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NOTE

FIRST RECORD OF THE AFGHAN POPLAR HAWKMOTH *LAOTHOE WITTI* EITSCHBERGER ET AL., 1998 (SPHINGIDAE: SMERINTHINAE) FROM INDIA: A NOTABLE RANGE EXTENSION FOR THE GENUS

Muzafar Riyaz, Pratheesh Mathew, Taslima Shiekh, S. Ignacimuthu & K. Sivasankaran

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First record of the Afghan Poplar Hawkmoth *Laothoe witti* Eitschberger et al., 1998 (Sphingidae: Smerinthinae) from India: a notable range extension for the genus

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Sphingidae moths can recognizably be identified with their robust streamlined body, rapid flight movement and narrow but powerful wings that are reminder of hawks, giving them the name 'hawk moths' (Messenger 1997). Family Sphingidae Latreille, 1802 comprises 1,602 species under 205 genera (Kitching et al. 2018). About 204 species are reported from India (Hampson 1892; Bell & Scott 1937; Roonwal et al. 1963; D' Abrera, 1986; van Nieukerken 2011; Avtar 2017; Geetha 2019; Pratheesh 2019). The genus *Laothoe* Fabricius, 1807 comprises five species distributed across the Palearctic region belonging to the tribe Smerinthini Grote & Robinson, 1865, under the subfamily Smerinthinae Grote & Robinson, 1865 (Zolotuhin 2018). The genus is characterized by its broad hindwing with strongly round anal angle; absence of frenulum and retinaculum in male and reduced in female; atrophied proboscis and spiny abdominal tergites (Fabricius 1807). The species *Laothoe philerema witti* Eitschberger, Danner & Surholt,

1998 was first described as a sub-species to *L. philerema* (Djakonov, 1923) with a single male holotype from Paghman, 30km north-west of Kabul, Afghanistan at an altitude of 2,100m. The species was recently re-instated based on DNA barcode divergence from *L. philerema* (Djakonov, 1923) confirming their species status as *Laothoe witti* Eitschberger, Danner & Surholt, 1998 raising it from the status of subspecies (Zolotuhin 2018). The wing span of this species ranges 120–140mm and is morphologically much similar to the smaller species *Laothoe philerema* (Djakonov, 1923), and paler species *Laothoe populi populi* (Linnaeus, 1758), the latter with distinctive prominent rust-red hindwing patch (Danner 1998).

The single adult specimen *Laothoe witti* (Image 2) was photographed and collected on 6 July 2020 in Tehsil Herman, district Shopian of Kashmir Division (Jammu & Kashmir), India, at an altitude of 1,596m (coordinates were 33.705°N, 74.940°E) (Image 2). The specimen was

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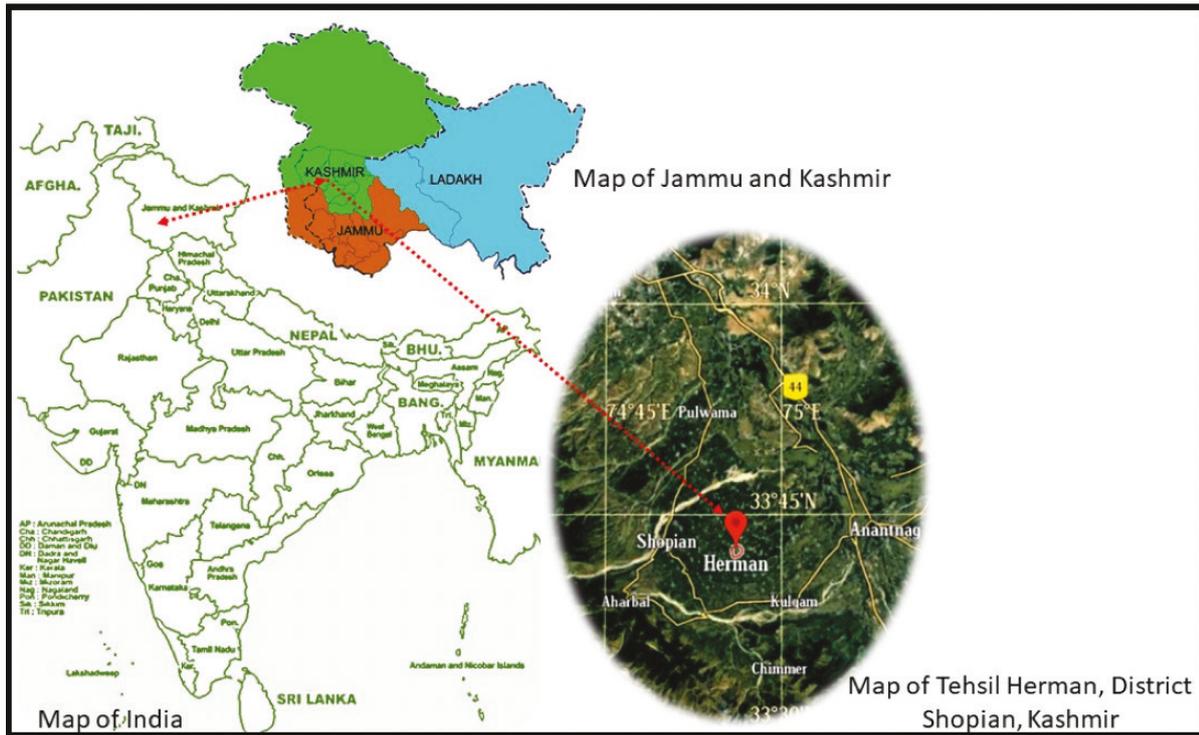


Image 1. Map of Shopian District showing location of collection site. (Source: Google maps).



© Muzafar Riyaz

Image 2. Specimen collected from Tehsil Herman, District Shopian of Kashmir.

collected by the first author while studying the diversity of insect fauna of Kashmir Valley, India and further taxonomic studies were conducted along with the other authors. Major tree species around the site were

Populus deltoides, *Juglans regia*, *Robinia pseudoacacia*, *Ulmus* sp., *Salix* sp., and *Malus* sp. Temperature was recorded as 25°C. The habitat mostly consists of agricultural lands with an annual precipitation of



Image 3. Stretched specimen showing wingspan. Mounted and stretched by Muzafar Riyaz

660mm and 13°C average temperature (Wachkoo et al. 2018). The collected specimen is deposited in the museum of Division of Taxonomy and Biodiversity at the Entomology Research Institute, Loyola College Chennai, India with specimen voucher number ERIB-KMR-267. The wingspan of the individual was 12cm (Image 3). The identification of the specimen was done from the website <http://tpittaway.tripod.com/sphinx/list.htm> and <http://sphingidae.myspecies.info/> by consultation with Dr. Ian Kitching. Notable range extension of the species within India was confirmed after checking the appropriate literature: Cotes & Swinhoe (1887), Bell & Scott (1937), Kitching & Cadiou (2000), Pittaway & Kitching (2000, 2018), Pittaway (2020), and Dar et al. (2020). This species was described and so far known only from eastern Afghanistan (Elberet 1969; Daniel 1971; <http://tpittaway.tripod.com/sphinx/list.htm>.)

The species shares similar morphology with *Laothoe philerema* (Djakonov, 1923) and can be distinguished by the following diagnostic features: forewing basal area paler; dark distinct antemedial band; pale medial band; waved post medial line with a dark spot at the middle; outer margin waved with prominent dark area between middle of outer margin towards apex; and paler hindwing with indistinct medial line darker towards costa; sub-marginal region greyish with dark patch near anal angle; outer margin with cilia whitish.

The genus *Laothoe* was recently reported with two species with two subspecies each namely *L. amurensis amurensis* (Staudinger, 1892), *L. amurensis sinica* (Rothschild & Jordan, 1903), *L. populi populeti* (Bienert, 1870), and *L. populi populi* (Linnaeus, 1758) were reported and described from China, North, and South Korea (Pittaway & Kitching 2000). The genus was reported in Europe recently with two species *L.*

amurensis (Staudinger, 1892) and *L. populi* (Linnaeus, 1758) from Lithuania (Dapkus 2010). The presence of the genus was again reported with the species *L. populeti* Bienert, 1870 from Georgia (Didmanidze 2013). Two species of this genus, namely, *L. populi populeti* (Bienert, 1870) and *L. philerema* (Djakonov, 1923) were enlisted among the list of possible future addition to the Sphingidae fauna of Pakistan based on its presence in neighboring countries (Rafi et al. 2014). *Laothoe populi populeti* (Bienert, 1870) was again later reported from Iran and Turkey (Gahari & Naveen 2017; Seven & Cakir 2019).

Based on the previous observations with similar habitats the authors propose a tentative area of occurrence for this species to the entire area of Kashmir and northern parts of Jammu division of the state of Jammu & Kashmir in India. The authors expect the possibility of the species to occur in northern parts of Pakistan, the areas that connects the present location with the type locality – Kabul, Afghanistan. The IUCN Red List assessment of this species at the GeoCAT website based on the present identification, type locality and two other possible locations showed the species to be Vulnerable (VU) with extent of occurrence of 16,264.596km². This record is significant and important as it constitutes the first proven evidence of the occurrence of *Laothoe witti* Eitschberger, Danner & Surholt, 1998 in the Indian subcontinent making it a notable range extension for the genus *Laothoe* into the political boundary of India.

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