

THE HAWKMOTH FAMILY

Seventeen species of hawkmoth, members of the family Sphingidae, occur regularly in the UK. They fall into three subfamilies: Sphinginae, which includes the resident privet and pine hawkmoth, and one of the the largest migrants, the death's-head hawkmoth; Smerinthinae, the lime and poplar hawkmoth; and the largest subfamily, Macroglossinae, which, as well as the hummingbird and elephant hawkmoth, includes two species of bee hawkmoth.

There are almost 1,500 species worldwide, mostly in the tropical regions. Hawkmoths have the ability to fly long distances, thanks to their long, narrow wings and streamlined body. They can reach speeds of 12mph. The ability of some species to hover in mid-air is also confined to this particular family. Elsewhere in nature, it is only found in bats, birds and hoverflies. The hovering hawkmoths have also evolved the ability to move rapidly from side to side, to avoid predators.



The lime hawkmoth flies only on warm nights and the adult moth does not feed.



The pine hawkmoth has a 2½-3in (6.5-8cm) wingspan.



The privet hawkmoth is the UK's largest resident with a wingspan of up to 4½in (12cm).



The dramatic death's-head hawkmoth is the largest moth to appear in Britain, with a wingspan of up to 5in (13cm). It has the unusual habit of entering beehives in search of honey, and if handled, emits a loud squeak.



The Poplar hawkmoth's distinct appearance when at rest is due to its lack of a frenulum, a structure which normally holds the wings together.



The day-flying bee hawkmoth has a reddish-brown border on its transparent forewings.

• Words: Stephen Moss