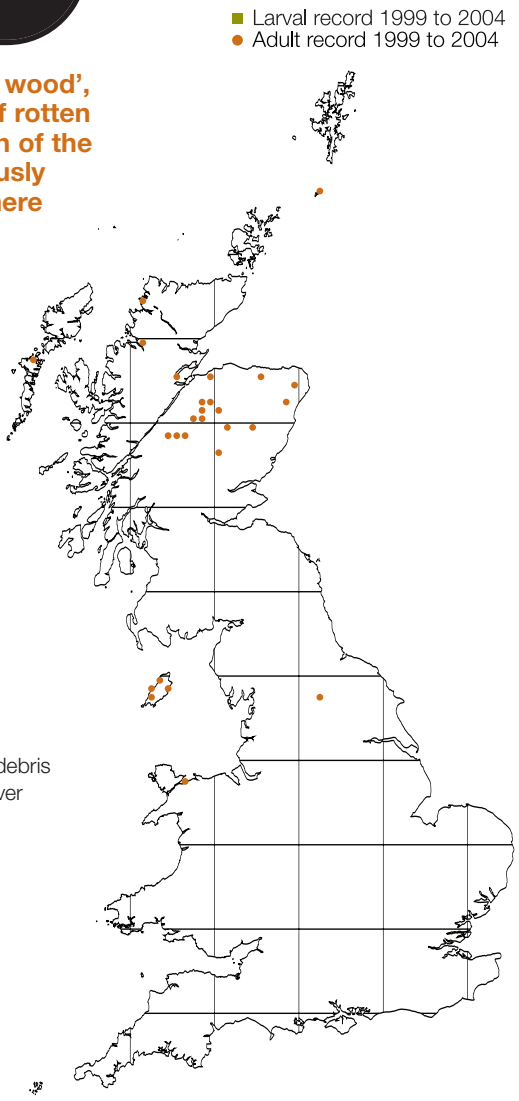
Butterfly Conservation

factsheet

Sword-grass

Xylena exsoleta

Conservation status
Priority Species in UK Biodiversity Action Plan.



The scientific name of this large moth means 'old or mature wood', in reference to the adult bearing a resemblance to a piece of rotten wood. The moth is most regularly recorded in Scotland north of the Firth of Forth and on islands including Orkney. It was previously widely recorded in north Wales and northern England, but there are few recent records in these countries.

Foodplants

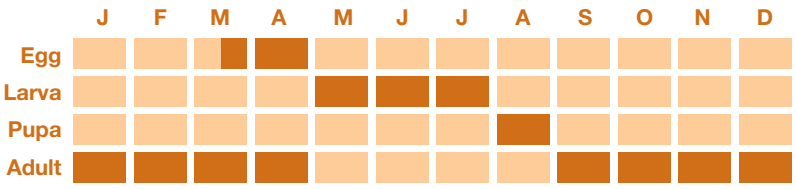
The ecology of the larvae in the wild is virtually unknown, although one larva has been found feeding on Thistle *Cirsium* spp. and another on Creeping Cinquefoil *Potentilla reptans*. Based on observations of the species in captivity, larvae are thought to be polyphagus, feeding on a wide variety of herbaceous plants, including Broad-leaved Dock *Rumex obtusifolius*, and woody plants, including Hawthorn *Crataegus* spp., Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* and Bird Cherry *P. padus*. The adult moth has been noted feeding at the blossom of Ivy *Hedera helix* and overripe blackberries in the autumn, and in spring at birch sap *Betula* spp., the catkins of Sallow *Salix* spp. and the flowers of Blackthorn.

Habitat

The moth is associated with upland habitats, including moorland, rough pasture and open woodland.

Life cycle

The species is single-brooded. The eggs are laid in batches in late March and April. Larvae develop from April to July before pupating in August, in a cocoon amongst debris on the ground. Adults are nocturnal and fly in September and October, hibernate over the winter (possibly in dense tussocks of grasses or rushes), and then fly again in March and April.



Habitat management for the Sword-grass

The precise requirements of this species are not known with any certainty and require research.

- Where the species occurs, a continuity of existing habitat structure should be retained.
- Ivy blossom and sallow catkins are useful nectar sources for a wide range of insect species, and a continuity of supply should be ensured where they occur.
- Sap runs are also an important food source for this and a number of other insect species.

How to survey/monitor

The best methods are using artificial baits, such sugar or wine-ropes, or light-traps to attract adults, and searching for adults by torchlight on Ivy blossom and sallow catkins or sap runs after dark.

right Typical woodland edge
below Red Sword-grass for comparison

Butterfly Conservation

Saving butterflies, moths and their habitats

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