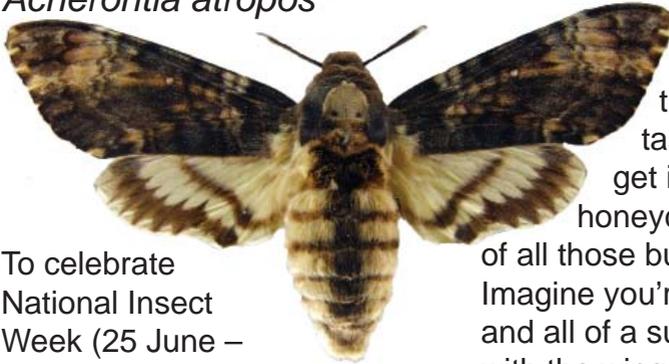


YZC Animal of the Month, June 2012

Death's Head Hawkmoth

Acherontia atropos



To celebrate National Insect Week (25 June – 1 July 2012), this month's animal is one of the spookiest insects you might be lucky enough to see in the UK: the Death's Head Hawkmoth. With the skull-shaped markings on its back, stripy body and cloak-like wings, it looks like a moth dressed up for a Halloween party. Add to that the high-pitched squeaks it makes when disturbed, and you can see why it was seen as a bad omen.

The Death's Head Hawkmoth is one of the largest moths in the UK, with a wingspan of up to 13cm. The caterpillars can be pretty enormous too – quite chunky and pale green/bright yellow in colour, reaching lengths of upto 15cm. Death's Head Hawkmoths appear to

have a bit of a death wish, as they like the taste of honey and get it right from the honeycomb in the midst of all those busy, stinging bees. Imagine you're a honey bee, and all of a sudden something with the wingspan of a small aeroplane comes in trying to steal your honey, you'd be pretty angry! The moths have a thick cuticle (the tough stuff on the outside of insect bodies) to protect against stings, and their legs are short and clawed to help them clamber about the honey comb.

This fantastic moth is not a native of the UK, and is only rarely seen. It migrates here from Africa and Southern Europe, so if you see one at all it is likely to be in the late summer/autumn. The Death's Head Hawkmoth on display in the museum was seen by someone pretty famous. It was found in the bed chamber of King George III during his third bout of madness in 1801.