

HERTFORDSHIRE AND MIDDLESEX BRANCH

NEWSLETTER

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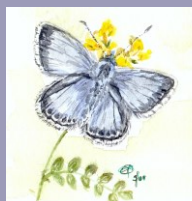
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**Butterfly
Conservation**

Saving butterflies, moths and our environment



Chair's Report, by Malcolm Hull

Autumn can be a disappointing time for butterfly enthusiasts. Cooler days, longer nights and declining butterfly numbers can all contribute to a down-beat mood.

Writing up notes of butterflies seen in sunnier times will help pass away the time, but does not necessarily do much to lift my melancholy mood.

So once all those summer sightings have been reported to Andrew Wood, or uploaded on I-record, my thoughts turn to plans for the future.

Introducing Wilder Spaces

In recent times the Branch has been active in working on Wilder Spaces initiatives. The Big City Butterflies and Wilder St Albans projects were featured at our Members Day in March.

Now the idea of individuals and communities working together to create wild spaces in parks, gardens and other local sites is being rolled out by Butterfly Conservation across the country.

Butterfly numbers have declined by 70% across the UK in the last 50 years. Wildflower meadows have declined by 98%. The actions and behaviour of people is the main cause of these problems. We now want to encourage people to come up with the solutions. Making change happen is not always easy - it relies on individual ideas and action as well as dialogue and compromise.

In recent months, members of the Branch Committee have been meeting with local authorities and landowners paving the way for new initiatives. Our head office staff are developing resources which will help with ideas and advice on all aspects of improving spaces for butterflies and moths.

So if you'd like to see more butterflies and moths in your garden, a nearby park, or elsewhere in your local area, why not get involved? It would be great for as many members as possible to join in and help make a real difference across our two counties.

To find out more, click on this link <https://butterfly-conservation.org/wild-spaces> where you can also register individual locations you'd like to see made wilder

In this newsletter we've included an example of a wild space which has already been created and how this has been achieved ([page 13](#)).

Future Events

It's been great to see so many of you join our many butterfly walks and moth events over the Spring and Summer. Full reports of almost all the trips are on the Branch Website <https://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/sightings-new.php> and there's an article with some of the highlights on [page 15](#). Most of these events are held each year, so these reports should help you plan trips you'd like to join in 2023 – next year's program will be published in April.

In the meantime we will again be running a series of winter talks on Zoom. Dates and speakers will be emailed to all members early in the New Year (see also [page 26](#)). In the meantime you can catch up with any of last year's talks you missed on the Herts & Middx Butterfly Conservation YouTube Channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCaCAEhhxWKLw7iTJA9G5GA>

Look out for details of next year's Members Day. This is our major indoor event of the year and held around the end of March. It's a great way to meet new people and find out fascinating information on butterflies and moths. Details of the date, location and speakers will be included in our New Year mailing.

And finally, don't forget to submit all your butterfly and moth records to our County Recorders - ideally by early November so they can be included in our Annual Report. Full details of the ways you can submit records are on the website at <https://hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/recording-new.php>

Date for your diary:

MEMBERS' DAY 2023

Will be held on the afternoon of

Saturday 1st April 2023

At the Welwyn Civic Centre, Old Welwyn.

**Full details of the programme, location and timings
will be circulated once finalized, early in 2023**

Heatwave Garden Butterfly Watch, 16th - 20th July 2022, by
Liz Goodyear

During those so terribly hot days of July my enthusiasm to go and seek out butterflies ground to a halt. I just simply sat in my garden in north Ware, either on the patio in the shade (until the sun came round) or under a tree always with my binoculars beside me! I like to think my garden is butterfly- and moth-friendly by providing a wide range of nectar sources as well as a few larval foodplants. One key nectar source this July was a very large clump of Hemp Agrimony which was the focal point of my watching. Many years ago I observed butterflies in the intense heat of an Arizona desert where sprinklers would be used to water the plants. The sprinklers would stop and the flowers would suddenly be covered in butterflies, then once the heat had dried everything up; the butterflies would disappear. So throughout the 'heatwave' I would 'mist' the buddleias and Hemp Agrimony every now and then – it seemed to work.

On 15th July I had ventured out locally looking for Purple Emperors but the heat was already getting too much! I hadn't intended doing a Heatwave Garden Butterfly Watch but I soon realised a lot of butterfly species were visiting my garden, with some I didn't expect. So starting on Saturday 16th July I was surprised to record 11 different species, with July regulars such as Peacock, Comma (which was also laying eggs on my hop plant), Red Admiral, Green-veined White, Large White, Gatekeeper and Meadow Brown. However, I wasn't expecting to see a Small Copper (only my third garden record); a very brief visit on my marjoram from a Brown Argus and the star - a White-letter Hairstreak late in the afternoon nectaring on the Hemp Agrimony. A few days earlier I had observed through binoculars 2 male White-letter Hairstreaks spiralling high over the elms at the end of my road, which are visible from my garden. An unmistakable Marbled White also flew through the garden during the day. However,



White-letter Hairstreak
Photo © Ian Small

there were still several more species that I might expect a visit from, but two I never expected?

Day 2; Sunday 17th July was equally hot and saw the return of the Small Copper, with the addition of a Ringlet, Small White and Holly Blue. However, Sunday's highlight was when I was sitting on the patio at 10:50 and was suddenly buzzed by a Purple Emperor; the sighting was so brief but having spent the previous four weeks looking for Purple Emperors, experience told me what it was and the garden species list had climbed to 15 – I never saw it again!

Day 3; Monday 18th July – there was no respite in the heat but whilst putting out the washing, I looked across to the top of the garden and saw a 'comma' fluttering around a dying Hebe plant at 10:40. However I quickly realised that the 'comma' was actually a female Silver-washed Fritillary and to my greater amazement, she then laid an egg about 6 inches off the ground on the dead Hebe stem just above my very large patch of Dog Violets. I was so stunned by what I was seeing; I never thought to take a photo!

Over the next two days and with an eventual break in the extreme heat, I added Small Tortoiseshell and Brimstone to my list. My final tally for those 5 days was 18 butterfly species but during the next few weeks I also recorded Painted Lady, Speckled Wood and a garden first on the 11th August - a Purple Hairstreak late in the afternoon taking moisture by the pond. There is a very large oak visible from my garden and this July I often watched the oak through binoculars hoping to get a glimpse of the Purple Hairstreaks but never managed to see one this year! The garden also had regular visits from Jersey Tiger moths although not in the numbers seen in previous years as well as several sightings of a Humming-bird Hawk-moth.

My garden butterfly list for 2022 stands at 22 species, which includes the regular spring visits of Orange-tip. Totally absent were any of the 3 golden skipper species which have been known to visit my garden in previous years. My all-time garden list covering 22 years is 28 species with single records of Small Heath and Clouded Yellow and historic visits of Common Blue when the local habitat supported a small colony!

Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park and its Butterflies, by Terry Lyle

Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park is in the heart of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets at Mile End. Andrew Wood, in “Butterflies of Hertfordshire and Middlesex (2016)”, provides a map, some photos and a short description. It was opened in 1841, and closed for burials in 1966, when the bankrupt cemetery company sold it to the Greater London Council (GLC) to become a public park. It appears that the initial intention was to make it conform to the then conventional idea of a public park - an expanse of mown grass with scattered trees. Work began to do that but was halted at an early stage by local protest, both on heritage and biodiversity grounds. Through the Seventies, the Sycamore, Bramble and Ivy continued to spread and by 1981 left almost no open areas.

In 1981, the GLC, having had a change of heart, began a project which greatly improved biodiversity. Over that and the next four winters they created a number of glades, by removing tombstones and felling Sycamores. Wildflower grasslands were sown in the glades, and mixed native trees planted around them. Abolition of the GLC in 1986 halted this work, and Tower Hamlets became the landowner. By good fortune, several local councillors, and many local residents took a keen interest and began to discuss the future. Meetings followed, which led to the formation of the “Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park” in 1990. The Friends had a role in deciding how the Park maintenance budget should be used and began small-scale Nature Conservation activity. This gathered force through the Nineties and by 2001 much had been achieved, including the status of ‘Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation’. By that time the Council had added 2 areas of adjoining land to the Park. These are Scrapyard Meadow (the name indicating its history), adjoining the Railway, and the Ackroyd Drive Greenlink, forming a green corridor to Mile End Park. Mile End Park links to Victoria Park, the canal network and the Lea Valley.

In 2001, grant-funding enabled the Friends to employ a staff member, Ken Greenway, who is still with us as Park Manager. His employment enabled us to take over most of the responsibility for Park care and management, and the associated modest budget. Since then we have, by building grants and earned income, been able to

reach a staffing level of 3, plus a huge amount of volunteer input, from local residents and corporate volunteers. The corporates also bring donations which are key to our finances..

In 1993, largely through the dedication and knowledge of one local councillor, the Council obtained the funds to build the Soanes Centre, the indispensable base for staff, visitors, events and for school educational programmes run by another charity. Butterfly conservation is a key long-term element of our management. We haven't been able to do all we'd like to, with the money and person power available to us and, in particular, we can't keep up with the growth of the Sycamores which form most of the woodland canopy. Where they are among gravestones, only arboriculturalists can bring them down. The pandemic greatly slowed our work, but we expect to be able to accelerate it, with Section 106 funds from a major housing development nearby.

Butterfly spotting in the Park is relatively intensive, with the weekly transect, and with myself and others keeping our eyes open. 30 species have been recorded in total. In any one year the number will be between 21 and 25. Two of the 30, Long-tailed Blue and Large Tortoiseshell, have only one record. The others divide into those we can expect in good numbers every year and those that are seen irregularly, and always in small numbers.

One of our main motivations, apart from the butterflies for their own sake, is to see what's possible on a 32 acre (13 hectare) site in the heart of the urban area, and to do what we can to improve conditions for butterflies elsewhere locally, and to encourage more recording across the Borough. We've been encouraged by linking with the Big City Butterflies Project and the active support they can provide. We've also been encouraged by the fact, as shown by the distribution maps in Andrew Wood's book for 2011-2015 compared with those for early periods, that many species have bucked wider negative trends by increasing and spreading in urban Middlesex. It seems clear that increased conservation measures are key.

The Brimstone exemplifies this. It is the one butterfly that will reliably appear if the larval foodplants, Purging Buckthorn or Alder Buckthorn, are planted for the caterpillars. I saw my first Brimstone in Tower Hamlets in 1987, 19 years after I moved here. Over the last 30 years we have planted hundreds of Buckthorns, mainly Purging, and we expect to record close to 200 Brimstone each year on the

transect, with the great majority from April to June. There are Buckthorns elsewhere in the Borough, but they are sporadic, and the occasional Brimstone may be seen anywhere locally in the spring. Male butterflies, it seems to me, “know” the larval foodplants as well as the females and foodplant presence retains the males as well as the females. It would be fascinating, though very laborious, to conduct a 12-month mark/recapture study over the year, from July to the following June. Our seeing far fewer Brimstones from July to October than from March to June may be because they go quickly into hibernation or it may be that they leave us and return in Spring. In our winter conservation activities, which often involve disturbance to holly and ivy, we’ve never flushed out a Brimstone. Our only discovery was of one in a tuft of grass. I’m inclined to think that butterfly species whose foodplants are localized are very good at navigating and, if they do make exploratory forays, can find their way back to suitable areas.



Egg of the Brimstone butterfly on
Alder Buckthorn
Photo © Ian Small

Small and Large Whites, with larval foodplants found everywhere, are clearly wide-ranging. Green-veined Whites, with us, are very numerous, but are much less common elsewhere in the Borough. In attributing Whites as Green-veined or Small on the transect, I’ve developed a criterion that, confirmed where possible, works very well. It’s that Green-veined stick in, or close to, shade. Small keep to open areas. Large Whites have a peculiarity I’ve not seen explained. They spend a lot of time flying high in the canopy, in searching mode. My guess is that virgin females fly to the canopy and the males therefore go there.

Even with relatively intensive monitoring, it seems it’s easy to miss butterflies that may be present in very low numbers, even if their habits are not especially elusive. The Ringlet is one such case. We had very few sightings before 2013. They were 1997 (2), 1998 (1), 2000 (1), 2003 (1), 2006 (1). Then in 2013 double figures, and they’ve been established with us ever since. Were all the pre-2013



Ringlet
Photo © Ian Small

sightings just passing through, or was there a tiny population there throughout?

I captured a male Small Blue in 2011 but saw no more till 2017. Since then, there have been sightings every year, in 2 areas of the Park separated by woodland. Egg-laying has been observed 3 times. In 2018 we began increasing the foodplant Kidney Vetch. This summer's drought has killed it all. My

suspicion is that the Small Blue has been with us continuously since 2011 or before. Time will tell if it still is.

The Marbled White is less elusive. Our first was seen in 2013. Another in 2016. Five in 2020, a few in 2021 and 2022. Were they all wanderers, or have we a tiny population? Butterflies are vastly better at finding one another than we are at finding them.

We've recorded all but 2 of the British butterflies which Butterfly Conservation defines as Wider Countryside Species (the 2 missing are Wall and Scotch Argus!) but only 2 Habitat Specialist Species.

The Small Blue is one of these, the Silver-washed Fritillary the other. Since we saw the first in 2005 they've been seen in every year except 2016. They were back in 2017 and the conclusion has to be that they were there, and bred, in 2016. I once had the pleasure of seeing a female laying eggs, in the small rough patches in the trunks of 2 sycamores. The female had detected that there were large patches of Sweet Violets nearby. It's usually stated that Dog Violets are the main food plant, and we've spent much effort planting them, without much success. Sweet Violet is very easily encouraged.

It's often easier said than done to establish low-growing larval foodplants in quantity. We record a few Small Coppers in most years but haven't succeeded in establishing Common Sorrel in quantity. We've had more success with Rock Rose and Cut-leaved Cranesbill for Brown Argus and they seem now to be established.

We have a good population of Holly Blues, which are known to have a very wide foodplant range. One of the most widely used foodplants

in the summer generation is the flowers of Lucerne. We very frequently see females laying eggs in the flower buds, and have found fully-grown larvae on Lucerne. Goats Rue, of which we have little, is also a prime target for egg-laying females. These leguminous plants are not generally mentioned as foodplants, but appear to be major ones, at least with us. Common Blues also use Lucerne, which is easier to sustain than Bird's Foot Trefoil.

Commas are by far the most numerous nymphalid here. Perhaps Elm serves as a larval foodplant as well as Nettle.

The Cemetery Park has several mature Pedunculate and Turkey Oak, and Wych Elms, and we have established many younger trees, with Hairstreaks particularly in mind. Both Purple and White-letter Hairstreaks have been occasionally recorded, though not in the last few years. However, these are elusive species, and we haven't made intensive, targeted searches.

When a species is common, an observer can build up a very satisfying composite picture of that species and the particularities of its behaviour. This is perhaps even more satisfying than hunting for the rarities.

We have never recorded a Green Hairstreak, despite having larval foodplants. It is one of those "long shot" possibilities that can never be absolutely ruled out, especially over the longer term. We have established substantial amounts of Honeysuckle for any mated female White Admiral that may chance our way. Two other extremely long shots for which we have ample supplies of larval foodplants are the Grizzled Skipper and the Duke of Burgundy.

In the last year I have trained another transect volunteer who stands in when I'm unavailable. It would be good to have others, but transect recording requires very flexible availability. If you live or work in the Tower Hamlets area and have some spare time to give to butterflies, we at the Park are keen to hear from you.

Outside the Cemetery Park, butterflies in Tower Hamlets are not very well recorded and all records are valuable and can stimulate and guide conservation work. The recording app makes it very simple to do, and we can help you improve your ID skills. We also have opportunities for habitat improvement volunteering. I can be contacted at: contact@fothcop.org

On Safari at the Knepp Wildland Project, by Isabel Moritz

An opportunity in late July for a safari tour to the 3,500 -acre Knepp Estate was too good to pass up. I'd read Isabella Tree's inspirational book, *Wilding*, about the past 20 years or so that her and her husband have worked to re-establish a functioning ecosystem from land that had been intensively farmed. I couldn't wait to see it for myself.

A complex web of interdependencies

The first sight that our ecologist safari guide pointed out to us were nests built for the reintroduction of white storks. This was followed by a view of dozens of these graceful birds wheeling on the thermals, including fledglings practising.

Standing round next to a boggy area of water and bullrushes as the basics of the project were explained to us, we watched Beautiful Demoiselle damselflies dancing around the little pools.

Walking a good few miles around the estate, I was on the lookout for butterflies that were different from those I normally see, but the majority were Meadow Browns, Gatekeepers, Whites and Ringlets (although I'm sure I saw a Small Skipper). That is, until our guide pointed upwards into an ancient oak to a Purple Emperor sitting on a branch. Sadly, my mobile camera just wasn't good enough to get a photo from that distance, but it looked beautiful through my binoculars, and was, for most of us, our first sighting of this rare butterfly.

Knepp is now home to the UK's largest Purple Emperor colony. The estate is being colonised by new species of butterflies and moths all the time: they are the subject of many surveys.



This is one of the nests the storks built themselves.



The Tamworth pigs that run loose in the area dig up the ground and these hollows fill with water for them to wallow in, benefiting wildlife – and the demoiselles – in a host of different ways.

How a different approach is bearing fruit

Learning as we walked about factors such as the specialist fungi, *Phellinus robustus*, the cause of the holes in oak trees that are perfect for nests and habitats, the function of the small herd of Exmoor ponies and longhorn cattle, the ravens and the freshwater mussels thriving in the lakes, we began to see for ourselves how the estate has taken a different approach to undoing the damage caused by intensive farming.

Isabella and Charlie consulted world famous experts including those from the UK, Europe and America (where there are vast tracts of wild heritage landscape such as Yosemite). They have rethought what we think is good for nature. The Knepp Estate now supports more direct jobs than it did in the 17th century, when farm work was all done by hand. Even the welcome brownie cakes we were given on our rest stop are baked in a small unit here.



Longhorn cattle and other grazers drive habitat creation at Knepp and wander free on the estate.

Using the discoveries

Visitors travel from far and wide to find secrets of how to improve soils, increase wildlife and insects and restore habitats. This pioneering experiment has shown that focusing on natural processes rather than species targets has been effective on a large scale. Along the way it has also given ecologists extraordinary insights into wildlife behaviours and hitherto unknown interdependencies.

They are joining up with and supporting other projects across the UK with the aim of providing corridors that benefit everyone's environment. Knepp holds special Butterfly Walks in July, but you need to book very early to be sure of a place. Booking opens in November for the following year.

Wilding my Garden, by Malcolm Hull

A small city-centre garden with a mown lawn and neat flowerbeds does not sound a promising place for butterfly-spotting.

But over the years I've made a number of changes which have helped to increase the number of butterflies, moths and other wildlife living or visiting here.

Shrubs are important, for their flowers and there's nothing the butterflies and moths like more than the three buddleias. The Peacocks and Small Tortoiseshells spend days feeding there before hibernating. This year its been a joy to see Hummingbird Hawkmoths and Red Admirals feeding for hours outside my office window. I chose three different buddleia varieties to give a long flowering season. I planted shrubs to provide food for caterpillars – Buckthorn for the Brimstone, Holly for the Holly Blue, Hawthorn for a variety of moths. These were positioned mostly at the back of the border along the south facing fence. Butterflies love the “edge effect” with flowers to feed on close to shrubs where they can take shelter.

My **Ivy Hedge** in the front garden is now wild and overgrown. Holly Blues lay eggs there in the summer; Commas. Red Admirals and countless bees, wasps and hoverflies feed on the ivy flowers during the autumn. During the winter, birds eat the berries and I once found a Brimstone butterfly hibernating deep inside the hedge. I now cut the ivy on a three year rotation – one third each year – to maintain the wildlife features and allow enough room for pedestrians to pass by on the pavement.

A **Wildlife Pond** is a great addition to any garden – 3 ft deep at one end with a shallow section to allow access for animals at the other. Over the years its attracted five species of damsel and dragonflies to breed, frogs and newts have spawned and visiting species have included grass snake, fox, hedgehog, heron, mallard duck and many more. Watching and videoing the southern hawkers and broad bodied chasers as the nymphs leave the pond and emerge as adults became a lockdown pre-occupation. Bats are frequently seen feeding on insects above the pond at dusk. I was given a bat detector (again during lockdown) and spent several hours deciding they are all pipistrelles. Watermint growing in the pond is a great nectar source for butterflies which has kept coming during this years drought. My

next project will be to extend the pond to create boggy areas nearby to accommodate more nectar plants which can last through future droughts.

Flower borders – Over the years I've acquired many plants to test which ones butterflies like best. This can vary quite a lot from year to year and even week to week! Everlasting sweetpea is great for Brimstones. Wild marjoram attracts Gatekeepers and Meadow Browns. Scabious, Lavender, Ice plant, Hemp Agrimony, Fleabane, Verbena bonariensis, Sweet Rocket and Aubretia are all favourites. I aim to have plants which have a long flowering season and a range of different species so there are flowers at all different times of year. Winter honeysuckle is amazing, attracting bees throughout the winter. Evening Primrose and Nicotiana are good night-time flowers for moths. Goldfinches love the seeds from the Evening Primrose and Teazels in the winter – I counted 15 in a flock last winter.

Caterpillar foodplants are also included in borders to allow butterflies and moths to breed successfully – Hedge Garlic, Sweet Rocket and Honesty attracts the Orange Tips and also Green-veined Whites. I've also planted Birds-foot Trefoil and attracted Common Blues, though I've yet to actually see them laying. I also planted Kidney Vetch to see if I could attract Small Blue – I've not seen one yet, but its only flowered for one year so far



Male Orange-Tip on Honesty flower
Photo © Ian Small



Orange-Tip caterpillar feeding on
developing seed-pod of
Hedge Mustard
Photo © Ian Small

The lawn was first reduced and the remainder is now being converted to a **wildflower meadow**. In the first year I let the grass grow long and Meadow Browns bred there. But no wildflowers appeared. So I then stripped off the turf to expose the less fertile subsoil and seeded it

with a mixture of wildflower seeds. Some of these have appeared, but they were overcome by Ragwort – which I didn't plant, though it has attracted Cinnabar moth. I've now reduced but not eliminated the ragwort and the Ox eye daisies, scabious, cowslips and other plants are starting to show.

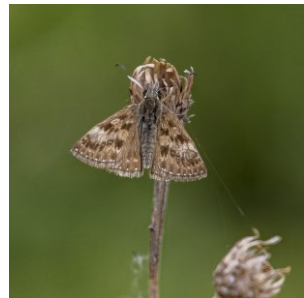
I've also done my bit to help butterflies overwinter by **hibernating in my shed**. There are 7 Peacocks and 7 Small Tortoiseshells in there now, but that's another story.

Overall I've seen 20 butterfly species in my garden and many more moths. Many other species of wildlife have also benefited, it's been a delight to have hedgehogs as residents. Making my own wild space has been a richly rewarding experience for me as well as helping the butterflies, moths and other wildlife. I knew very little about butterflies before I started and would encourage everyone to think what you could do to make a wilder space.

Some Highlights from the Season's Field Events

Full reports of many of the 2022 field events can be found on the Sightings page of the website. Here are just a few extracts to give a flavour - editor.

It's hard to remember back to before the long hot summer, but the annual trip to **Bovingdon Brickworks** (15th May) often succumbs to bad weather and this year was no exception, despite a favourable forecast earlier in the week. However, the walk went ahead with 6 enthusiastic walkers and an even more enthusiastic ranger. Setting off the sun was just shining which meant that we knew that the Dingy Skippers had come off their roosts! We had several sightings across the site before cloud cover halted all activity. It was only as the walk was ending and the sky was even more overcast and the rain was imminent that we found our first seriously roosting Dingy Skippers, with 3 being found hiding on knapweed seed heads and a Common Blue nearby.



One of the roosting
Dingy Skippers
photo © Colin Meager

No less than 35 people joined the event at **Heartwood Forest**, on 28th May in search of Small Blue. Weather at the start was promising with good numbers of Small Heath in the grass paths near the car park. Because of the number of people we split into two groups led by Andrew Steele and Malcolm Hull who headed in opposite directions. Conditions were mostly cool and overcast, which meant we saw rather more moth species than butterflies. Those we managed to identify included Mother Shipton, Common Carpet, Cinnabar, Burnet Companion and Silver Y. Small Heath and Common Blue were the most widespread and abundant butterflies. Other species included Speckled Wood, Peacock, Small White, Green-veined White, Comma, Painted Lady and Holly Blue. In the Valley Field, we found numerous Kidney Vetch plants, descended from the seeds sown by the Branch four years ago. Nearby a Small Blue was seen and photographed by some close to the hedge at the bottom of the field. Most unexpected sighting of the day was a very early Meadow Brown.



A very early Meadow Brown
Photo © Chris Newman

Hounslow Heath is a fabulous Heathland site, with woodland, acid grassland and meadow habitats. With 27 butterfly species recorded in recent years, it is one of the very best sites in Middlesex. Cloudy weather and a stiff northerly breeze did nothing to assist butterfly spotting on the Branch Walk on 29th May, in search of the Green Hairstreak. Although this species had been recorded almost every day in the previous 6 weeks, the group were unsuccessful. Butterflies seen included Speckled Woods, Holly Blues and a few unidentified 'whites', one of which was chased by a hawk dragonfly and miraculously evaded capture. Moths included Mother Shipton and two beautiful final instar Emperor Moth caterpillars feeding on bramble.



Emperor moth caterpillar
photo © Malcolm Hull

Big City Butterflies events over the weekend of 2nd / 3rd July at the **Islington Ecology Centre** at Gillespie Park and at **Gladstone Park** (LB Brent), respectively, each produced close to a dozen species of butterflies. Ringlets were recorded at both sites, bringing the Gladstone Park site total to 25 species.

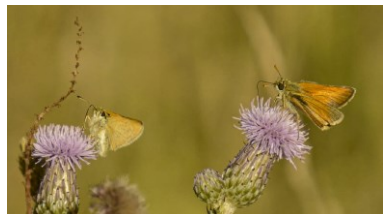
The weather was again gloomy for the trip to **Ruislip Woods NNR** on 6th July. The main highlight was at least six Silver-washed Fritillary but, disappointingly, only one reasonable sighting of a White Admiral along what is normally a favoured track. Attempts to see Purple Hairstreak were unsuccessful. During a brief glimmer of brightness, a brief view was seen of a large butterfly in the canopy - a possible Purple Emperor- but not entirely convincing.

At **Horsenden** on 9th July, the main target was White-letter Hairstreak. As the sun started to peak through, one was picked up in flight and tracked to where it landed, eventually allowing everyone the opportunity to see it it sat up and the long-lensed photographers a chance to get some shots. Prior to this, a few Purple Hairstreaks had been seen, initially causing some confusion as they flew around an elm. After enjoying the more common meadow butterflies and several day-flying moths, the group headed back to inspect the contents of a moth-trap run the previous evening. The highlight amongst the moths was a Rosy Footman, a species whose caterpillars feed on the lichen on trees.



Rosy Footman
Photo © Pete Withers, UK Moths

At **Whippendell Woods** on 10th July, there were plenty of Silver-washed Fritillaries, with around 30 being seen, plus several White Admirals, and later 2 male Purple Emperors were spotted chasing each other high in an ash tree. Several butterflies were also seen in **Cassiobury Park**, including the first Common Blue there of the season, plus both Essex and Small Skippers together on the same plant.



Essex (left) and Small Skippers
Photo © Peter Fewell

The event at **Heartwood Forest**, Sandridge, on 16th July was very well attended with people keen to see Purple Emperors! They set off in sunny conditions and in the first meadow were treated to views of several freshly emerged Common Blues, along with Ringlets, Gatekeepers, Meadow Browns, orange Skippers and Whites.

Turning on to the track alongside Langley Wood, they added Speckled Wood, Brimstone, Comma, Large Skipper, Green-veined White, Large White and Purple Hairstreak, one of several which came down low and posed for photos. Further up the track were Peacock, Marbled White, Holly Blue and Shaded Broad-bar.

The Dog Pond by Well Wood was searched carefully for mud-puddling butterflies around the edge of the pond. There were several - but all Skippers and not Purple Emperor. Suddenly a shout went up, followed shortly by fantastic views of a Purple Emperor gliding majestically around an oak near the pond, staying in view long enough for nearly everyone to see it. Moving along the track, stopping to see a Brown Argus, they arrived at the eastern tip of Pudler's Wood to watch for territorial activity in the assembly area. There were a few flickers of movement in the tree tops, but then a passer-by said he had seen 2 Purple Emperors low down in a nearby oak tree. Quickly relocating 20 yards along the track, there they were, 2 Emperors feeding just above head-height on sap runs on branches of an oak.

There were excellent views and photo opportunities, particularly when one Emperor landed just above head height on a nearby oak. The other kept feeding and the yellow proboscis could clearly be seen feeding off the sap.

Competition for the sap came from 2 Commas, a Speckled Wood, a Hornet and a range of fly species. All were seen off with the Emperor moving its position and flicking its wings to drive the other insects away from its feast. The Emperor was still feeding in exactly the same spot an hour later.



Purple Emperor feeding on sap
Photo © Ian Howarth



Brimstone in Bricket Wood
Photo © Chris Newman

The following day (17th July), the walk at **Bricket Wood Common** was also well attended and successful. Sadly, the canopy is slowly closing over the main ride and there are just a few sunny pockets left. However, Ringlets, Meadow Brown and Gatekeeper, also Large White, Small White and Green-veined White were soon found. These were followed by the first of several Silver-washed Fritillaries. Continuing along the ride were added Speckled Wood, a White Admiral, Small Skipper and Large Skipper.

In the clearing were added Marbled White, Brimstone and Purple Hairstreak.

A few of the group then went on to **Mutchetts Wood** and were rewarded with some great views of Purple Emperor in the newly created canopy gap. They had nearly continuous views of one or more for a whole hour, starting at 12.45pm. Flights around the edge of the canopy gap were interspersed with great views of the Emperor perched on top of the oaks and spruce. A second PE appeared and after a period of 30 seconds ignoring each other, a very brief clash occurred, followed by a relatively low speed chase. This lasted less than a minute before the victor returned and resumed its perch and patrol activities. Purple Hairstreak and Silver-washed Fritillary were also seen in the wood.

The next day (Monday 18th July), there was a trip to **Therfield Heath**. However, only 1 person joined the leader - perhaps the combination of temperature (>30C) and weekday (Monday morning) conspired to reduce the appeal. We all missed the tremendous numbers of Chalkhill Blue (around 2000 were estimated to be flying !), plus other species, including Dark-green Fritillary.



Mating Chalkhill Blues at Therfield
Photo © Martin Johnson

On 23rd July, we welcomed some of our newer members to a special event at **Greenwood Park**, to introduce them to some of our more common species. Unfortunately the hot dry weather meant butterflies weren't numerous but we were pleased to see several species, including about 20 fresh Common Blues, together with Brown Argus, Gatekeeper and Small Copper, amongst others. Prior to our walk, a moth trap run the previous evening was opened and the contents identified and shown to everyone.



Opening the moth trap at our event
for newer members.
Photo © Ian Small

The event at **Stafford Road Open Space**, Ruislip Gardens (10th August) attracted those prepared to put up with the forecast heat. After a slow start the main target was seen low down in a Blackthorn bush and, eventually, 8+ Brown Hairstreaks were reliably seen, several presenting photographic opportunities. At least one female showed signs of potential egg laying. The 15 other butterfly species seen included Common Blue, Purple Hairstreak, Small Copper, Holly Blue and Brown Argus .



Brown Hairstreak
seen at the same site 3 days later
Photo © Peter Fewell

The highlight of the return trip to **Therfield Heath**, on 22nd August was the numerous Adonis Blues, over 30 of which (mostly male) were seen (females being much less conspicuous). The thunderstorms which had hit much of the region in the previous days had missed the Royston area, so the site was still parched and the butterflies still present. A few well-worn Chalkhill Blues were also seen, as were Common Blues, Brown Argus and a single Small Copper.



Male Adonis Blue (left) and mating Adonis Blues at Therfield Heath
Photos © Martin Johnson

Millhopper's Pond - the First Year, by Christine Ridley and Chris Hilling

The new pond at Millhoppers Butterfly reserve has been buzzing with activity since early spring.

First to arrive in February were some Water Boatmen, followed closely by Back Swimmers, then crazy Whirligig beetles were seen skimming over the surface of the pond. A few frogs hid in the folds of the liner although they were small, so no spawn was laid this year.

In May some Nomad bees were seen on the pebbles at the side of the pond, and a Large Red Damselfly settled to bask on the marginal pond vegetation. Then the stars of the show - the dragonflies - appeared. Broad-bodied Chasers, a species that likes to inhabit newly created stretches of water, were first. Looking chunky and bold, the blue and black males thundered around the pond at speed. The yellow females waited until June to join them, and we were able to watch them mating with the males, then repeatedly flicking their abdomen above the pond when laying their eggs.



Male Broad-bodied Chaser
Photo © Chris Hilling

Meantime, many pairs of Azure Damselflies had arrived, mated and also laid eggs and hundreds of 'Semaphore' flies fascinated us with the males flying round the surface of the pond, constantly waving their wings at the females.

From mid-June into July there was a constant frenzy of activity with beautiful green Southern Hawkers, White Legged Damsel flies, Common Blue damselflies, then Brown Hawkers and Emperor Dragonflies and Migrant Hawkers arriving to join them, while Great Diving beetles and numerous small beetles dived, and pond skaters skimmed water surface.

The August drought resulted in the water level becoming so low that we topped it up with water from Chris' water butt. However, the dragonflies continued to arrive, and bright red Common Darters could be seen chasing around the pond then sunbathing on the stones while the females again did their share of egg laying.

It turns out that Millhoppers has its own Nessie - albeit a very small one - a thin creature, which none of us have been able to identify as yet, that crawls in amongst the roots of the plants then slowly swims into the water.

In the past, Millhoppers was a watery place and originally had a stream flowing permanently through it. However, for the last few years much of the stream has been diverted and water now only flows in the winter months, so it seems right to have a permanent pond in the reserve with all the life that comes with it. Marigolds have already been planted in the pond to make up for those now mainly missing from the site because of the drier conditions.

Our desire was to increase the diversity of wildlife at the reserve and so far, it has been a resounding success.



Damselflies mating at the
Millhoppers' Pond

Photo © Chris Hilling

Sawfly Larvae, by Andrew Wood

I'm quite often sent images of caterpillars for identification and on several occasions they turn out to be sawfly larvae rather than those of moths or butterflies.

So what is a sawfly? Well, it is a kind of insect that has larvae that rather than being grubs are remarkably caterpillar-like. They are long, cylindrical, and have obvious legs. They belong to a group called Symphyta which is in the order Hymenoptera (ants, bees, and wasps). Many of the adults look like wasps or flies.

Sawflies go through the same complete process of metamorphosis as butterflies and moths, that is the four stages of egg, larva, pupa, and adult. and most of them eat plants, often being restricted to one plant or group of species. If you are a gardener you may be familiar with Gooseberry or Berberis sawflies. Their communally living larvae can strip the leaves off a bush in a matter of days, although the bushes generally recover. Interestingly I have had many fewer instances of these two species in my garden in recent years and I don't use insecticides. This is good for my plants, but is it another instance of the decline of insects?

So how do you set about telling if your caterpillar is one of this group? There are two characteristics that serve to tell them apart. All the larvae of sawflies, caterpillars, and moths have a series of sucker-like legs on the rear part of their body called prolegs. In moths and butterflies there are five or fewer pairs while in sawflies there are six or more. These prolegs are easy to see and count. All the larvae have three pairs of true legs at the mouth end of the body. Many sawfly larvae have a shiny head capsule with a very prominent black eye, whereas the eyes on moth and butterfly and caterpillars are much less visible.



Sawfly larva on Ash

Some of the species whose larvae live communally will react to threat or disturbance by rearing up in a coordinated fashion which may well

be off-putting to potential predators such as birds. Some of the communally living butterfly caterpillars will also do this, but in my experience, it is less coordinated action.

Sawflies can be difficult to identify as adults as species differences often depend on the pattern of wing veins, seeing what the larvae are feeding is often a better clue.

Having said all that I would not want to put you off sending me images of larvae to identify.

A few species are illustrated in this article which should help to show the differences I have described.



Sawfly larva on Valerian



Cimbex conatus larva



Yellow Sawfly



Unidentified Sawfly larvae

Conservation Success - BC Press Release

One of the UK's rarest butterflies is having a welcome comeback to its Dartmoor stronghold. Annual monitoring of the High Brown Fritillary across Dartmoor shows the species is having an excellent year with strong numbers recorded at known locations as well as several sightings at new or historically occupied sites.

The High Brown Fritillary was once widespread in England and Wales but since the 1950s has undergone dramatic decline, with a massive 96% reduction. The butterfly is now only found on Dartmoor, Exmoor, Morecambe Bay, and South Wales.



High Brown Fritillary
Photo © Ian Small

The upturn in its fortunes began several years ago with the introduction of intensive conservation activity across landscapes. On Dartmoor,

conservation work has brought together a range of organisations and individuals including Dartmoor's farmers, Devon Wildlife Trust, Dartmoor National Park Authority, Natural England, The National Trust, and Butterfly Conservation. They have worked together to manage the bracken habitats to create suitable conditions for breeding.

The work is being rewarded; the High Brown Fritillary has responded well, and its threatened status has been reduced from 'Critically Endangered' to 'Endangered' in the new 2022 Red List published in May this year, which assesses the extinction risk for British butterfly species.

Large, elegant, and powerful butterflies, High Brown Fritillary are found in bracken-dominated habitats where their caterpillar foodplant, common dog-violet, is abundant. They fly during June/early July and are best seen at rest when nectaring on favourite foodplants like brambles and thistles.

Jenny Plackett, South West Regional Conservation Manager for

Butterfly Conservation, said: “It’s fantastic that the High Brown Fritillary is continuing to thrive on Dartmoor, and responding well to conservation efforts. This year’s warm and sunny weather will have really helped and may have enabled the butterfly to expand to colonise new sites nearby – we’ll be monitoring closely!”

Dartmoor National Park Authority Ecologist Richard Knott said: “Keeping the habitat suitable for these butterflies and other species requires traditional grazing by cattle and ponies. The success is a testament to the hard work of Dartmoor’s farmers who maintain these areas. It also shows the value of coordinated partnership working at a landscape scale.”

Look Out for our Programme of Online Events..... editor

Over the coming winter, the Branch are again planning to host a series of online evening meetings. These will likely run from January through March and cover a variety of topics. Many of you have joined our previous sessions, which we began as a result of the pandemic, but I would encourage those who have not yet joined us to consider doing so. The sessions use a software called Zoom, which is free, and can be run from computers, tablets or even phones - obviously the larger the screen you have, the more you will appreciate the pictures shared by the speakers. Even if you would like to join, but are unable to do so at the time, all the sessions are recorded, and the link to the recording (on the Branch YouTube channel) is shared when the connections details for the next meeting are sent out.

Full details of the programme will be circulated in due course, once they are finalized. The invitations to these events are sent only to those members for whom we hold e-mail addresses. If you are currently a ‘paper only’ member and would like to be able to join, then please send me your e-mail address (details on back cover).

It is always nice to be able to think of warm summer days with butterflies during those long cold winter evenings. As part of the online programme, and possibly with the sub-title ‘..and now for something completely different !’, I will be giving one of the online evening presentations, in which I will be sharing with you an overview of the butterflies (and possibly some other wildlife) to be found in the rainforests of Ghana. I was fortunate enough to be able to spend a couple of weeks there earlier this year (the trip having been

postponed twice due to the pandemic). I was able to photograph over 200 species in that short time, some of which are truly amazing - here is a flavour of just a couple.

Hypolycaena antifaunus
(Large Fairy Hairstreak)
Photo © Ian Small



Euphaedra janetta
(Janetta Themis Forester)
Photo © Ian Small

Copy Deadline for the Spring Newsletter will be

21 March 2023

NB it helps the editor if you can submit an electronic copy of your article (but don't worry if you can't - I can transcribe your handwriting).

Files can be sent by e-mail to

ian-small@virginmedia.com

or send an article by post - address on back cover

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