

Managing land for the Argent & Sable

Ensuring the long-term survival of the Argent & Sable, as with many other species, is probably more likely if sites are linked, enabling an exchange of adults between neighbouring colonies. The loss of suitable habitat can be damaging by making the surviving populations more isolated.

The precise habitat requirements are not fully understood, however, the following general principles should benefit the Argent & Sable.

The race *hastata* requires a continued source of regenerating birch to survive. The lack of young birch along woodland edges and rides combined with the demise of coppicing is thought to have contributed to its serious decline in England. Birch trees up to 1.6m (5ft) tall in full sun provide ideal conditions. Management should, therefore, aim to encourage birch regeneration, especially in sunny situations, along rides and woodland edges. In addition, short-rotation coppice on a 10-year cycle will allow continuity of suitable conditions.

Over-grazing by sheep on moorland can have a serious impact on bog myrtle stands used by the race *nigrescens*. In some areas this has led to the confinement of bog myrtle to roadsides and other fenced areas protected from livestock.

Extensive areas of bog myrtle should be maintained by avoiding over-grazing, trampling and use of such areas to feed out-wintered stock. Stands of bog myrtle should also be avoided when undertaking muirburn. Light grazing is probably beneficial to prevent scrub encroaching and shading-out the foodplant. In the absence of grazing, some scrub cutting may be necessary. This is best undertaken between October and March. Ideally a little should be cut each year and some scrub retained permanently to provide shelter and breeding sites for other insects and birds.

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Argent & Sable: race '*nigrescens*'



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learn about the Argent & Sable



The Argent & Sable is a day-flying moth that occurs in Scotland in two different forms or races, each associated with a different habitat. The smaller race, *nigrescens*, is a moorland species whose caterpillars feed on bog myrtle whilst the slightly larger and darker race, *hastata*, feeds on small birch trees. Argent and sable are heraldic terms that mean 'white and black'. The white spear-shaped markings in the outer black band give rise to this species' scientific name '*hastata*' from the Latin word *hasta* meaning spear. The UK government has listed the Argent & Sable as a UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority species, in need of urgent conservation action.



Caterpillar on birch



The caterpillars only feed on one surface of the leaf creating "windows"



Caterpillar "spinning" on birch leaves



Argent & Sable habitat

disappearing fast !

In Scotland, the Argent & Sable *Rheumaptera hastata* has a westerly distribution with the bog myrtle feeders predominating to the north of Glasgow and the birch feeders to the south. On the continent the Argent & Sable occurs from Spain and the Alps to northernmost Scandinavia eastwards.

Early stages

Argent & Sable caterpillars are glossy black with fine golden markings along their flanks, these become more extensive as the caterpillar grows. Like all caterpillars in the family *Geometridae* this moth is a "looper", with legs at both ends but none in the middle. It therefore walks with a characteristic "cartoon" gait, arching the centre of its body in a loop, as it inches along.

It is not known if there are subtle differences in appearance between the caterpillars of the two races or if both races feed on both birch and bog myrtle. The caterpillars feed inside a protective chamber called a "spinning" that they construct by fastening the leaves of their foodplant together. They feed for around five weeks, between June and September, before overwintering as a pupa.

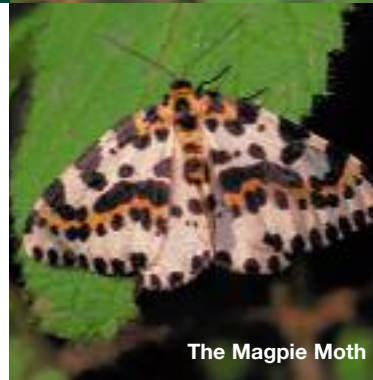
Inside the spun leaves the caterpillars only feed on the inner surface of the leaf creating "windows" that can reveal their presence. Once the food supply is exhausted they move and create a new spinning.

Care has to be taken recording the caterpillars as there are several other species of moth whose caterpillars roll leaves and build 'spinnings', particularly those in the family *Tortricidae*.

Adult moth

The adults fly by day, usually in warm, sunny weather, from late May to early July with *hastata* having an earlier flight period than *nigrescens*. Argent & Sable is most easily surveyed by looking for adults on sunny days, though searches for spinnings in late summer can be a good alternative and not so weather dependent.

If seen clearly few moths can be confused with the striking black and white Argent & Sable. However, in flight they can appear superficially similar to many species that are disturbed when walking through tall vegetation. The more widespread Magpie Moth is also black and white, but has conspicuous yellow markings on both wings and body, and is larger.



The Magpie Moth

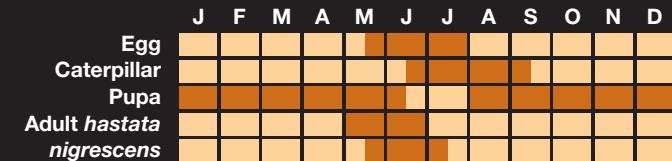
Size bars: actual size
Adult *hastata* (wing span)
 34-38mm (c1 1/2in)



Adult *nigrescens* (wing span)
 30-36mm (c1 1/4in)



Caterpillar (fully grown)
 20-22mm (around 3/4in)



Life-cycle of the Argent & Sable

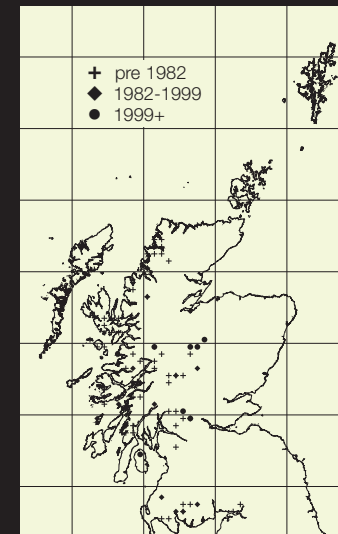
Do you have Argent & Sable on your land?

If you have the right habitats for the Argent & Sable on your land we are happy to provide free detailed advice on suitable management.

Do you want to get involved?

We need your help to undertake survey work to establish the true distribution of the Argent & Sable in Scotland. If you want to help or have seen Argent & Sable we would like to know.

If you can help us with either of the above please contact us: details on the back page.



Distribution of the Argent & Sable