

Preface

People travel more nowadays than ever before. Not only are ordinary tourists able to widen their experience by encountering new cultures and seeing beautiful scenery, but also scientists extensively visit new areas to gain personal experience of animals and plants, which they could never obtain by studying dead material in collections or reading what other persons have observed.

Europe has changed throughout history, both culturally and politically, and so too has nature. Since the latest glaciation a great part of Europe has been colonized by organisms hitherto confined to ice-free refuges, and which were subsequently able to spread northwards or to re-enter areas which had been occupied previously. Central Europe was invaded by plants and animals from the east and south and would have been a fascinating place for a naturalist to visit before man began to cut the forest and till the ground with efficient machinery.

Some thousands of years ago, the valleys, hills and lower mountains of the Mediterranean area and further into western Asia and northern Africa, were covered by extensive oak forests, and many other broadleaved trees grew among the oaks in that favourable climate. Man, however, exploited and felled most of the forest, leaving behind an open and largely impoverished countryside. Some organisms, however, were favoured by this deforestation. The scythridids belong to this group of animals that successfully occupied the open landscape preceded by, or along with, their foodplants, many thriving in sunny, dry habitats. Possibly the scythridids were among the first Lepidoptera to inhabit such areas, since many of them are associated with the so-called pioneer plants which appeared in the virgin and fertile soil when the glaciers withdrew or the trees were cut down.

Today the Mediterranean countries, including Asia Minor and the northern coastline of Africa, are very rich in scythridid species. Many more remain to be discovered and a lot of field work remains to be done. Almost certainly some of the scythridid species, unknown to scientists, have already become extinct owing to the impact of human exploitation. During the last century many scythridids within the geographical area treated here have been described but never in recent time have they all been gathered in one book to assist the taxonomist to determine these small and difficult moths. This publication is intended to fill that gap, presenting all known taxa including descriptions of 42 new species. Of course, such a contribution is only one step towards further knowledge. Errors are inevitable and often due to lack of information. Yet, it is hoped that this book may constitute a spring-board for better understanding of this complex family of Microlepidoptera.