

Butterfly
Conservation

HERTFORDSHIRE AND MIDDLESEX BRANCH NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 39

SEPTEMBER 2004

Le Dernier Clin de Yeux d'Ete. September in The Chilterns, by David Chandler (Branch Chairman)

The French have their own name for what we call an Indian Summer – “the last wink of the eye of Summer”; so forgive any errors in my schoolboy French, because the special phase used by our European neighbours over the English channel (or should that be the sleeve), reminds me that more often than not the first week of September is blessed with good weather. This is also harvest-time, the time of year to take stock of the season past, knowing Autumn is just around the corner. September is a time for reflection on things that could have been better, but also a time to celebrate the good and simple things that have happened, like seeing both a Wall and a Clouded Yellow on my butterfly transect, events which brought me joy that money could not buy.

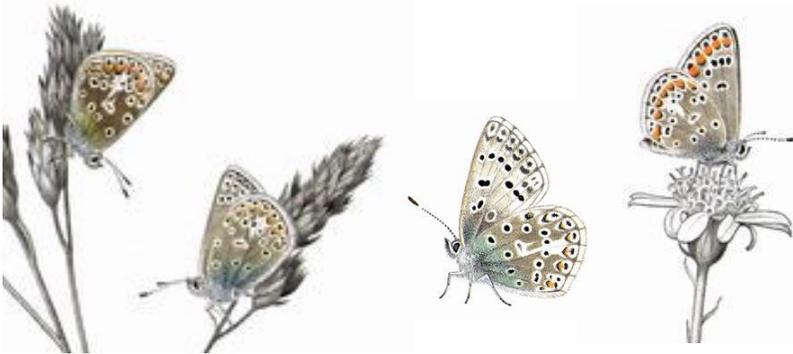
Hertfordshire and Middlesex

It is Sunday September 5th and 27 degrees with a clear blue sky. A wonderful day.

I am high up on the scarp slope of the Chiltern ridge; below me a farmer toils on his combine harvester throwing up clouds of dust, keen to get his corn cut before the weather turns. As I walk around the butterfly transect, I note it is recording week 23 out of 26, just three weeks until the season is finished. I notice that the Chalkhill Blues, Common Blues, Small Coppers and Brown Argus are still on the wing but their colours are beginning to fade; however, they themselves do not seem to be too worried that they have lost their pristine looks; they chase each other all over the grassy herb-rich bank being bathed by the bright sunshine and pair up as if they were freshly emerged. The Brown Argus seem to pick squabbles with the other blues, driving them away if they come too close to the favoured perches where they alight.

As I make my way around the circuit that forms the transect I take note of where the bramble and hawthorn have started to scrub over the site and begun encroaching upon the herb-rich down-land turf loved by blue butterflies. I make a mental note that these are the places where I will recommend to the owners, The National Trust, that some habitat maintenance work could be done during the forthcoming Winter to protect the environment for all my favourite “blues” and the “dukes” also found on this site.

The French call the Chalkhill Blue “Argus Bleu Nacre”, the Common Blue “Argus Bleu” and the Brown Argus the “Argus Brun”; it is strange that of these local names only the Brown Argus can be translated word for word. I then muse: I believe I read somewhere that Argus derives, from Greek (or Roman) and literally means “eyed” - of course all these butterflies have small circles, or eyes, on their undersides - which must be why the French call them the eyed blues. I find it rather amusing that, using French nomenclature, I have my own version of the last wink of the eyes of Summer in that the last flush of the small many “eyed” ones on their chalk-down brings me the simple pleasure of them just being there. Darker, colder days may be with us soon, but I can look forward to seeing their offspring flying in the same place next year.



Common Blues

Chalkhill Blue

Brown Argus

NATIONAL MEMBERS' DAY AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 27th November 2004 - PROGRESS UPDATE

The working group formed to organise the event are now putting the final plans into place for the big day. There will be lots of jobs that have to be done and an awful lot of things that must be remembered to make the day run smoothly. A daunting task!

By now everyone should have received the new edition of *BUTTERFLY*, which includes the full programme for the day as well as the lunch booking form. If you intend to have the cooked lunch please do remember to book it. Additionally if any Branch member wants to attend but has difficulty with transport do contact me (by the 1st November please) and we will endeavour to arrange something.

We would still appreciate any offer of assistance on the day, so if you would like to help please tell me. We hope that you will attend the NATIONAL MEMBERS' DAY AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING and that you have a very enjoyable day. We look forward to meeting as many Branch members as possible.

**Butterfly Conservation
Hertfordshire & Middlesex Branch**

Annual General Meeting

Saturday 15th January 2005

**To be held at St. Thomas's Church Hall
Prince George Avenue
Oakwood, Enfield
Middlesex, N14 4SN
Grid Reference: TQ297957 [Map 176 or 177]
(see map on next page)**

Time: 2 for 2.30 pm - 5.30 pm

**Guest speaker: RICHARD FOX
Butterfly Conservation's
Butterflies for the New Millennium Project Co-ordinator**

Full programme to be confirmed in the next newsletter

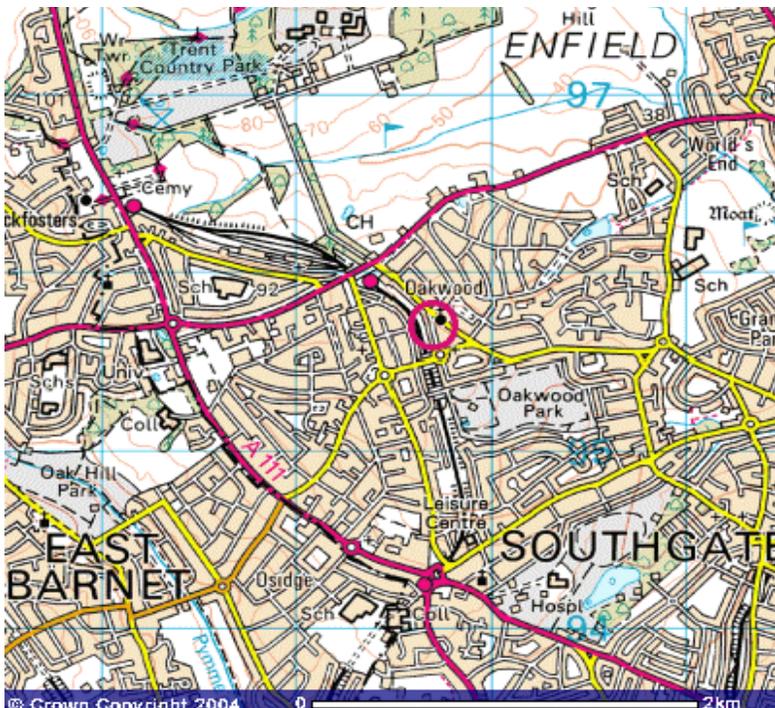
The Sales and Plant Stand will be present

Refreshments will be available

NON MEMBERS WELCOME

The committee have decided to continue holding the Annual General Meeting on a Saturday afternoon and this year it will be held in Middlesex. Richard Fox from Butterfly Conservation and co-author of *The Millennium Atlas of Butterflies in Britain and Ireland* has kindly agreed to be our guest speaker. It is the committee's intention to rotate the AGM between the two counties in the future.

The Parish Church of St. Thomas, Oakwood, Enfield is only a short walking distance from Oakwood Station. Oakwood is on the Piccadilly line with easy underground links to London and south west Middlesex. If travelling by car, the church hall is only a short distance from the M25. From the M25, exit at Junction 24 and follow the signs for Cockfosters (A111). After about 3 miles, and less than ½ mile after Cockfosters Underground Station, there will be a roundabout.



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Take the 1st exit sign-posted Enfield (A110). Prince George Avenue is on the right immediately after Oakwood Station. Continue for about 400 yds and St. Thomas's is on the right on the corner of Prince George Avenue and Sheringham Avenue (see map - church marked O). The car park is entered from Prince George Avenue and is just beyond the church if coming from the Oakwood Station direction.

The committee have not agreed the final programme as this newsletter goes to print but full details will be available in the next newsletter and on the branch website (<http://www.hmbutterflyconservation.org.uk>) when confirmed. We look forward to seeing you – non members are also welcome.

Winter Meeting – Saturday 19th February 2005

Our second meeting of 2005, will be the Winter Meeting and is intended to be a second chance to socialise during the winter months. We want members to come along and meet other members and just have a chat and share their butterfly and moth news. For the Winter Meeting we will be returning to Hertfordshire and to the Civic Centre, Welwyn. Although we do continue to search out potential new venues, this hall has a good central location in Hertfordshire, and easy access to the A1M which makes it one of the easier places to find.

Alan Downie will be giving a talk on *Gardening for Butterflies* and will be able to give everyone plenty of ideas of what you could plant in your garden to attract butterflies and moths. He will also bring along a wide selection of plants that can be purchased from the Branch Sales Stand. Seeds will also be available.

We have sampled Roger Gibbons wonderful butterfly images on many occasions when he has brought selections along to show members at the end of our winter meetings. We therefore thought it would be nice to give him his own slot. Over a few years he has taken over 1000 photographs of at least 125 species, so we might need to ask him to come back.

Welwyn Civic Centre is situated in Old Welwyn and is just off Jct. 6 of the A1M (see map on next page). When you exit the A1M, you will encounter the Welwyn bypass and some roundabouts. However, you need to take the exit that takes you under one of the slip roads and almost immediately after this bridge the Civic Centre can be seen on the right. Take the turning immediately after the building and follow the road right round the Civic Centre and the car park entrance is

behind the building. The nearest railway station is Welwyn North (approx. 1 mile) – please check that there are no engineering works that might affect your journey. If anyone has any difficulty getting to the Winter Meeting please ring or email Liz Goodyear (details on back) who will endeavour to find you a lift.

Winter Meeting

Saturday 19th February 2005
To be held at the Welwyn Civic Centre
Prospect Place
Welwyn
Herts, AL6 9ER
Grid Reference: TL232160 [Map 166]
2.00 for 2.30 – 5.30

Speakers

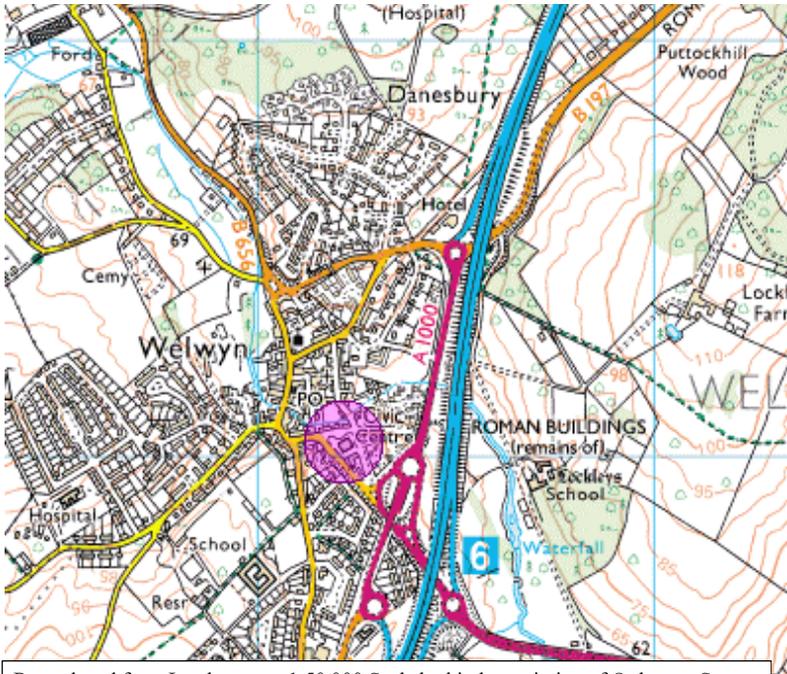
Alan Downie – Gardening for Butterflies
&
Roger Gibbons – Butterflies of Southern France

The Sales and Plant Stand will be present

Refreshments will be available

NON-MEMBERS WELCOME

Welwyn Civic Centre:



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Butterfly Christmas Presents by Post, by Malcolm Hull

This Christmas, why not help your favourite charity by buying a butterfly gift? You may help a friend or relation build their interest in butterflies & moths, or just treat yourself to a momento of those sunny summer months. This year we have several new items as well as a number of classics.

You can order all of the items listed below by post, or by contacting Malcolm Hull by letter, email or phone (evenings & weekends) – contact details on back cover. There will be a small additional charge for postage at cost.

If you'd like to order any butterfly attracting plants please contact

either Malcolm or Alan Downie and we will make arrangements for collection. Or call in at our sales stall at the BC National AGM or any of our indoor winter meetings. A full list of forthcoming dates & locations for the sales stall is available on the branch website at www.hmbutterflyconservation.org.uk.

- **NEW – Mounted Butterfly Prints** by Nick Sampford – a range of high quality butterfly photos by a HMBC member, each professionally mounted on card (A5 approx.). Designs include White Admiral, Purple Emperor, White-letter Hairstreak, Dark Green Fritillary, Brown Hairstreak, Adonis Blue, Orange Tip and Chequered Skipper - 9 others available on request - £4.99 each
- **NEW – Butterfly Postcards** from CB Picture Postcards – 8 stunning new designs, all based on photos by HMBC member Clive Burrows, prize winner in the last BC national photo competition. Designs include Peacock, Apollo, British Butterflies (6 species), White & Red Admirals, Peak White, Black-veined White, Butterflies of Andalucia (6 species) and Butterflies of Alpes Maritimes (6 species) - 35p each
- **NEW - Gardening for Butterflies Leaflet** (A4 folded) – New BC publication, completely rewritten to provide advice for all seasons and including moths - free
- **Gardening for Butterflies by Margaret Vickery** – based on an exhaustive study carried out in many gardens nation-wide over five years, this lists all the top 100 favourite nectar sources in their preferred order (A5 booklet, – 44 pages). BC price £2.99 (Original Price £4.99)
- **Butterfly Gardening by Jenny Steel**. This newly published book shows what to grow for nectar, how to encourage butterflies to breed and how to manage your garden in a butterfly friendly way. (A5 booklet 28 pages) BC price £3.00 (original price £3.50)
- **Saving Butterflies by David Dunbar**. A practical guide to the conservation of butterflies, suitable for larger gardens with sections on how to start and manage a wildflower meadow. Also much practical advice on managing the countryside for butterflies (Hardback book 8”x 8”, 80 pages). BC price £4.99. (original price £ 9.99)

- **Butterflies of Hertfordshire by Brian Sawford** – Classic Guide to locations and species in Herts, the most comprehensive account ever published (hardback, 195 pages). BC price £7.50 (original price £15.00)
- **The Butterflies of the London Area by Colin Plant** – Guide to butterflies within 20 miles of Charing Cross, includes all of Middlesex and parts of South Herts. (hardback 199 pages). BC Price £7.50 (original price £15.95)
- **FSC Identification Guide to Butterflies**– Fully laminated folding guide showing all UK butterfly species in full colour. This publication from the Field Studies Council is our single best selling item, an invaluable guide. BC Price - £3.00
- **FSC Identification Guide to Caterpillars** – Fully laminated folding guide showing the caterpillars of all UK butterfly species. BC price - £2.50

FIELD TRIP REPORTS

Totteridge Fields Moth Evening 19th June, by John Hollingdale

Another moth evening, another rotten weather forecast that promised unusually low temperatures for a summer night. My thermometer read 3C on the ground and an air temperature of 5C; not promising.

The small group of three humans and Vickie the dog gathered around the light suspended from a camera tripod and waited.

In the first half hour only four moths of the species Yellow Bar appeared but then slowly but surely other species arrived so that by the time we stopped at 12.15 am we had a list of 21 species that didn't include the unidentified Pug and Minor.

There was nothing unusual but the following species seen are less common in Harrow; The Shears, Bird's Wing and Light Arches. One Elephant Hawk-moth turned up and also the migrant Dark Swordgrass.

We ended the evening struggling with the enormous padlocks that are

required in this part of London to stop fly-tipping on the site.



The Shears *Hada plebeja*
Photo: David Painter

**Bunkers Park and Long Deans
NR, Hemel Hempstead,
11 July, by Mike Pearson**

On a chilly (17C), overcast afternoon, which always threatened but never actually achieved, rain, five local residents, having seen a leaflet in the library, but who professed to be more bird- than butterfly-watchers, joined Mike

Pearson in what turned out to be a most enjoyable "nature ramble" through Bunkers Park and HMWT's Long Deans Nature Reserve. HMBC members can perhaps be forgiven for their absence on the presumption that all sensible butterflies would not have been flying, but lying low in the vegetation.

The undoubted butterfly-unfriendly weather did mean that there were very many fewer butterflies to be seen, than would normally be expected in mid-July. The eventual species count for the afternoon was 7 only: Small & Essex Skippers, Small White, Small Tortoiseshell, Marbled White (1 only), Gatekeeper, Meadow Brown.

The silver lining to this particular cloud was, however, that we were able to examine some individual resting insects from very close up, something that would have been impossible, had the weather been any warmer. Most of those on the walk had never before seen a butterfly in close-up, and were most impressed with the vivid colours and wing patterns of a Small Tortoiseshell and a Gatekeeper that we were able to examine very closely.

One of the aims of this walk was to try and demonstrate the differences between Small/Essex Skippers. A number of Smalls had been identified on the way round, but it was not until the very end of the walk, when we were returning to the car park, that an obliging Essex Skipper posed for us on a bramble flower, waving its black-tipped antennae for all to see.

Butterflies were largely absent from Long Deans NR, so we prodded

mounds of the Yellow Meadow Ant, *Lasius flavus*, and talked about the role ants can play in the life-cycles of some butterfly species; we looked at Cinnabar Moth caterpillars on Ragwort plants deliberately left by a ragwort-clearance work party the week before; and we noted the last of this year's Pyramidal Orchids, along with other plants in flower such as Restharrow and Birdsfoot Trefoil, the main local foodplant of the Common Blue.

At the end everyone said they had enjoyed themselves.

Stanmore Country Park July 18th, by John Hollingdale

Another butterfly walk and another unfriendly weather forecast. Other people must have thought so or perhaps they thought Broxbourne Woods sounded more exciting. Therefore only Margaret, my wife, and I ventured out, in a very light drizzle, to see what species flew in these conditions.

In the first meadow there were the first of the many Gatekeepers seen on our two hour walk. Also flying were a Large White and Shaded Broad-bar and Six-spot Burnet moths. However the second meadow was inhabited by Narrow-bordered Five-spot Burnets clinging to every available nectar flower. Here we identified a Green-veined White and every other white netted during the walk was this species. Meadow Browns were also flying in these damp conditions.

As we made our way over to the clearings on the other side of the reserve one of the promised bright periods arrived and the sun shone for the rest of the walk. In the third open space a Comma and one or two Purple Hairstreaks were seen. Both Small and Essex Skippers were identified and in the last field we saw the only Peacock. The only other species encountered were a Speckled Wood and a Holly Blue together with a Yellow Shell moth.

We went home to put names to the various bits of flora collected en route.

Purple Emperors (*Apatura iris*) in 2004, by Andrew Middleton and Liz Goodyear

Warmer than average weather through April and May promised an early and strong season for the Purple Emperor, as in 2003. However, June was generally rather cool, then July was exceptionally wet. Even though rainfall of 10 cm was 2.5 times the average for the month,

sunshine and temperatures were near normal, and in the end the Purple Emperor seemed to fair OK.

The first sighting in south Hertfordshire on the 28th June were followed by a steady trickle of sightings in between the showers, and Broxbourne Woods was again the most popular place to try for an encounter. Several observers were fortunate to get images of *iris* early in the month, and a selection of these can be viewed on the branch website (see next pages). Two Purple Emperor field trips were held in July by the branch in Broxbourne Wood NR, and both days yielded success for those who waited patiently for the sun to shine.

Sat 10th July ~ Broxbourne Wood NR Field Trip: We set up the signage (thanks to CMS for the laminated signs) and arrived by “the bench” at about 9.45 am, only to learn that the early-birds had already seen a female at 9.30 am. By 11 am, and with the sun still shining, around 40 expectant people lined the main ride from the car-park. A report came through that a male had been seen on the outer path near the hemp agrimony, so naturally most deserted their leaders to go and see it, and some were lucky. But whilst the faithless were away, a male flew down the ride and to the delight of the remaining few, alighted on the track to enjoy the pleasures of some fresh dog’s muck. It stayed on the track for nearly 20 minutes, during which time Liz was able to jog off and bring the crowd back in time to enjoy great views, as it flashed purple and fed vigorously with its large yellow proboscis. The predicted showers arrived in the form of a downpour, at which point most sensible people, being well satisfied, left for home. Some greedy stalwarts hung on for more, but were rewarded only with the briefest of sightings when conditions brightened.

Sun 18th July ~ Broxbourne Wood NR Field Trip in conjunction with Countryside Management Service: Despite the rain, about 25 people were present in the morning, hoping for the sun to shine. Paul

Hertfordshire and Middlesex

Jarczewski (CMS) led a popular walk around the reserve, whilst others enjoyed the few butterflies that could be seen, but understandably people drifted away as the hours passed. However, after some minutes of brighter sunshine around 2 pm, two Purple Emperors appeared around the canopy, one of which dived into the trees and was then seen to feed at an oak sap run for 40 minutes. As the weather brightened, butterfly activity and observer numbers increased, and a while later, one of the female Purple Emperors was



seen flying around the willows and gave a fantastic aerial display. We then suggested a visit to

Both photos of a female Purple Emperor taken by Sandra Stanbridge in Broxbourne Woods

Broxbourne Common, where we had located male territorial activity around the tree-tops the previous day. Although conditions towards 5 pm were not ideal, a male was eventually seen flying in a canopy gap in weak sunshine, and after another flight it perched in view on the top of an oak. We then realised that a second male was already perched about 2 ft away on an adjacent oak spray, and that neither seemed aware of the other's presence. A Purple Hairstreak flying past initiated sorties by both Emperors, and on seeing each other, they then performed several aerial clashes to the delight of the onlookers. Eventually it seemed that one had the greater energy and managed to evict the other from the territory.

As is usual, sightings fell away through late July, and the last was seen on 3rd August; a very sad battered individual that lost out to a Spotted Flycatcher, which had also taken up residence in the territorial area! We look forward to receiving news of other sightings from elsewhere in Middlesex and Hertfordshire in 2004, and hope to be able to report the 2004 season in more detail at a later date. It was really nice to see so many Butterfly Conservation members at the two field trips, a fair

few having come from other branches just to see the Purple Emperors, so thanks to everyone that came along.

Heath Fritillary Introduction to Middlesex, by David Chandler

During this summer English Nature issued a licence to introduce the Heath Fritillary into Middlesex. The Branch were unofficially aware of the proposal in 1999 and opposed it because it contravenes the Society's national guidelines which discourage the introduction of species into locations from which the species has not previously been recorded. Further, the Heath Fritillary is not mentioned in the Thames Regional Action Plan or the local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP).

I quote an expurgated extract from a comment received by the Branch from English Nature's Chief Invertebrate Ecologist:

“I am not surprised that Butterfly Conservation disagree with the attempt to introduce the Heath Fritillary to Middlesex. BC have had a consistently unsupportive stance about introductions of any species. Nevertheless it is my job to promote invertebrate conservation and I see

introduction attempts as a means of learning a great deal about the habitat requirements of species, maintaining the interest of enthusiasts and maybe even getting a little successful conservation along the way. I am not prepared to sit back and criticise the efforts of others whilst doing nothing more than monitoring the death of colonies and the extinction of species, which seems to be the main thrust of much butterfly 'conservation' to date. Butterfly Conservation local branch has been consulted on several occasions since 1999. Their responses were, predictably, in line with their organisation's national policy. It is not necessary for a species to be mentioned in BC's Regional Action Plan or in the LBAP. These documents add weight to a project proposal but neither limit nor direct actions. So far as I am aware, there is no evidence that the species ever occurred naturally at Middlesex. However, as the species has probably been present for about 8000 years and records are rarely older than 200 years, there is plenty of scope to adopt unrealistically narrow views. With a rapidly changing climate, or at least a significant temporary warming, it may be expected that butterfly populations will respond appropriately. Introductions give us a chance to assess whether range and density

changes, as determined by the butterfly monitoring schemes, are, elsewhere, being constrained by unsuitable landscapes.

English Nature will assess each introduction proposal on its merits. BC will be consulted, as it has been in the past. English Nature will not be restrained by Regional Action Plans compiled by other organisations and will not necessarily adopt their opinions either.”

The EN comment has caused much disquiet in our Branch and is an episode which serves to illustrate that BC at a Branch and local level needs to engage more constructively with conservation partners. Had BC engaged more constructively with English Nature in this instance, the Heath Fritillaries taken from Kent may have been transplanted in a more sympathetic way. An inconsistent policy application nationally in BC may cloud the issue; on the one hand we tell English Nature it's against BC policy to introduce species, then work extremely hard to create an unsustainable environment in Lincolnshire (albeit for a re-introduction) of possibly non-suitable non-arctic type Chequered Skippers from the Benelux countries. English Nature's comment shows that their ecologists are becoming frustrated in getting the same automatic response from BC rather than working with them to devise a shared view to conserve the species. I point out that EN's reply could be interpreted as somewhat cavalier and tactless, but some Branch members I discussed this matter with do sympathise with EN's view in that just sitting around and documenting extinction after extinction of butterflies just isn't good enough.

It is perhaps surprising, but certainly frustrating, that English Nature will not be restrained by Regional Action Plans compiled by other organisations and will not necessarily adopt their opinions either. However, having decided to proceed anyway, a constructive engagement between us at that time may have persuaded English Nature to have approached the release differently, rather than adopting a go it alone stance. It appears they have operated within the law, in the absence of anything illegal taking place there's little BC can do other than rattle its sabre and rue a lost opportunity. I will, however, be reporting this episode under ‘lessons learned’ at the next Branches Liaison Meeting, in October.

Regional Officer Report, By Sharon Hearle

Dingy Skipper and Grizzled Skipper

These two declining butterflies have been the focus for much survey effort across the region. There are now colour leaflets available for both species which have been widely distributed to many volunteers, landowners and relevant agencies and can help distinguish between the butterfly and several day flying moths.

Training days at Monks Wood in Cambridgeshire on 20th March and at High Lodge Brandon in Suffolk on April 24th was well attended including staff from Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Essex Wildlife Trust, WBB Mineral Company and British Trust for Ornithology. Many attendees did go on to complete survey work across the region.

It appears that 2004 has been a relatively good year for both skippers. The highest count for Dingy Skipper on my transect at Devil's Dyke near Newmarket was 26 compared to 15 last year.

Survey visits to the cut-off channel from Feltwell to Wretton in Norfolk has led to the discovery of several new colonies of Grizzled Skipper, Dingy Skipper, Wall and Brown Argus not recorded before along a potential 9 mile length. The cut-off channel was dug in the 1960's and chalk banks appear to have slowly re-vegetated since that time. There is very limited public access to the cut-off channel but I did get permission to survey some sections in more detail and further work is planned for 2005.

Despite some of this good news, many sites remain threatened by lack of management and I am involved in planning issues at several sites in Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire.

Moth Work

I have been involved in moth survey work across the region including Narrow-bordered Bee Hawk Moth, Chalk Carpet and Four-spotted. The known site for Narrow-bordered Bee Hawk moth was re-confirmed but despite searching no new sites were located. A significant area for Chalk Carpet has now been confirmed in the Barrington area near Cambridge (about 5 miles from the Hertfordshire border). A single Four-spotted came to light at my house suggesting that a colony remains undiscovered right under my nose near Newmarket.

Survey Training

Following the success of the transect and monitoring training day in Cambridgeshire, a similar day was held in Bury St Edmunds on

Hertfordshire and Middlesex

Thursday 5th August using PowerPoint presentations from Head Office and the experience of Rob Parker and Sharon Hearle. The event was attended by 6 volunteers; none were members of Butterfly Conservation and included staff from Suffolk County Council and RSPB. There were many other enquiries about recording from people who could not make the day.

The event was covered by Eastern Daily Press and East Anglian Daily Times and although the copy was not completely accurate it did lead to an incredible 34 enquiries from the public and hopefully more recorders/members in the future.

There will be further training days in 2005, including Royston in Hertfordshire, and if anyone has any suggestions for topics they would like to see covered please get in touch.

Defra Conservation Walks

Currently over 35 Conservation Walks and Rides are available throughout Hertfordshire and may provide access to under-recorded squares.

Most footpaths have existed for centuries and appear on ordnance survey maps. But now there is a whole new network of routes, called Conservation Walks which are part of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, a farm conservation scheme run by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). This provides an opportunity for farmers and other land managers to protect and enhance the natural beauty and diversity of our countryside.

Information on Conservation Walks can be found online from Defra's interactive website www.countrywalks.defra.gov.uk. This allows the opportunity to search for a walk within each county and provides details and a map for each entry. Alternatively, the Register of Walks and Rides may be available at public libraries and Tourist Information Centres or can be obtained from Defra Countryside Stewardship, Defra, Ergon House, Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2AL.

The Great Immigration of February 2004, by Peter Davey

The following article was written by a member of Dorset Branch, describing the amazing sights they had earlier this year. The article appeared in their newsletter in Spring and is reproduced here by permission.

Many readers will already have seen a Painted Lady butterfly this year. This is unusual as this fine migratory species is rarely seen in England much before May, and in some years is absent altogether. Much depends on the combination of a large emergence of adults in north Africa plus a persistent airflow from a southerly quarter to bring it to northern Europe in the late spring and early summer.

However, in February 2004 this very combination was established to an extreme degree, and many hundreds duly appeared across mainly southern Britain; indeed, more than five hundred were recorded across Dorset. The Painted Lady butterfly was not the only lepidoptera species to participate in the migration. It was indeed fortuitous that our moth recorders were on the ball and light trapping during the critical period. In Dorset alone, a staggering twenty potential immigrant moth species were observed, many very rare, and one, the Levant Blackneck, was totally new to the county. In fact no less than ten of this rare vagrant were seen all told, and this is equivalent to the total ever seen in Britain. Another species, a well-known migrant micromoth called the Rush Veneer (*Nomophila noctuella*) tends to occur most frequently in the summer and autumn months. Only ten have ever been recorded in Dorset in February historically, but on this occasion more than one thousand five hundred appeared across the county. Other moth species included the fabulously marked Striped Hawk, the more familiar Humming-bird Hawk and Silver Y, and the minuscule Diamond-back (*Plutella xylostella*) a tiny micromoth with a six-millimetre wingspan. Another species, the orache-feeding Nutmeg, is double-brooded in Europe and on the wing in May and August. No fewer than twelve of these were trapped across the county, all of an unusually pale or sandy colour, suggesting a very southerly source indeed for this species.

This event therefore was unique. Evidently conditions south of the Mediterranean must have been perfect for a mass emergence of lepidoptera during January. The weather then proceeded to play its part, with a strong high pressure system firmly anchored over the western Mediterranean during the first week of February and an uninterrupted east to south-easterly airflow on its southern flank across much of north-west Africa. This airflow veered to a southerly point to the west of Iberia, and finally to a south-westerly across much of England. Day-time temperatures peaked at 26°C across Algeria, 22°C in Gran Canaria to 13°C over Dorset at this time. The first wave

of immigrants passed across the county on 4th and 5th February. The author was fortunate enough to disturb a very pale Painted Lady butterfly from a gravel track in Lower Hyde Heath in cloudy conditions on 4th February and to trap a Striped Hawkmoth at Durlston thirty hours later.

As the east to south-easterly airflow increased across the Western Sahara and Mauritania regions on 4th February, so sand from the desert became airborne and moved on a broad front towards and then across the African coast and finally out into the Atlantic on a turbulent Sirocco wind. A correspondent on the Canary Islands observed the onset of this phenomenon and the sudden arrival of many Striped Hawkmoths and Painted Lady butterflies on 5th February. Although, the offshore airflow over north-west Africa continued unabated, the flow of immigrants to southern England was brought to an abrupt halt on 7th February as polar north-westerly winds swept across northern Europe. The tropical south-westerly winds resumed during 11th February and with it came the second and much larger influx of immigrants. Fantastic totals were recorded on the night that followed: Portland Bird Observatory recorded one hundred and sixty-four Small Mottled Willow moths at light traps; and at Puddletown, twenty five kilometres to the north-east of Portland, three hundred and eighty-four Rush Veneer moths were counted in the light traps there.

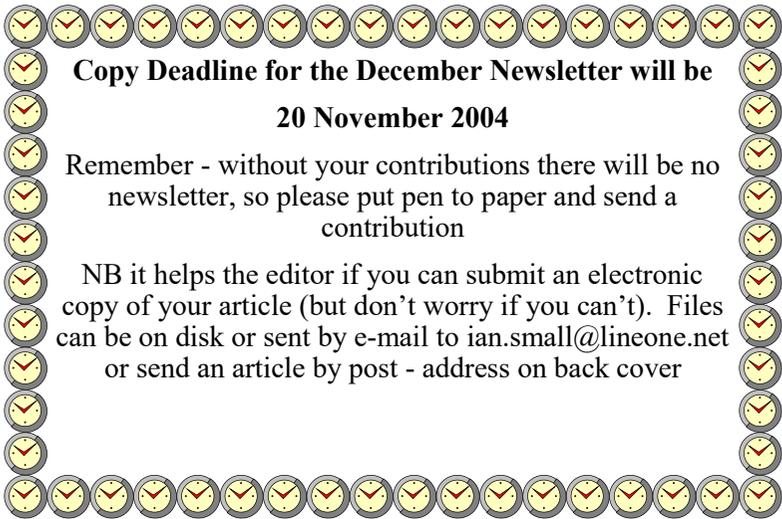
Tracing a path back for these individuals lead to a departure point and time coincident with the onset of the Sirocco winds over the Canary Islands a week earlier. The author believes that a large proportion of the insects comprising this second influx travelled at altitude for much of their journey, and that many of these filtered out of the sky across southern Britain as winds fell light at all levels by the evening of the 11th February. Certainly, temperatures that ranged between 12°C over the Canary Islands and 5°C over south-west England at 1500 metres above the ground, would have made flight viable for insects at this level, and the Sirocco a suitable mechanism to transport insects to various levels of the atmosphere at the start of their 4000 kilometre journey.

Interestingly, numbers of moths peaked on 4th and 5th February and again on 11th and 12th February in England, with relatively few seen in the intervening period. However, numbers of Painted Lady butterflies increased between the two peaks. This may have been due to the relatively sunny conditions at the time and the associated

stimulation of nectaring and basking behaviour making them more visible to recorders. In addition, the 7th and 8th February fell on a weekend and with it the potential for increased observations.

Dorset's butterfly and moth enthusiasts are to be congratulated on the wealth of county records they submitted. Of the four thousand plus individual immigrants seen across Britain during February, more than two-thirds were spotted in Dorset. At the time of writing in late March, singleton Painted Lady butterflies are still in evidence along the coast, but as every day passes they become more tatty and fewer in number. It will be fascinating to see whether this spectacular immigration manages to spawn resident broods of the respective species over the coming season.

The sequence of meteorological events was also of great interest on this occasion, and the second influx may be the first recorded instance of flight at altitude within the Sahara dust-plume during a winter month. Prior to the onset of the warming trend or global warming, this phenomenon was a relatively rare event and primarily restricted to the summer months. However, in recent years it has become more frequent, and in the hot summer of 2003, no less than four such plumes made it to the UK transporting many rare migrant species, some of which were new to Britain.



**Copy Deadline for the December Newsletter will be
20 November 2004**

Remember - without your contributions there will be no
newsletter, so please put pen to paper and send a
contribution

NB it helps the editor if you can submit an electronic
copy of your article (but don't worry if you can't). Files
can be on disk or sent by e-mail to ian.small@lineone.net
or send an article by post - address on back cover



Conservation Dates

Conservation work is one of the most important activities of the Society, as loss or neglect of suitable habitats is one of the major reasons for the decline in many of our butterflies as well as other wildlife.

Below are a series of dates across Herts. and Middlesex where you can help with essential management that aims to maintain the correct conditions on these sites for the wildlife that inhabits them. Several of the dates are run by the HMWT on their nature reserves.

Millhopper's Pasture SP 900149. Fourth Sunday of the month. Meet at 10.30 am. John and Margaret Noakes need your help. (01296) 660072.

Therfield Heath, TL 335400 First Sunday of each month from 10.00 a.m. - 1 p.m. Details from Vincent Thomson (01763) 341443.

Duchies Piece (Aldbury Nowers) SP 952131. Third Sunday of each month. Meet 10.00 a.m. in the lay-by, near Tring station. For details ring Alan Strawn (new reserve warden) on (01442) 232946

Hertford Heath TL 354111. For details ring Anthony Oliver on (01992) 583404.

Fryent Country Park - details from Leslie Williams at the Brent Ecology Unit on (0181) 206 0492

Patmore Heath TL 443257. Meet at 10.00 a.m. on the last Sunday of each month. Further details from Gavin Vicary (01279) 771933

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