



Species profile

Aspen hoverfly

The Aspen hoverfly is only found in Scotland, in very small numbers. Its future is uncertain. Read why below.

The Aspen hoverfly (*Hammerschmidtia ferruginea*) belongs to a large group of insects called Diptera. This group also includes houseflies, mosquitoes and craneflies (daddy-long-legs). They are true flies, having only one pair of wings (wasps and bees have two pairs) but as with other insects they have three body parts - head, thorax and abdomen.



Aspen hoverfly (*Hammerschmidtia ferruginea*) © Iain MacGowan

Many hoverflies have spots, bands or stripes of yellow or brown against a dark coloured background, sometimes with a dense covering of hairs (but the Aspen hoverfly does not have these characteristics). As their name suggests, hoverflies are excellent at hovering; their body appears still whilst they collect nectar from wild and garden flowers.

Scotland has the entire population of the Aspen hoverfly - it is only found in about 12 sites in the Highlands, making it one of Britain's rarest hoverflies. In 2006 it was estimated that there were around a thousand surviving. It is listed as endangered in the UK Insect Red Data Book.



Species profile

Aspen hoverfly

As the name suggests, the Aspen tree is very important to this hoverfly. Larvae of the Aspen hoverfly live under the bark of rotting, fallen Aspen trees and branches where they feed on micro-organisms in the decaying sap. Without Aspen dead wood the Aspen hoverfly cannot survive and this is why it is threatened.

- After a year or two, the Aspen dead wood becomes unsuitable for the larvae as the bark starts to crack and dry out. The larvae need a constant supply of Aspen dead wood.
- Landowners 'tidy up' their woods - they clear away fallen trees.
- Fewer new woods containing Aspen are being planted.
- Deer and rabbits eat young plants of Aspen and other tree species.

In recent years scientists have been looking at how to increase the numbers of Aspen hoverflies and are trying a number of things:

- Working with owners of woods where there are lots of Aspen trees - educating them about the importance of leaving Aspen dead wood.
- Fencing off Aspen woods and controlling rabbits.
- Deliberately felling some branches of Aspen to provide future homes for the Aspen hoverfly larvae.



Aspen tree (*Populus tremula*) © Chris Gibson

It does seem that numbers of the Aspen hoverfly are slowly increasing but there is still a lot of work to be done and much still to learn about the Aspen hoverfly if this little insect is to survive.