

HERTFORDSHIRE AND MIDDLESEX BRANCH NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 23

SEPTEMBER 2000



**BUTTERFLY
CONSERVATION** SM

A Mixed Year,

by Gavin Vicary

It seems to me to have been an unusual season for butterflies, probably affected by the mixed weather. Based on my records, numbers seem to have been generally low, although the flight seasons of several butterflies appear to have been prolonged.

Recently, I have seen several Clouded Yellows in Hertfordshire and even one on an industrial estate in North London where I work. Thus it seems to be a reasonable Clouded Yellow year, as they appear to have come across from the continent in fairly high

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numbers. Other migrants that I have seen recently include large numbers of Silver Y moths and several Painted Ladies.

Many of you will know that one of my favourite butterfly haunts is the Herts & Middx. Wildlife Trust reserve at Patmore Heath, as I am fortunate to live close by. I usually consider Patmore to be one of the best sites in our branch region for Small Coppers, although this year numbers have been low. Small Heath also seems to have been very scarce, which is another butterfly that I usually expect to find in reasonable numbers on the reserve.

Like many heaths, Patmore, has suffered through lack of grazing. However we are about to get a flock of sheep back again for several weeks, which hopefully will help recreate the conditions that these butterflies prefer.

The field trips this year have not been particularly well supported. Part of the problem may be that most local destinations, with less common species, have been visited before. When we try to introduce new trips for different species, perhaps these are just too far afield to attract good numbers of people.

We have been contacted by the Chairman of Bedfordshire Branch with a view to having closer links with them. Joint field trips might be another way of boosting attendances, particularly if they are at locations close to the border of the two counties. I would be interested to hear any views that our readers might have on ways of increasing numbers on field trips or if there are destinations that you would particularly like to visit.

I hope to see members at the AGM where you are all welcome to bring along a few slides for showing after the formalities are over. There are likely to be some changes on the committee at the AGM and if any members would like to play a more active role then again I would like to hear from you.



Reminder...

This year's Branch AGM will be
on Wednesday, November 1st
at 8pm

Cross Street Centre,
Upper Dagnall Street,
St. Albans.
(map on next page)

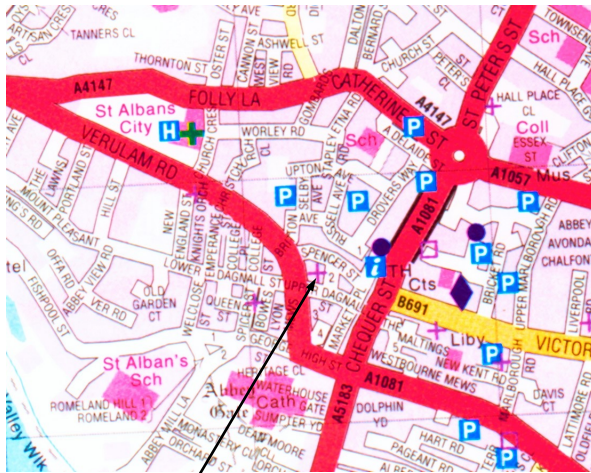
The AGM will be followed by
refreshments and
members' slides

**...so bring along a few of your best butterfly and
moth slides to share with us, and make us all
jealous.**

If you haven't joined us on previous occasions, don't be
put off. We try to get the formalities over with as quickly
as possible so that we can get on with viewing the slides
members bring. As long as the subject matter is
Lepidoptera then it doesn't matter if it is butterfly or
moth, adult, larva or egg, UK or foreign - we usually have
a grand mixture of all of these. See you there....



Venue for Branch AGM.....



Cross St. Centre, St. Albans



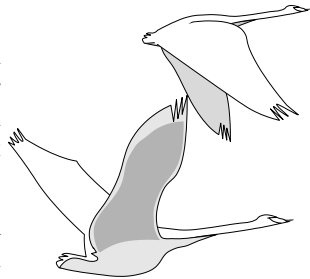
National Society AGM and Members' Day

The National Members' Day and AGM is to be held on Saturday 24th February 2001 at the Great Hall, University of Devon, Exeter. There are three confirmed speakers - Dr Jeremy Thomas - the renowned Large Blue expert, Dr Jim Asher who has pioneered the Millennium Atlas for butterflies, and Dr Martin Warren, BC's Head of Conservation, who has an in-depth knowledge of Devon's rare fritillaries.

At the AGM, which will be open from 10 am - 5 pm, there will be the normal variety of stalls with booksellers and wildlife societies among them.

The Devon Branch of Butterfly Conservation are planning the AGM to be part of a more major event. Following the AGM, and also at the Great Hall, Exeter, they are holding a wildlife barn dance between 8 pm and 11.30 pm. A lively band has been booked, a bar is available and the price of the ticket (£12.50) also includes a varied buffet suitable for all culinary tastes. In addition, they are planning a boat cruise at the Exe estuary on Sunday 25th February at about 10.30 am to see Avocets and other waders and wildfowl. Tickets for this will be £5 for the guided 2½ hour trip. A bar and refreshments will be available on the boat which has an enclosed and heated area.

If you are interested in any of the ticketed events, please contact Mr Ken Tyson on (01363) 772261, or at 19 Okefield Road, Crediton, EX17 2DL.



Further literature concerning the events will be distributed in January, but the Devon Branch would appreciate knowing numbers of people who are interested well in advance of the event.

Submission of this Year's Butterfly and Moth Records, by John Murray.

Butterfly Transects 2000 - New software.

Those of you who have walked Butterfly Transects this year, and have a P.C. computer, are invited to submit your data via Butterfly Conservation's new Transect Walker software. Details are available from Andrew Wood (address and Email on the back of this newsletter). You are also asked to send in the transect weekly sheets and any other details as soon as possible after week 26 has been completed, to John Murray as usual (contact details for John are also on the back cover). These will be archived with all original observations. If you want to walk any late transects, send these in a separate package later with the mapping records.



Other butterfly sightings

Any other butterfly sightings should be submitted on the usual Butterfly Mapping Forms before November 9th at the latest. If you are a new member and wish to submit records from earlier years, please use a separate recording form for each year. Additional details (verbal reports of butterfly behaviour, larvae, anecdotes etc.) can be submitted at the same time. Very late sightings in November and December should be sent, telephoned or E-mailed separately.



Moths

Please see the article by Rob Souter and Andrew Wood about the Moth Officer, starting on the next page.

Remember, late submission inevitably delays production of the Annual Report, so do try and meet the deadlines above.

Branch Moth Officer - Past, Present and Future, by Rob Souter and Andrew Wood

In 1994, Butterfly Conservation proposed that each branch should have a Moth Officer on its committee to promote an interest in the conservation of moth and their habitats, and to act as a contact between branch members and the county moth recorder. I (RS) took on this role and have now been in post for about five years. This article is a way of informing members that I now intend to stand down, and to introduce Andrew Wood who is to be proposed for election into the role at the AGM in November. The following is a review of my role during the past five years and our proposals for the future.

The Past.

I have attempted to promote an interest in moths by writing a regular item in the branch newsletter, by writing a Moth Page on the branch web site (www.hmbutterflyconservation.org.uk), and by encouraging the recording of moths, that has included organising and leading moth evenings. Moth recording forms have been produced and the numbers being returned have been increasing over the years, so that in 1999 records were sent in from 30 different people in Hertfordshire and Middlesex. I have created a database for the records and used this to prepare accounts of the more noteworthy species, with results published annually as a moth report within the Branch report. All records have been collated and passed on to Colin Plant, the moth recorder for both Hertfordshire and the London Area (including Middlesex).

In March 2000, target moth species in Hertfordshire and Middlesex were identified by Sue Clarke, Colin Plant and myself, and have been included in the Regional Action Plan which is being prepared by Sue.

In April 2000 the Hertfordshire Moth Group was formed. This non-affiliated group, set up by Colin Plant and myself, is working in close co-operation with the branch to encourage the recording of moths in Herts. The group has a number of field meetings which are open to BC members to attend, and where the county recorder is

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usually present to pass on his wisdom. Colin produces regular newsletters and I have developed a web site for the group (www.hertsmothgroup.org.uk).

The Present.

We are now in a situation where there is a growing awareness and interest in moths, and where we are beginning to have more detailed information regarding their distribution in the branch area, an important basis for any future conservation measures.

I hope that my contribution to the branch has been of use and I have no hesitation in recommending Andrew as a suitable successor.

The Future.

Since Butterfly Conservation is actively involved in moth conservation work the role of the Moth Officer will continue to be to promote this and raise awareness within our membership and at the same time act as a contact between BC members, Colin Plant and members of the active and knowledgeable Hertfordshire Moth Group. However, we see the future role of the Moth Officer changing to reflect the developments outlined above.

As Colin Plant is moth recorder for both Hertfordshire and Middlesex it is logical that all moth records should be passed directly to him (see contact details below). We would encourage you to do this from now on to avoid duplication of effort or loss of records. This will enable as complete a record as possible to be built up of moth distribution in the two counties. Colin has developed a database, initially for Hertfordshire records, which we will be using to produce the moth section in future annual reports. A database should soon be developed for Middlesex records.

However, as with butterfly records, the raw numbers tell only part of the story and we would welcome any more anecdotal information about sites recorded, notable sightings or notable lack of sightings! These can be passed to the Moth Officer for inclusion in branch newsletters and reports.

Although some might feel that the Moth Officers role will be diminished if records are sent straight to Colin, we feel that the benefit from the greater co-operation and transference of

information and knowledge that has already begun to occur will be positive.

Moth records for both counties should be sent to:

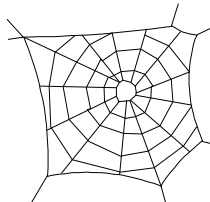
Colin Plant, 22 West Road, Bishops Stortford, Herts CM23 3QP
(Tel/Fax 01279 507697) Email Colinwplant@compuserve.com

NEW ADDRESS FOR BRANCH WEBSITE

In case you missed it in the above article, the URL for the Branch website has now been changed, so that it is no longer part of Rob's own site. The new site address is:

www.hmbutterflyconservation.org.uk

Please update your browser bookmarks



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Patmore Heath Field Trip, 16 August, by Gavin Vicary

Three members met me on a sunny morning, which sadly had not been predicted by the weather forecasters, for a walk around Patmore Heath.

As we moved across the heath I explained how for centuries it would have been grazed and that the wildlife found there such as Heath Bedstraw, Common Sorrel, Devils bit Scabious, Harebells, Green Woodpeckers, Small Copper and Small Heath butterflies thrived because they had adapted to the conditions that grazing created.

Much of the heath looked very overgrown, although I was able to inform everyone that grazing would soon be reintroduced. Recent newspaper articles had been in the local press concerning the purchase of a flock of sheep by the Herts and Middx Wildlife Trust who manage the reserve. These are due to arrive in the middle of September and will be on the heath for several weeks.

We saw plenty of butterflies and dragonflies although I expressed concern at the lack of Small Coppers and Small Heaths this year. It is unknown at the time of writing if this is a trend that has been common in our branch area this year or if it is just at Patmore.



Image reproduced from the CD-ROM Guide to British Butterflies, drawn by Richard Lewington

We looked at the conservation work that had been carried out during the winter, particularly around one of the ponds, which was looking healthier than it had for some time. We also noted how two of the ponds were still retaining water which was the first time that this had happened for several summers.

Clouded Yellows in Herts and Middlesex, by Andrew Wood.

On 22 August I decided to go for a lunchtime stroll around a gravel pit that lies in the angle of Westmill Road and the A10 just to the West of Ware. A path runs between the A10 and a high bank of soil along the edge of the pit and is usually good for a few blues and Peacocks etc. I was surprised to see after only a few yards a Clouded Yellow flying strongly along the bank. As I continued another appeared and in a distance of under half a mile I saw a total of eight with at least three being seen at the same time. Having seen this fine site I decided to continue across Westmill Road to the disused, and soon to be filled, quarry behind Ware Park and there I saw another two. Returning the next day on a rather more cloudy and windy lunchtime to Ware Park quarry to attempt photographs I saw five more but no really good photographic opportunities. Jane, my wife, visited Waterford Heath that afternoon and also saw three.

On the Thursday I had a meeting in West London, which gave me the opportunity to visit Horsenden Hill open space in Greenford at lunchtime. I was not disappointed, in a field full of birds foot trefoil there were five flying with a good colony of Common Blues. Later returning to the tube station one flew along Greenford Road and a further three were flying across the car park of the recently built Westway Cross retail park.

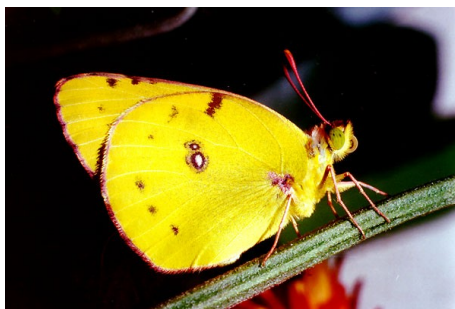
On the Friday a visit to the chalk bank on the Meads near Ware was a total disappointment with nothing seen. However a visit to Waterford Heath on the Sunday afternoon saw a further twelve flying.

My attempts at photography have still not succeeded as this species has such a strong low flight and seems to alight on each flower for just a few seconds before flying off at great speed up steep slopes or frustratingly across barbed wire fences, such a contrast to the “find a Buddleia and stay all day” Painted Lady.

I was not seriously looking at butterflies in the great 1983 Clouded Yellow invasion and saw only one in 1996 so this week of Clouded Yellows has been an exciting event all the more so for the extent of it being unexpected especially this far inland. I imagine that

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these are the offspring of immigrants that arrived in early June along with Painted ladies, Silver Ys and Rush Veneers, all of which have been strongly in evidence over the past couple of weeks. The sight of this large yellow insect flying along side the bright blue of the Common Blues which are present at all these sites is a marvellous end to what has seemed a rather poor summer



More Clouded Yellows, by Ian Small

Having seen a Clouded Yellow at Therfield Heath in early August, and having heard that there were a few around this year, it was with great anticipation that I visited the Isle of Wight on the last day of August. Even in poor years it is not uncommon to find Clouded Yellows there.

We were blessed with the most glorious day for our visit - clear blue skies, warm sunshine, and a light warm breeze (in contrast to the previous days which had been very blustery). During the afternoon, we went to Freshwater Bay on the south coast of the Isle, and had a walk along the coastal path at the top of the cliffs. Clouded Yellows were everywhere, and we must have seen 20 - 30 in the hour or so that we were there.

Almost all were very active, pausing only briefly to take nectar from one of the many yellow flowers along the cliff tops. Whilst trying to get a closer look at one that had landed, I noticed another which was just sitting close by in the vegetation. As it was not moving, I thought at first that it may have been dead, but this wasn't the case. I got closer and closer, and it showed no sign of flying away. I then wondered if it was freshly emerged and only just completed pumping up its wings, but this would have been unlikely given that this was early afternoon on a very warm day, when most butterflies to emerge would have done so during the morning.

Usually when one comes across such a sedentary butterfly it is when it is cold, and you are able to encourage it to walk onto your finger, both for warmth and to suck some of the salts from your skin. Never believing that I could persuade a Clouded Yellow to do the same, I nonetheless gently put my finger down in front of it. The antennae twitched and reached forward to touch it, closely followed by the first of those staggeringly pink legs. Slowly it climbed aboard!

There I was - with a Clouded Yellow on my finger (and my camera miles away !!). It stayed quite happily for several minutes whilst we all had a close look. It only flew away when my son tried to persuade it to walk onto his finger rather than mine. Clearly, enough was enough.

Over the years, I have had many butterflies on my fingers, but I don't think any has given me greater pleasure than this one.

The following day, we were back on the mainland, and had a walk along Hordle Cliffs (just west of Milford-on-Sea, east of Bournemouth). Here too there were many Clouded Yellows, again with over 20 being seen in a relatively short space of time.

Certainly, I saw more Clouded Yellows on these two days than I have ever seen in the UK before. I was fortunate to witness good numbers in 1983, when I lived in Wiltshire, but this year was the best yet for me. I cannot imagine what the great 1947 invasion must have been like, when it is estimated that 36,000 Clouded Yellows were seen along the South Coast.

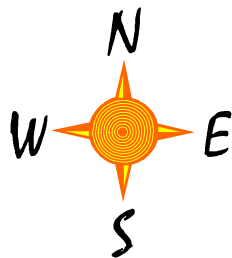
Despite the high numbers of these butterflies on the coast, I saw no evidence of any of them flying south out over the water, on a return migration to the continent. Whether my visit was just too early to witness this, I will never know, but....

Southerly Migration of Red Admirals ? by Ian Small

As you will have seen from the above article, I spent a day on the Isle of Wight at the end of August. In the morning I visited Alum Bay. Whilst walking along the beach, and waiting for a boat to take us out around The Needles, several Red Admirals flew in over the water.

I didn't think much about this at first, but as we were on the boat trip, there was a steady stream of Red Admirals flying over the water towards Alum Bay from the direction of Bournemouth on the other side of the Solent. It was only a 30-minute boat trip out to see the huge chalk outcrops and the lighthouse, but in that time there were certainly two dozen Red Admirals. All were flying purposefully in the same south / south-easterly direction, making landfall at the eastern edge of the Isle of Wight. In fact, one of the butterflies realised that the boat was going in the same direction, and kept pace with us flying above the cabin.

I would be interested to hear if anyone else has witnessed a similar thing. Surprisingly, in our walk along Freshwater Cliffs (described above), although there were lots of Clouded Yellows, there were no Red Admirals. Perhaps those that were there had flown further south in the morning before we arrived?



Forthcoming Moth Meeting at Broxbourne Wood

The Hertfordshire Moth Group, an informal group set up this year by Colin Plant, will be having a field meeting at Broxbourne Wood on Sunday 8th October 2000.

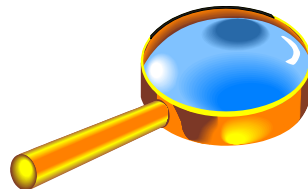
Meet: West car park at grid reference TL 322070. This is the south-western end of the really long main ride that runs right through the Broxbourne Woods complex to Hoddesdon.

Assemble: 10.30 am for 11 am start. Bring lunch.

Leaders: Ray Uffen, Colin Plant, and hopefully Maitland Emmet.

This trip will be an opportunity to meet the highly-respected grand old man of British lepidoptera, A. Maitland Emmet, now in his 94th year, subject to him being well enough. He is the general editor of the 10 volume work on British butterflies and moths which is being published at the moment, and the recipient in 1999 of Butterfly Conservation's first ever Marsh Award, for Lifetime Achievements in Lepidoptera.

Col. Emmet says that he will be unable to walk very far from the Car Park, but reminds Colin Plant that the last time he went there in 1983 they had identified more than one hundred species BEFORE they had left the car park! A unique occasion to meet the experts and to watch and learn the fascinating (but surprisingly easy) methods used to identify tiny leaf-mining moths, a severely under-recorded group.



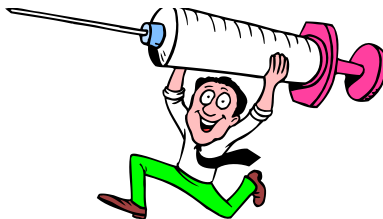
The Anti-Love Potion

The following article was seen in The Times on 7 September - editor

Male pierid butterflies do not like their sexual partners to play the field. so much so that they inject an anti-aphrodisiac into female butterflies during copulation. So repulsive is the chemical, methyl-salicylate, that even virgin butterflies that have the substance applied artificially are no longer desirable.

While this may seem a letdown to the lady, the reason appears to more more than male pride, according to a paper in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society*. Copulation can last up to 21 hours, which can interrupt the laying of eggs from the first sexual encounter. Also, females trying to escape persistent males have to crawl away into vegetation, which puts them at risk from predators.

The scientists in Sweden who carried out the study conclude that becoming unattractive to the opposite sex does away with all those complications and enhances the likelihood that female butterflies will bear offspring.



*Image
the CD-
British
drawn by*

Lewington

*reproduced from
ROM Guide to
Butterflies,
Richard*



Behind-the-Scenes Visit to the Natural History Museum, 21 February 2001, by John Murray

Martin Honey has kindly agreed to take us behind the scenes at the museum that has been such a childhood inspiration to so many generations of naturalists. Many of you may be unaware that there are literally millions of butterflies, moths and other insects from all over the world in the collections of the Natural History Museum that never see the light of day, dating from the 18th century onwards. These are kept in the Entomological Department, and comprise specimens and collections (including some Irish moths from my great great grandfather, who died of yellow fever whilst collecting hymenoptera in Colombia in 1864, that I hope to finally see). They form an important resource for the biological and taxonomic study of insects, vital knowledge that often becomes important in their conservation.

For logistic reasons this visit will take place during office hours (9 a.m. to 5 p.m.), so if you can make it and would like to come, please let the secretary, Liz Goodyear, know immediately (her contact details are on the back cover) as PLACES ARE STRICTLY LIMITED TO 20. She will supply further details.

Winter Indoor Meetings.

The first of the Winter indoor meetings will take place on **Saturday January 27th, 2001 at 2.30 pm** in the Welwyn Civic Centre, Old Welwyn, Herts.

The speaker will be Ray Uffin, who will talk on “Managing Grassland for Moths”.

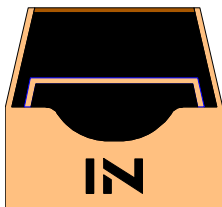
Further details of this and other indoor meetings will be included in the December Newsletter.

**Copy Deadline for the December Newsletter will be
15 November 2000**

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

Please send articles / letters / comments on any subject you think would interest other members. Photographs or other illustrations you would like included are also welcome - your prints will be returned after the article is incorporated.

Why not share the highlights of your butterfly year with the rest of us and brighten up our cold winter nights...my in-tray is empty: I need your contributions.





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 (starting 24th September) - (5th Sunday in October). 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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Please direct your correspondence to the relevant committee member. The magazine is produced by the Hertfordshire and Middlesex branch of Butterfly Conservation (The British Butterfly Conservation Society Ltd.) a registered company in England No. 2206468, which is a registered charity (No. 254937) with limited liability status. Registered Office: Shakespeare House, Dedham, Colchester, Essex, CO7 6DE. The views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the committee or the national society. Copyright 2000.