

Death's-head Hawk-moth *Acherontia atropos* (Linnaeus)

The Death's-head Hawk-moth acquired its common name due to the presence of a skull-like marking on the thorax of this large (100-135mm wingspan) moth. This distinctive marking has resulted in the moth being widely regarded as an omen of death. A closely related species, the Eastern Death's-head Hawk-moth featured in the thriller film 'Silence of the Lambs'. The Death's-head Hawk-moth is not resident in the British Isles but is an immigrant to these shores, being usually recorded in the south and east of England but it has been found further north. Its range outside of the UK includes southern Europe, Africa and the Middle East.



Photograph Alan Barnes/Butterfly Conservation

The Death's-head Hawk-moth is seen most years and arrives in the UK usually from late August to October, though some times earlier. It is seldom seen unless in light traps, under lights or occasionally at beehives, where they are able to feed on the honey without being attacked by the bees. It is thought that the moth produces sounds similar to those made by the Queen Bee, which appeases the bees, allowing the moth to steal the honey unharmed. These sounds are created by the moth expelling air through its proboscis (mouthparts) and typically consist of a low-pitched squeak followed by a higher pitched squeak. The Death's-

head Hawk-moth can occasionally be found at rest during the day and, if disturbed, it has been known to produce these same strange squeaking sounds.

The moths themselves are unable to overwinter in this country but adults that arrive in the summer sometimes produce caterpillars that pupate underground, in late summer or early autumn. The favoured caterpillar foodplants are usually Potato or Deadly Nightshade. Before the widespread use of insecticides, caterpillars and pupae were often encountered in potato fields but these encounters are now much less frequent and usually restricted to organic crops, allotments and gardens. Caterpillars are typically coloured yellow, with dark oblique stripes down the side, but a brown form of the caterpillars also occurs somewhat less frequently.



Photograph Emily Funnell/Butterfly Conservation

It is thought that this brown form of the caterpillars is a form of mimicry as it is said to closely resemble a snake, which may serve to prevent it being eaten by predators, potentially increasing its chances of survival. When fully grown these caterpillars are 100-125mm in length.