

Lichenised Leafhopper

On a recent field meeting in Pod's Wood, Essex, while looking at *Fuscidea lightfootii* on an oak branch, I noticed a very odd-looking insect. It is the nymph stage of the Leafhopper *Ledra aurita*, supposedly the only member of the subfamily Ledrinae found in Europe. The texture and coloration of the pronotum afford it a remarkable degree of crypsis against branches covered in algae and lichen, upon which it feeds. It



Ledra aurita nymph on oak branch

is interesting to hypothesise about the selection pressures that resulted in its exceptional camouflage: Those individuals that most resembled the lichen against which they spend a large amount of their time, feeding, were less likely to be detected and selected as prey. This increased chance of survival, multiplied over evolutionary timescales, has resulted in a curious-looking animal that has, in a fanciful sense, become lichenised, just like the fungus it feeds on. I couldn't find much in the way of published literature on the species, but an image search reveals a certain degree of intraspecific variation in colour in both the adults and the nymphs. This raises a number of questions: Are there various morphotypes that feed on different lichen? If so, how does their distribution and abundance correlate with that of their food lichen? It has only been recorded in 71 grid squares (10km) on the NBN gateway,



Exceptional camouflage of *Ledra aurita*

suggesting that it has been under-recorded; unsurprising given its singular ability to blend in to the background! However, if anyone is likely to encounter this interesting species, it is the lichenologists, who are well-equipped (and perhaps inclined!) to reveal more about the ecology of *L. aurita*.

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