



Hunt the Harvestman

by Geoff Oxford

You may well know that many insects that used to live only in the south of England are spreading north. The best known are some of our butterflies. For example, the Speckled Wood was not found around York (where I live) until about 2000, but is now very commonly seen in woodlands and along hedgerows. Even more spectacular has been the increase in the range of the Harlequin ladybird. This beetle invaded the south east of England in 2004 and is now found right across England and most of Wales, with some even 'spotted' in central Scotland, which is bad news for our native ladybirds.

But it's not only insects that are on the move, some spiders are in on the act too. One of the most impressive is the Wasp spider (*Argiope bruennichi*). This species was first discovered in Britain in 1922 at Rye in East Sussex, and for many years it stayed along the south coast. It then began to spread and is now found across all of the south and south-east of England, with odd records much further north (e.g. south Lincolnshire and Derbyshire). I can't wait for it to arrive in Yorkshire! Likewise, the Noble False Widow spiders (*Steatoda nobilis*) are also heading





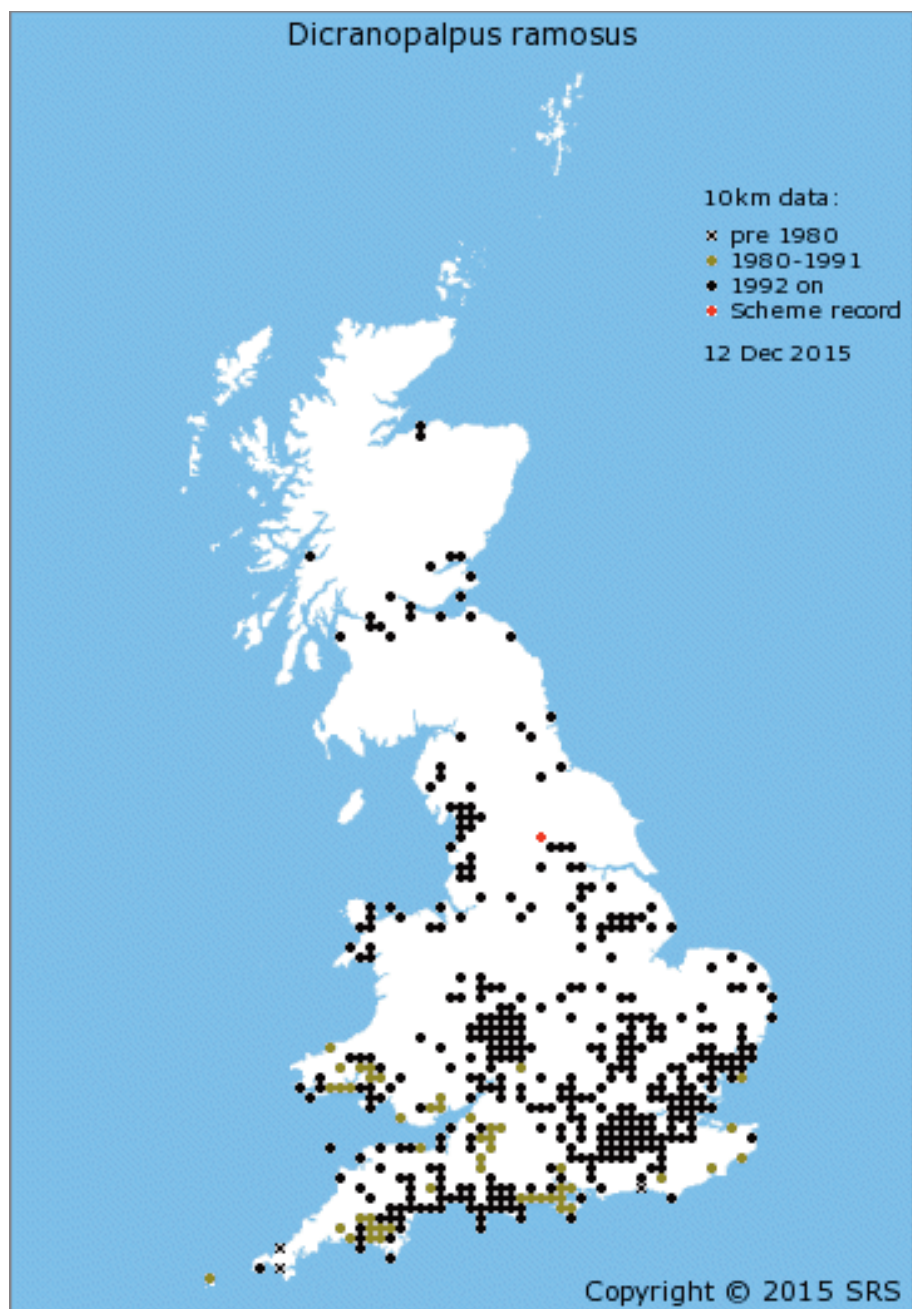
north. This is the species the newspapers love to scare people with, but most of their stories are untrue.

For many species, such as the Speckled Wood, their spread further north is because our summers are getting warmer. For introduced species like the Harlequin ladybird, the story is different. The south of England is closest to Europe and so any species hitchhiking (or flying) across the English Channel is most likely to land there. Much of Britain might be suitable for them but because they started off in the south the only way they can spread is to the north (and west).

This is probably the case with the harvestman *Dicranopalpus ramosus* (it has no common English name). Its natural home is in Morocco, Spain, Portugal and the south west of France, but it has spread to many countries further northern and east in Europe over the past 50 years, including Britain. It was first recorded in Bournemouth in 1957, and since then it has been found right across England and Wales and more recently in Scotland, as shown on the map opposite.

But why are the records so patchy? Is the harvestman really missing from Staffordshire and Nottinghamshire, for example, or are these places where no-one has looked for them? This is where you can help, because *Dicranopalpus ramosus* is a harvestman that can't be confused with any other!

Adult *Dicranopalpus* are between 4 mm and 6 mm long in their bodies, and are often found in gardens. This harvestman lives on evergreen shrubs and conifers, for example leylandii hedges, but is most often seen when





resting on walls, fences and the trunks of trees. There are three things to spot that are not shown by other species:

- (a) the way the legs are arranged when resting
- (b) the long pedipalps held out in front, and
- (c) the fork on the pedipalps.



When they are at rest the legs of most harvestmen (such as the *Opilio canestrinii* in the photo opposite) stick out from the body at all angles, almost in a circle, and are usually not fully extended. *Dicranopalpus*, however, holds its very long, banded legs straight out to the side (at right angles to the body), very close together and pressed tight to the branch or wall, as you can see in the banner photo at the start of this article, and in the photo below.



Left: a female *Dicranopalpus ramosus*, resting on a wall. Note the way it is holding out its legs to the side of the body, and the forked (two-pronged) pedipalps in front of the body.

Photo: Katty Baird

Why do they do this? This allows them to settle down near the ends of thin branches of trees and bushes – which is where they normally live. No other British harvestman does this, so it's a very useful clue.

As well as eight walking legs harvestmen have a pair of





short, leg-like structures at the head end called **pedipalps**. In most harvestmen the pedipalps are usually folded under the head when the animal is resting (you can see this if you look at the pedipalps in the photo of *Opilio canestrinii*, on page 16) but in *Dicranopalpus* they are held out straight in front, and are the same length as the body (see the banner photo, and the photo of *Dicranopalpus* on page 17). You may also be able to see that the pedipalps of *Dicranopalpus* have an easily spotted 'side branch', which sticks out giving a forked appearance not shared with any other harvestman. Here are some more photos that show this.



Photo: Nik Nimbus

Left: Female *Dicranopalpus* showing the 'forked' pedipalps at the front of the body

Right: Male *Dicranopalpus* showing 'forked' pedipalps.



Photo: John Davison

In adults, you can even tell males from females by looking at the pedipalps. In adult females the 'side branch' is like a tube with a rounded black end and covered with fine hairs (see photo opposite). In adult males, however, it is thinner, more pointed at the end, not black and has no hairs (lower photo, opposite). Adult males also have a black 'face mask' across the eyes (see the banner photo at the start of this article) but females don't (see photo on page 17).

Adult *Dicranopalpus ramosus* are found from late summer into winter but at other times of year the branched palps and the resting position are still obvious, even in very small juveniles. Although most striking when seen at rest on a wall (see photo below) they are easily collected by beating or sweep-netting trees and shrubs.

We need your help to map where this harvestman is found in Britain. If you spot one, take a photograph and e-mail it to me at:



Photo: Katty Baird

secretary@britishspiders.org.uk
together with your name, the post code where it was found and the habitat it was found in (e.g. garden, park, woodland etc).

I'll put all your records together and report back this time next year.



Until then,
Happy Harvestman Hunting!

Geoff