

Butterfly Conservation

Saving butterflies, moths and our environment



**HERTFORDSHIRE AND
MIDDLESEX BRANCH**

**NEWSLETTER
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Spring 2010

Collection Recollections,

by David Chandler

I have never been a butterfly collector, but I have collected butterflies, albeit very briefly and hopefully, in retrospect, without not doing too much harm to them.

The story starts many years ago in the mid-1960s when my interest in butterflies was first sparked by collecting the Butterflies of Britain cards given away in packets of PG Tips leaf tea. Over a year or so I collected one card a week until I had all the 50 cards and, still being quite young in years, naively thought that I could see most of these butterflies in my parents garden in Kings Langley. Nowadays that idea may seem quite daft but fifty years ago the gardens of The Bury

Hertfordshire and Middlesex

estate were full of traditional flowers and shrubs like Roses, Lily of the Valley, Marigolds, Petunias, Michaelmas Daisy, Hollyhocks, Broom and Privet and butterflies were much more numerous and widespread in the suburbs than they are these days. The fields behind the house were not so intensively farmed and so wild flowers like Vetches, Nettles, Willow-herb, Mallow, Knapweed, Field Scabious, Bluebells, Thistles, Bladder Campion, Red Clover and Ox-eye Daisy were all present in the hedgerow at the top of the garden.

In the height of summer in mid-August on hot sunny days I'd take my seaside fishing net and chase and catch butterflies that visited my garden. There was also a Buddleia by the gate of a neighbour's front garden that I found most "attractive" too.

I would begin my quest after lunch and see how many different butterflies I could catch before teatime. All the butterflies I caught would be placed in my north-facing bedroom window and they would remain there in the four-inch gap between the net curtains and the window pane because they seemed to be more attracted by the outside light than the shady room. I recall blues would passively sit on the glass yet the vanessids would be active most of the time, I've never quite figured out quite why, perhaps its just an automatic response. At teatime when I had finished all the butterflies would be released in



A selection from the 1963 Brook Bond Tea-card collection of British Butterflies that inspired David - the Chalkhill Blue, the Wall Brown and the Brimstone

a small cloud of fluttering colour by simply opening the window. I would be quite disappointed if I didn't catch at least a dozen different species and I recall one special mid August day I caught sixteen butterfly residents – seventeen if I counted in the Painted Lady from the Buddleia from down the road.

On a good day I would hope to catch Large, Small and Green Veined White, Brimstone, Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper, Wall, Common Blue, Small Copper and Holly Blue, Small Skipper, Essex Skipper, Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell Red Admiral and (at the time) the uncommon Comma. Oddly, the Speckled Wood was uncommon locally at this time as was the Ringlet – which I would have to go and visit the scrubby woods of Rucker's Lane about a mile and a half away to see. The Small Heath was an absentee and the Marbled White was not seen in the garden either, the nearest colony I was aware of was some eighteen miles away at Ivinghoe Beacon.

First brood Wall, Orange Tip and Large Skipper along with the odd Brown Argus were found earlier in the year sometime around the Whitsun school holidays. The Wall was a very common butterfly in those days and often, when in the garden, I'd think "Oh its just another Wall". Ironic really when I think of my excitement last year in seeing four Wall flying together on Benfleet Downs (Essex) on 2nd August.

These days my mother's garden still has a good variety of butterfly species and we conduct a garden transect there monitoring the populations. Over the past half century we have lost some species like the Common Blue and Wall from Violet's garden but others like the Speckled Wood and Comma have replaced them and there is still real interest in looking for butterflies there particularly as we have our own Buddleia now.

Gardens may be smaller in modern houses and so people may have less opportunity to see butterflies near their homes; however, it is still possible to go see some butterflies in their community in their local parks. I encourage everyone to go out and visit their local park and send in their sightings to our recorders, especially as the theme for this year's Save Our Butterflies Week (24th July to August 1st) is "parks for butterflies".

Spring Meetings

Our first Spring meeting was our AGM, held in St John's Hall, Hertford on 23 January 2010. Over 20 members attended. Prior to the formal AGM our guest speaker, Maurice Avent, national Chairman of Butterfly Conservation (and Chairman of Wiltshire Branch) gave us a very informative talk on Farming for Butterflies. Maurice is fortunate to own his own SSSI which, as you would expect, he farms for the benefit of wildlife and it was clear from his talk that the butterflies are benefitting tremendously. Also of note was Maurice's comment, in response to a question, that despite the very large badger population, his cattle did not suffer from TB. He attributed this to the fact that they are all feeding on herb-rich grassland rather than getting large amounts of cattle-feed. He feels this leads to a much healthier stock which is better able to resist infection. Interestingly, a very similar thesis has recently been put forward to explain the troubles facing many bee populations (see page 10).

After Maurice's talk, and the formal AGM, members held an informal discussion about where they saw the Branch, and the Society as a whole, developing over the next few years. This forum was 'chaired' by Ian Small, who is both a Branch committee member and a Trustee of the Society. This was a very lively discussion, and many thanks to all who participated.



Our second Spring event was a 2-part affair, comprising a visit to our Reserve at Millhopper's Pasture in the morning, and an indoor meeting nearby at Puttenham. We were fortunate that the weather was Spring-like, almost for the first time, and this encouraged over 20 people to attend each session. The

morning walk was led by reserve manager, Jez Perkins, who was able to demonstrate how well the reserve was looking following the establishment of sheep grazing.

The afternoon indoor meeting began with a lively presentation from Liz Goodyear and Andrew Middleton describing their novel White-letter hairstreak survey work. This has taken them far and wide, not always in clement weather, searching for elms, and then looking to see whether the adult butterflies or their eggs (depending upon time of year) were present. Having initially hoped that many other Branches would take on this work in their own areas,



*White-letter Hairstreak
Photo © Ian Small*

Liz and Andrew found that this was rarely the case, and so they have spent many hours travelling many miles for this project. This would not have been possible without funding both from the Branch, and from Head Office, both of which were acknowledged and thanked.

Due to the endeavours of Andrew and Liz, (and a small number of other hardy souls, most notably one from Yorkshire) the recent distribution map of the White-letter Hairstreak has been re-drawn, with the butterfly appearing to be more common and widespread than had been realised previously.

Following a break for refreshments (including some of Liz's excellent cake !) the meeting concluded with a showing of members' photographs. Roger Gibbons showed a fine selection of his photographs from France, where he is fortunate to spend the summer months. Ian Small showed photographs from the UK as well as from Bulgaria. Andrew Wood, our Moth Officer, again showed some excellent moth images and Malcolm Hull's photos included several taken at Butterfly World in St. Albans.

Thanks to all who attended these meetings, and for those of you who were not able to attend, perhaps this summary will encourage you to attend our next Spring season.

Brown Hairstreak Egg Hunt East of Welwyn Garden City - Sunday 21 February 2010, by Malcolm Hull

Snow forced the postponement of the January Field Trip to search for Brown Hairstreak eggs in the location of Kevin Hornby's sightings last summer (see last newsletter). By February the snow had all gone and 6 intrepid souls met up to search the local Blackthorn thickets, which is the most reliable way of determining the butterflies presence. Despite an hours searching in the area close to last summers sightings, no eggs were found. Suitable Blackthorn remains in the area, despite some heavy trimming of hedges by a local farmer, which may have removed favoured egg laying sites. So the status of the butterfly in Herts is inconclusive. Prior to last summer there had been no confirmed sightings for 11 years. But we know the species is doing well in its strongholds in Surrey and Bucks. And individuals are quite capable of flights up to 10km. So do keep an eye out for adults during mid July - September (usually in oak, ash or blackthorn) or eggs in the winter (on blackthorn)

An unexpected highlight of the day was the discovery of a White Letter Hairstreak egg on Wych Elm by Liz Goodyear.

WIDER COUNTRYSIDE BUTTERFLY SCHEME 2010

It has been confirmed that WCBS will be run again in 2010. Once again this will be a collaborative project with BTO and CEH.

Nationally WCBS was a great success with 763 random 1km squares sampled by over 600 surveyors. The results have given us the first ever random sample of butterflies in the UK and have established an important new baseline from which to assess future trends. The hope is that the same squares can be surveyed as in 2009. The priority is to re-survey these squares for at least the next 2 years so that we can determine trends in the wider countryside and see whether they differ from transect trends. We also welcome new participants either to help re-survey old squares, or to survey new ones for the first time.

I have written to all the recorders for 2009 to see if they are able to

take part again in 2010, but if there is anyone who would like to take part this year, or wants to find out more, please contact Andrew Wood (details on the backpage)

The Monarch of New Zealand, by Nigel Agar.

Last July (2009) we went to Australia and New Zealand spending a week in NZ in the middle of their winter. This is not of course the brightest time to see butterflies but we did see two on the last day on the vegetation between the motel car park and the Oritogi River estuary at Raglan, Waitomo County, North Island. They were apparently North American Monarchs. I reported the sightings to two NZ butterfly websites Robert Arter Williamson of NZ Butterfly Info and Margaret Topzand and Jacqui Knight of Monarch Butterfly NZ Trust- a community project. Both replied.



Monarch Butterfly, Raglan,
Waitomo County New Zealand N
I, July 2009
Photo © Nigel Agar

The Monarch is something of a mystery in NZ. How did it get there? (It has been there for some time and as a Maori name.)

It could have:

1. Flown the Pacific diagonally. I.e covered half the world. The Monarch is a long distance migrant and occasionally reaches Britain with a following wind. Even so New Zealand is a long shot at four times the distance
2. Island hopped. But it does not occur on most Pacific Islands although it is found in Australia where it is know as the Wanderer.
3. Been introduced. Possible but no record. Much NZ wildlife has in fact been introduced. If it was introduced by settlers they would have to have been American settlers.

4. Accidentally introduced in the fruit and veg. More possible than you might think. Some of the earlier settlers to New Zealand were in fact Americans – Yankee Whalers from Nantucket. It is possible that they were worried about scurvy on the long voyages and carried vegetables or even living plants aboard their ships along with the odd Monarch eggs or pupa.

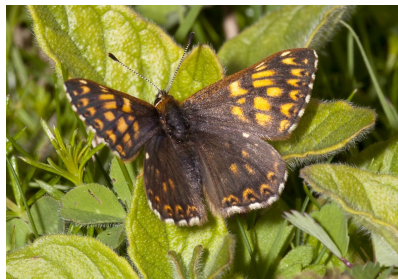
Meanwhile Jacqui, Margaret and the team at Monarch NZ send their love and would no doubt appreciate any good theories about the Monarch.

Fears Grow for Future of Britain's Rarest Butterflies

The following press release was issued by Butterfly Conservation at the beginning of March - you may have seen some of the resulting press articles.

Figures for butterfly sightings in 2009 have raised fears that five of Britain's rarest butterflies face a growing risk of extinction. Their numbers last year either continued to plummet or remained at near rock bottom levels.

Conservationists are particularly concerned about the Duke of Burgundy, which has reached new low points in each of the past three summers and is now at its lowest level since monitoring began. The butterfly, which 50 years ago was a common sight in woodland clearings, now has less than 80 colonies throughout the whole of the UK. Other rare butterflies



Duke of Burgundy
Photo © Ian Small

that remained at very low levels in 2009 include the High Brown Fritillary, with less than 50 colonies, and the Wood White and the Lulworth Skipper, both of which are down to under 100 colonies. Another rare species, the Pearl-bordered Fritillary, had its second worst year in 2009.

Concern for the future of these butterflies follows analysis of data collected by the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme from over 1,000 sites nationwide. The UKBMS is co-ordinated by the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology and the charity Butterfly Conservation.

Experts believe that the extremely wet weather throughout the summers of 2007 and 2008, followed by the above average rainfall of July and August 2009, have accelerated a long-term decline in numbers. Heavy rain makes it hard for butterflies to survive.

And it's not just the rare butterflies that are having a tough time. According to the new data, collected in the course of last year by the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme, some relatively common species including the Wall Brown, Small Skipper and Green Hairstreak also remained at very low numbers in 2009. The Small Tortoiseshell, which has suffered a serious decline in recent years, made a slight comeback.

The highlight of 2009 was the massive migration of Painted Lady butterflies, which originated in North Africa and arrived in vast swarms in early summer. At one point it was estimated there could have been over a billion Painted Ladies in the UK. However, the UKBMS figures indicate that this migration was not quite on the scale of the last big one in 1996.

The UKBMS statistics show a very modest overall recovery compared with the dire summer of 2008, which was the worst for 25 years. In addition to the abundance of the Painted Lady, some native butterflies also did well in 2009. These included the Green-veined White, Ringlet and Speckled Wood – all of which thrive in lush woodland areas and may have been beneficiaries of the damp but not particularly cold conditions.

Dr Tom Brereton, Head of Monitoring with the charity Butterfly Conservation, said: “We are particularly concerned about the Duke of Burgundy. At the start of the century there were about 200 colonies in the country. This number has now more than halved – and most colonies that remain are small. It is a serious situation.”

Butterflies are important as indicators, alerting us to underlying problems with the environment. If butterfly numbers are falling,

inevitably other wildlife is in decline.

The main factors causing the long term decline of many butterfly species include the loss of crucial habitats such as flower rich grassland and the intensification of farming methods. A lack of management is also causing problems in habitats such as woodlands.

Each year the UKBMS collates data collected by hundreds of volunteers nationwide. Dr Marc Botham, a butterfly ecologist at the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology who analysed the results said: “The results show the enormous value of long running datasets in identifying environmental problems. We are extremely grateful to the many volunteers who contribute each year. Through their efforts a new milestone was reached in 2009 when the number of sites monitored passed the 1,000 mark for the first time.”

Honeybee Decline Linked to Falling Biodiversity ?

The following is taken from an article from BBC Online, by Richard Black on 20 January. There are striking parallels between the main thesis and the views expressed by Maurice Avent about the link between the diet of his cows and the strength of their immune system (see page 4).

The decline of honeybees seen in many countries may be caused by reduced plant diversity, research suggests.

Bees fed pollen from a range of plants showed signs of having a healthier immune system than those eating pollen from a single type, scientists found. Writing in the journal *Biology Letters*, the French team says that bees need a fully functional immune system in order to sterilise food for the colony.

Other research has shown that bees and wild flowers are declining in step. Two years ago, scientists in the UK and The Netherlands reported that the diversity of bees and other insects was falling alongside the diversity of plants they fed on and pollinated.

Now, Cedric Alaux and colleagues from the French National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA) in Avignon have traced a possible

link between the diversity of bee diets and the strength of their immune systems.

"We found that bees fed with a mix of five different pollens had higher levels of glucose oxidase compared to bees fed with pollen from one single type of flower, even if that single flower had a higher protein content," he told BBC News.

Bees make glucose oxidase (GOX) to preserve honey and food for larvae against infestation by microbes - which protects the hive against disease. "So that would mean they have better antiseptic protection compared to other bees, and so would be more resistant to pathogen invasion," said Dr Alaux. Bees fed the five-pollen diet also produced more fat than those eating only a single variety - again possibly indicating a more robust immune system, as the insects make anti-microbial chemicals in their fat bodies.

Other new research, from the University of Reading, suggests that bee numbers are falling twice as fast in the UK as in the rest of Europe.

Forage fall

With the commercial value of bees' pollination estimated at £200m per year in the UK and \$14bn in the US, governments have recently started investing resources in finding out what is behind the decline.

In various countries it has been blamed on diseases such as Israeli Acute Paralysis Virus (IAPV), infestation with varroa mite, pesticide use, loss of genetic diversity among commercial bee populations, and the changing climate. Varroa mite infestation could be made worse by lower bee immunity. The most spectacular losses have been seen in the US where entire colonies have been wiped out, leading to the term colony collapse disorder.

However, the exact cause has remained elusive.

A possible conclusion of the new research is that the insects need to eat a variety of proteins in order to synthesise their various chemical defences; without their varied diet, they are more open to disease.

David Aston, who chairs the British Beekeepers' Association technical committee, described the finding as "very interesting" - particularly as

the diversity of food available to UK bees has declined.

"If you think about the amount of habitat destruction, the loss of biodiversity, that sort of thing, and the expansion of crops like oilseed rape, you've now got large areas of monoculture; and that's been a fairly major change in what pollinating insects can forage for."

As a consequence, he said, bees often do better in urban areas than in the countryside, because city parks and gardens contain a higher diversity of plant life.

Diverse message

While cautioning that laboratory research alone cannot prove the case, Dr Alaux said the finding tied in well with what is happening in the US. There, collapse has been seen in hives that are transported around the country to pollinate commercially important crops.

Biodiversity near 'point of no return'

"They move them for example to [a plantation of] almond trees, and there's just one pollen," he said. "So it might be possible that the immune system is weakened... compared to wild bees that are much more diverse in what they eat."

In the US, the problem may have been compounded by loss of genetic diversity among the bees themselves.

In the UK, where farmers are already rewarded financially for implementing wildlife-friendly measures, Dr Aston thinks there is some scope for turning the trend and giving some diversity back to the foraging bees. "I'd like to see much greater awareness among land managers such as farmers about managing hedgerows in a more sympathetic way - hedgerows are a resource that's much neglected," he said. "That makes landscapes much more attractive as well, so it's a win-win situation."

The French government has just announced a project to sow nectar-bearing flowers by roadsides in an attempt to stem honeybee decline.



Children's Writing Competition

BC were contacted by a lady called Elise Harter a few weeks ago. Elise is a children's author who has launched a creative writing competition to raise awareness of Butterfly Conservation.

Children aged 8-11 (inclusive) are being encouraged to put pen to paper on the theme of butterflies and caterpillars.

There are two age categories: 8-9 years of age (inclusive) and 10-11 (inclusive). Each story or poem must be a maximum of 400 words. Parents and teachers are kindly requested to send in entries on behalf of the children by email. The stories will be uploaded to her website where the public can vote for their favourite. Entries will be accepted up to and including Friday 23 April 2010. The winners will be announced both on Elise's website and also on BC's main website. One winner in each category will be selected by the official judges, while a second winner in each age group will win based on the number of votes they receive.

Participation is free of charge, but voluntary donations to Butterfly Conservation are being encouraged.

We have supplied Elise with prizes, for the winners, including copies of Nick Baker's book, 'British Wildlife: A Month by Month Guide', free family tickets to Butterfly World, publication of the winning stories on our website and bundles of Insect Lore goodies, including a grow-your-own butterfly garden, huge floor puzzle and lifecycle butterfly soft toy.

Elise's website is <http://eliseharter.weebly.com>

Early Sightings...

Butterflies (and much else) has been a bit slow of the mark this Spring due to the prolonged cold weather. The earliest reports notified to Liz Goodyear for placing on the Branch website were of a Red Admiral on the 23rd of January. It was nearly another month, on 20th February, when the first male Brimstone was recorded.

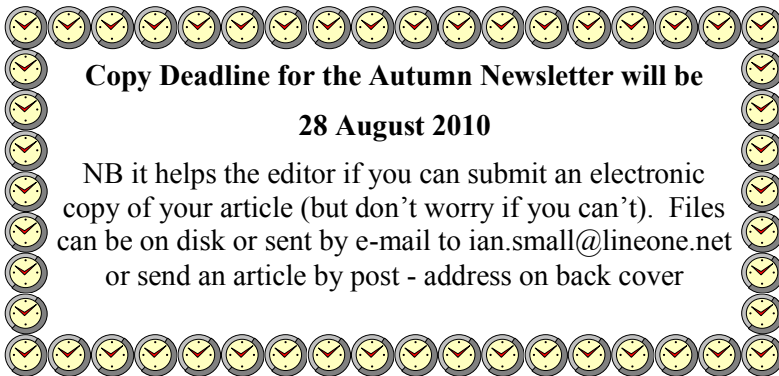
The beginning of March has seen reports of Small Tortoiseshell and Comma on the 2nd of the month, and there have been many reports of both species since. The first Peacocks were seen on 18th March.

An Orange Underwing was reported on 21st March.

So it looks as if, at long last, Spring is finally here and we can look forward to several months of warm weather and hopefully many encounters with butterflies and moths.

Why not share your enjoyment with other Branch members by sending a short letter / article to the editor (details on back cover) telling us what a great time you had.

Wishing you all a very enjoyable Summer.....



Copy Deadline for the Autumn Newsletter will be
28 August 2010

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. Contact Jez Perkins on 07967 832627 for details of planned work parties

Therfield Heath, TL 335400 First Sunday of each month from 10.00 a.m. - 1 p.m. Contact Paul Palmer, Clerk to the Conservators, on (01462) 675232

Ashwell Quarry Nature Reserve TL 252396 for the entrance off Hinxworth Road. Work parties on the third Sunday of each month starting at 10am. Contact Chris James on (01462) 742684

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

Fryent Country Park - details from Barn Hill Conservation Group on 020 8206 0492, www.bhcg.uk.com

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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