

Identifying Lead-coloured Drab

Lead-coloured Drab (*Orthosia populeti*) is a nationally 'local' species that is found across much of the UK. The larvae feed on poplars, usually Aspen (*Populus tremula*). It is usually a woodland species but can be found most places where the foodplant occurs. It is on the wing in the spring.

In north Wales, the species is sparsely recorded. This may be because it is genuinely scarce; the foodplant is fairly localised here but is often planted and can be found in most places across the region. It may, however, be more common than the records suggest as it has been overlooked - due to its fairly early flight time and confusion with similar species.



It is most likely to be confused with Clouded Drab (*O. incerta*) and Common Quaker (*O. cerasi*). The aim of this document is to highlight the differences and aid identification. Another possible confusion species, not covered here, is Northern Drab (*O. opima*), this species has not been recorded in the county, though could potentially be present.

The species is fairly distinct when the recorder is familiar with it and should be identifiable without too many difficulties, especially fresh individuals or males. However, the most likely confusion species, Clouded Drab, is extremely variable and as a result this species could be mis-identified as one or overlooked amongst them.

If in any doubt, a photograph is usually sufficient to determine an individual, provided it is not worn. Note that Lead-coloured Drab records are unlikely to be accepted in the county without a photo.

Time of year

Lead-coloured Drab is usually found towards the end of March and throughout April. Occasionally individuals can be recorded in early May. Throughout its flight period, both confusion species are on the wing.

Size

Lead-coloured Drab should be roughly the size of a Common Quaker. Clouded Drab can vary greatly in size, however, is often considerably larger. Larger specimens can usually be easily discounted. Small examples of Clouded Drab are not uncommon and in these cases there is size overlap with Lead-coloured Drab.

Forewing colour

Lead-coloured Drab is always grey, hence the common name.

Clouded Drab is extremely variable. Black forms through reddish, brown and grey forms are equally common. Forms of a similar grey to Lead-coloured Drab do occur.

Common Quaker is a brown moth. This should immediately separate it from Lead-coloured Drab.

Wing shape

Lead-coloured Drab has rounded wing tips, as does Common Quaker. Clouded Drab, however, has pointed wing tips (right). The differences are subtle and may not always be obvious, however an individual with obviously rounded wing-tips (left) is unlikely to be Clouded Drab.

Care should be taken as the wing tips can get worn, which can cause the shape to be somewhat distorted.



Forewing markings

Clouded Drab is very variable and therefore the forewing markings are often less useful to distinguish the two species. There are a number of guides which may be useful.

Clouded Drab tends to have a dark 'dash' on the leading edge of the wing. Such a marking is not obvious on Lead-coloured Drab.



Lead-coloured Drab tends to have a series of small wedges along the sub-terminal line. These are usually black but can be a reddish colour. Clouded Drab does not tend to have these but is extremely variable and some forms may have something similar. These are also not present on Common Quaker.

Antennae

There are obvious differences between of male antennae of Lead-coloured Drab and Clouded Drab. The males of both species have bipectinate antennae (feathery), however Lead-coloured Drab have strongly bipectinate antennae. An individual with very obviously feathered antennae (right) will not be Clouded Drab.

Male Clouded Drabs have weakly bipectinated antennae and this is almost unnoticeable with the naked eye but visible under a hand lens.

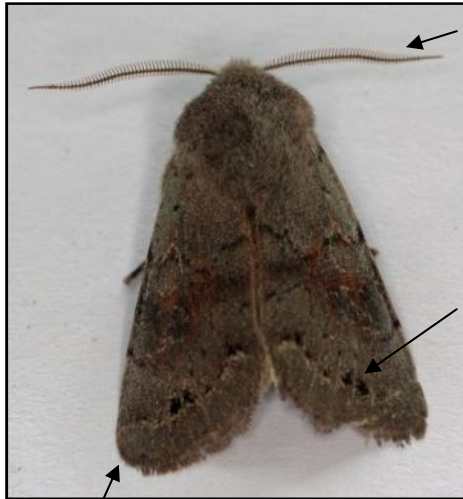
N.B. the male Common Quaker also have strongly bipectinate antennae.

Females of these species all have setaceous (thread-like) antennae.



Comparison

Left is a Lead-coloured Drab and on the right is a form of Clouded Drab. Both with the key features mentioned above annotated. Both are males.

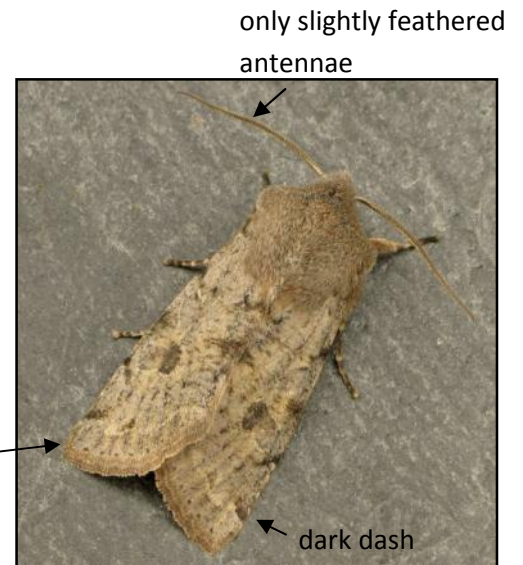


obviously feathered antennae

wedges on sub-terminal line

pointed wing-tips

rounded wing-tips



only slightly feathered antennae

dark dash

In many respects, Lead-coloured Drab is most similar to a Common Quaker. Similarities shared include size, wing shape, shape of stigma (tend to be large and rounded) and the antennae.

However, the forewing colour should distinguish this species with little trouble. In addition, this species has a very obvious sub-terminal line bordered with red. This line is usually much less obvious on Lead-coloured Drab and forms a different shape as it meets the costa. An obvious row of black spots near the terminal edge of the wing should further distinguish this species from Lead-coloured Drab. In contrast to Clouded Drab, Common Quaker exhibits relatively little variation.



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Photos by DBo, MDH & PRW.