

# HERTFORDSHIRE AND MIDDLESEX BRANCH

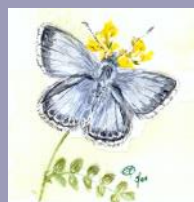
# NEWSLETTER

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*In the pdf version of this document, active hyperlinks are displayed in bold blue font - clicking on these will take you directly to the source. For those reading the printed version, the full internet location is either obvious in the link or is detailed close to it.*



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### Chair's Report, by Malcolm Hull

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Welcome to our Autumn newsletter and particular greetings to all our new members. Our Members Day in April was full of enthusiasm and promise for the new butterfly season. Six months later I am left wondering what happened?

#### **Butterfly Numbers Plummet**

I have never known a year so short of butterflies. And nearly everyone I meet has said the same. I have seen just one Small Tortoiseshell in Herts all year and the numbers of many other species have been well below usual. Brown Hairstreak has been a notable exception, with the first adults seen flying in Herts this century (see [page 12](#)) You can read about the mixed fortunes of this year's Branch butterfly walks from [page 17](#).

#### **What's Going On?**

Poor weather this year is the immediate cause. But this comes after years when the numbers of all types of insects have been steadily falling across large parts of the planet. The loss or decline of good places for butterflies to live is the most obvious problem. In London and in Herts many of the best butterfly areas are protected. The new government's ambitious housebuilding program will present a threat to some sites. We are lobbying hard to make the case that butterflies and other wildlife need homes as well as people.

Pollution is a massive threat to all wildlife. People have long campaigned against visible threats such as smog and chemicals in rivers. But the problem now is the less obvious types, such as sewage in the rivers, the widespread use of pesticides and artificial light outdoors at night. In this newsletter we are looking closely at some of the issues around the use of pesticides (see [page 10](#)) and herbicides ([page 15](#))

#### **What can be done?**

Across the UK councils are in the process of drawing up Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS). These aim to provide a blueprint for increasing biodiversity. Our Branch is actively contributing ideas to the Greater London and Hertfordshire council plans. We are emphasizing the importance of helping all species as well as rare ones and the considerable benefits of bringing more nature into both towns and countryside. More on this next year.

Artificial light can cause real problems for moths and bats. Butterfly Conservation's Dark Skies campaign spells out the problem and what can be done and is definitely worth a read - just follow this link: [Join the dark side](https://butterfly-conservation.org/join-the-dark-side).

[<https://butterfly-conservation.org/join-the-dark-side>]

We are making steady progress with our landscape plans for restoring and improving habitat areas within key landscapes. In East Herts our plan to protect Grizzled Skippers is up and running (see [page 4](#)). In the Chilterns, our plan focusing on chalk-loving butterflies is written and we are discussing funding options with potential partners. Our plan for the M25 corridor focuses on the Hairstreaks and woodland butterflies which should be thriving in the woods and scrublands of South Herts and outer north and west London. This is still in draft form.

### **What's on**

Big City Butterflies has been our flagship project for the last five years, making huge improvements to parks and gardens in inner London. Engaging with the people who live in the area around each project will help ensure the future of the special meadows and gardens created. Sadly, the project ends early next year but keep an eye out for the end of project online presentation this Autumn.

Our popular Winter Zoom talks will be returning in January - we aim to publish the program just after Christmas. These are a great way of brightening up some cold winter evenings without leaving the warmth of your own home. If you're not sure what to expect, then you can access recordings of the meetings from previous years on the Branch website by clicking [here](#).

[<https://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/youtube-new.php#OnlineTalks>]

Our Annual Report will be published in March – the authoritative guide to how well (or badly) butterflies have fared in Herts & Middx this year. This just would not be possible without the many thousands of records we receive. Many thanks to all who have already contributed sightings and please submit any more as soon as you can.

**Members Day 2025 will be on Saturday 12 April** at Greenwood Park Community Centre in Chiswell Green. Make a note of the date! It's our 30th birthday, so look out for some star guest speakers.

**Beane Valley Grizzled Skippers – a Landscape Project,  
by Liz Goodyear & Andrew Wood**

Butterfly Conservation has been encouraging Branches to develop their own local Landscape Projects. The Committee has now been working on these with the help of our Regional Officer, Sharon Hearle, for a few years. These projects can't be created overnight and involve the co-operation and support of several conservation bodies and landowners/land managers. Finally, when they are all agreed, there is also the need to secure funding! However, one project had already been in the making before Butterfly Conservation launched its initiative and a lot of the ground work had been done! So here is a little update on our progress.

*Background*

We live in the part of East Hertfordshire where the majority of Grizzled Skipper sites in our Branch area are found. For several years, we have become increasingly worried (with several other recorders) over the decrease in Grizzled Skipper numbers and the deterioration of their local habitats. Grizzled Skipper sites, particularly those just north of Hertford, are often brownfield sites



Grizzled Skipper  
at Waterford Heath  
Photo © Ian Small

with poor fertility such as quarries and railway lines. Luckily, in Hertfordshire, these particular brownfield sites tend not to be under threat from development, but in the past have been subject to restoration as set down in the original planning permissions.

The Grizzled Skipper thrives on hot bare ground where it can bask in the sunshine and lay its eggs on wild strawberry, common agrimony and creeping cinquefoil. Although wild strawberry is always associated with Grizzled Skipper and listed as a larval food plant – we rarely see females laying their eggs on it. Bramble - particularly 'tripping bramble' - is also required as it is known to be used as a later instar larval foodplant as well as helping to create micro-climates and shelter. A good population of rabbits can be beneficial as they help keep the vegetation in control in the absence of any grass management!

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic meant a lot of conservation work was curtailed due to volunteer restrictions, so sites such as the HMWT Waterford Heath site started to suffer from serious scrub invasion. Two other private gravel pits - one managed by Tarmac and one by Heidelberg (previously known as Hanson) - also started to show similar worrying signs. Combined with wet winters and very hot summers, numbers of Grizzled Skippers being recorded were starting to show a concerning pattern of decline. Something had to be done before it was too late and with the help of Sharon Hearle we started to make progress.

### *Progress*

Our first approach was to reach out to the landowners and managers to arrange site visits and discuss ideas for habitat management. We had no difficulty in working with the Reserves officers at the HMWT as they were equally keen to halt the species' decline and they set about creating a new programme of habitat work based on our advice. The Waterford Heath pits cover a big area, with two slightly different structures; the south pit was originally restored and top soil distributed across the site – this top soil contained goat's rue and, at the height of the summer, this plant now covers a large area of this pit. HMWT have for some years had contractors cut and remove it every summer before it can seed – a dry summer and it is kept in check; a wet spring as was the case in 2024 and it becomes rampant!



Two views of Waterford Heath south pit. Photos © Andrew Wood

The north pit was not restored, but without regular management would become invaded by scrub. This has slowly started to take away valuable breeding habitat as well as making it difficult to survey! It also gets very damp in parts during wet weather and unfortunately

even the goat's rue is starting to appear. Thanks to volunteers from the Branch and HMWT, a successful mid-season work party took place and a lot of the north pit goat's rue was removed. There is still work to be done, but everyone understands that it does have to be done, but most importantly not all at once!

The two other gravel pits are more complicated. At Rickneys, apart from public footpaths, there is no official access. The pit was part-restored around 2000 and is still subject to possible further extraction on the east side. The owners, Heidelberg, had been very co-operative in the past and allowed volunteers to survey for Grizzled Skipper, so we had a good baseline of records to work from. They also took advice on habitat management. However, with staff changes, it became more difficult to make contact but thankfully we have started to re-engage with them; permission was given this year for more surveying and they have in principle agreed to conduct a 3-year cycle of scrub removal!



Grizzled Skipper adult and eggs at Rickneys, May 2024  
Photos © Andrew Wood

The second gravel pit is Frogmore – which was created when Stevenage New Town was built and the first Grizzled Skippers were found there just before the new millennium. At the time, the managers were Lafarge and, thanks to good contacts that we had with them then, work parties were conducted and some scrub was removed. The Branch even considered taking it on as a Branch reserve but there were too many hurdles and that never came to fruition! There is no public access in any form.

Our next challenge was to contact Tarmac and arrange a site meeting – this was held in the winter of 2022 and it became very clear that the site was now almost impenetrable! The secondary issue at the site, and



the concern for the Grizzled Skipper population, was the water table.

Back in the 2000s, the pit tended to just have a small amount of water in the base, but if there was a wet winter the water levels would rise, and a small lake would appear. This lake just got bigger and deeper and the available habitat was shrinking. What was still there become more inaccessible to survey unless you had a boat! In 2022, with permitted access, there were only a handful of sightings and even fewer in 2024!

But what was exciting was that eggs and adults were found in an area of the site where they hadn't been recorded before – we are hoping that some work will be undertaken by Tarmac this winter. But why was the water table going up? No doubt wet winters were in part a cause, but why then in the dry summer of 2022 did it not go down? This is where a discussion with Affinity Water produced the answer – that and further discussion with the River Beane Restoration Association that monitor the condition of the river. They produced lots of graphs and figures pointing to the most likely reason. The River Beane is a chalk stream, and an important habitat in its own right. Over the years, there has been pressure to reduce the amount of extraction from the aquifer. Close to Frogmore was a pumping station and that, together with another pump further upstream, had been shut down! Thus, we couldn't do anything to reduce the water table and so we have to think creatively and look to see whether there is any suitable habitat nearby that the Grizzled Skippers might also colonise?



The lake in Frogmore Pit in 2022 (left) and the newly-colonised area (right).  
Photos © Andrew Wood

This is where contacting the landowners in the area became increasingly more important. Andrew Wood has for several years had

permission to survey the Woodhall Estate, which farms land adjacent to the River Beane. In 2022 we met their Forestry Manager who agreed that we would do more formal surveys of several of their woods and field margins which have been ongoing since. Included in these surveys are three areas that support Grizzled Skipper. One of these had been known about for some time as it is quite close to Waterford Heath, but the second and third areas have only been found recently and since the project was initiated. Numbers seen are still very low, but we are working with the Woodhall Estate to ensure this habitat is maintained.

However, through our new partnership with the Woodhall Estate, we were also introduced to FWAG – the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group and their local area co-ordinator and butterfly enthusiast, Shaun Downman! FWAG already had its own Beane Valley Farm Cluster which is funded by Affinity Water (please note that Affinity only supply water, they do not discharge sewage). With Shaun and FWAG, we first held a special meeting for farmers from the Beane Valley and its catchments - this covers a huge landscape between Hertford and the north of the county – a mix of gravel and chalk habitats. We gave presentations on the local butterflies (and moths) and discussed ways they could help improve their habitat. We handed out kidney vetch seed, and as a result, have conducted several farm visits and been given access to these farms to survey for butterflies and look for potential Grizzled Skipper habitat. Andrew also gave a talk on the local butterflies to the Beane Valley River Association; this also gave us new contacts and we are also hoping to work with newly-formed River Ash and River Rib farm clusters.

The final part of this jigsaw is the railway line that runs between Hertford North and Stevenage. We first contacted Network Rail over 15 years ago when we realised there was a colony of Grizzled Skipper beside the track bed. They agreed to give Branch representatives privileged access to survey a key area near the village of Stapleford, and this has happened nearly every year since then.

This is not a simple survey, as it involves contacting managers some weeks in advance, arranging a date and filling in forms to confirm you are fit to conduct a trackside survey, which enables them to issue a Temporary Visitor Permit. We are met at a pre-arranged site; have to wear hard hats, high viz waistcoats, trousers and safety boots. We are not allowed closer than 2 metres from the trackside and have to follow all instructions conveyed to us by the trackside operatives as trains are



passing every 10 or 20 minutes. These men are usually responsible for the trackside fencing and know every section of this particular line. When we first started surveying, we were still allowed to cross the track bed, but this stopped a few years ago when the track was upgraded and faster quieter trains were introduced. Therefore, when we get to a bridge, there is insufficient width for us to walk by the track, so we now need to clamber down the embankment, through stinging nettle infested slopes, climb through or over a wire fence and do the same on the opposite site. We should add here that the operatives also follow the same procedure – in their case sometimes for several miles during their working day. This has meant fewer sections are now surveyed.

The area to the north is in a cutting, so this can now only be surveyed from the top of the embankment, which in recent years has become encroached with saplings and bramble banks (Network Rail look on bramble banks and stinging nettles as good security measures against trespass!). Unfortunately, in recent years, the Grizzled Skipper population levels have dropped, the site is becoming ranker, the rabbit population appears to be in decline and because we have to select a day in advance, we can't necessarily pick a sunny day or the peak of the flight period.

Thankfully, because the species can be found roosting, most surveys can still go ahead but with varying results – this year wasn't a good year, but we still found eggs and the track-side operatives are now quite good at finding the butterfly as well! This year, only one operative was available so only one person could accompany him – and that was Liz! In the ideal world we would try and work with Network Rail, to improve the habitat, but even with initiatives such as the Network Rail Eastern Region Biodiversity Programme, it's very hard to reach the right person who has the right contacts to authorise the work.

None of this work is easy, we are in three cases dealing with huge organisations and to get any work done is an achievement. So, when you see a really good site scrubbing up or deteriorating, please realise we are trying very hard to get the desired result; it just doesn't happen overnight and in some cases we just have to meet half way and be very diplomatic!

## The Problem with Pesticides, by Malcolm Hull

Pesticide is a generic term which includes a wide range of individual products. There are around 500 chemical products licensed to be used as pesticides in Europe. The various products can be categorized into different types such as insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and rodenticides which all target different groups of species.



In the past our attention has focused on individual pesticides aimed at killing insects. The use of DDT was widespread in agriculture during the 1950's and early 1960's, before it was banned. This was a period during which butterfly populations plummeted. More recently neonicotinoids have been shown to have harmful effects on butterflies and moths. Although these are now mostly banned in agriculture, exemptions are still allowed for use on sugar beet crops in eastern counties, including Hertfordshire. Continued use on pets and accumulations in the soil and in the bodies of animals mean that the harmful impact of neonicotinoids will be felt for years to come.

In recent times pesticide use has continued to increase. One study showed that the average UK arable field is treated sixteen times each year. Much of this is precautionary – there is no outbreak of pests, but the chemicals are applied just to make sure it doesn't happen. Seeds and plants, including many you buy from garden centres, are already dosed with pesticide.

Although individual pesticides are tested and licensed, there are concerns about the effect of pesticide cocktails. These occur when a person or animal is exposed to small doses of multiple different substances, which then interact. A third of all fruit and vegetables consumed by people in the UK contain pesticide cocktails. Cocktails of up to ten different chemicals can be found in UK soil with the potential to affect bees, birds and butterflies. Despite this, regulators often continue to test the safety of pesticides as individual chemicals, ignoring the cocktail effect.

Most of the research on the harmful side effects of individual pesticides focuses on people rather than wildlife. Individual products aimed at one species can easily have an impact on other groups of species such as insects. And little research has been carried out on

how pesticide cocktails may impact butterflies and moths.

### **Pesticide-free towns**

Every year, hundreds of tons of pesticides are used in the streets, parks, schools, playgrounds, cemeteries, pavements, road verges and other open spaces of our towns and cities. Local councils are the main users, but there are also many others that use pesticides including university campuses, car parks, hospitals, private housing developments, shopping centres and schools.

In most UK towns and cities, it is currently impossible to avoid exposure to pesticides but there are plenty of alternatives. However, a growing number of places around the world have already gone pesticide-free and are proving that it can be done. For example, pesticides are now banned in urban areas of France. 50 councils in the UK have already declared themselves pesticide free. In our area these include Hammersmith and Fulham, Hackney and Westminster. Others with some restrictions in place include St Albans and Islington. Campaigns for pesticide-free towns have started up in several other areas.

The Pesticide Collaboration is a new initiative calling for a ban on the use of pesticides in publicly-run urban areas. It is supported by RSPB and around 80 other organizations, including Butterfly Conservation. It claims that urban pesticides are unnecessary and should be banned immediately in order to protect human health and the environment. There's a petition to the new government at [Go Pesticide-Free - The Pesticide Collaboration](https://pesticidecollaboration.org/go-pesticide-free/)

[<https://pesticidecollaboration.org/go-pesticide-free/>]

There is sufficient evidence to show that the widespread use of pesticides has a major adverse impact on nature. Banning pesticides entirely would have a massive adverse impact on food production. But dramatic reductions should be achievable. The urban pesticide initiative is a start, but more major benefits could be achieved by changing to more sustainable farming practices. Applying pesticides only when the outbreak of a pest has actually occurred would be an immediate improvement. We don't yet know exactly how to achieve it, but a massive reduction in pesticide use is one of the most important ways in which we can help butterflies, moths and other wildlife thrive.

### Further Reading

- Silent Earth – Averting an insect apocalypse – a book by Professor Dave Goulson
- The Pesticide Collaboration [<https://pesticidecollaboration.org/>]
- Pesticide Action Network UK [<https://pan-uk.eaction.org.uk/>]

*(Hyperlinks omitted for technical reasons - editor)*

### **Brown Hairstreaks - a Summer Update, by Liz Goodyear**

As some will know, finding Brown Hairstreak eggs can be a lot easier than finding the adult butterfly. For this reason, new sites are not usually confirmed during the summer unless you are one of those lucky people that just happened to be in the right place at the right time!

After the excitement of last winter's egg searching, I personally decided not to actively look for the adult butterfly but let others do the hard work! One of the first things that had to be achieved was to see an adult Brown Hairstreak in Hertfordshire and that honour fell to Rick Vickers and Pete Fewell on the 28 July 2024!



The first adult Brown Hairstreak recorded in Hertfordshire  
Photo © Pete Fewell

Rick and Pete were able to follow that up with several more sightings at Merry Hill, near Bushey, including seeing a female lay an egg.

Adults were also seen at Carpenders Park and Moor Park but all Hertfordshire sightings and egg-finds remain inside the M25.

Hertfordshire targets for the egg-searching teams this coming winter must include the Watford area and any sites in the parts of Hertfordshire lying inside the M25, possibly with a river system that flows south into Middlesex or close to the main road and railway conduits coming out of London?

In Middlesex, activity continued to be high with several reports from the key site at Stafford Road Open Space, but also transect records from the Brent River, Wormwood Scrubs, Horsenden Hill and Ten Acre Wood. One notable new site is Minet Park, owned by Hillingdon Council, which has been searched on several occasions for eggs with no success, but several adults were reported there by different recorders this year. Perhaps the most exciting report was from the London Borough of Hackney, where an adult was seen at Allen's Gardens. This corner of London needs some serious egg- searching, as no doubt it could connect with the Kent and Essex records?

It is quite normal now to receive Brown Hairstreak photos from gardens, and this was the case this year with several noted in Middlesex on iRecord or the Branch website (which are the sources of my information). Although the Gatekeeper is no longer flying, I always say, especially at the height of both species' flight season, – double check every Gatekeeper just in case.....

It is the Branch intention to run at least two training survey days - most likely in January 2025 – please check the Branch website for details when they have been finalised. A booking system will be set up, simply because we can't guarantee the weather will behave!

Further information is on the Branch website [here](#).

[[https://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/BrownHairstreak\\_survey.php](https://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/BrownHairstreak_survey.php)]

### **Brown Hairstreaks - Notes from Merry Hill and South Oxhey, by Pete Fewell**

After returning the rescued Brown Hairstreak eggs with Nick Furtek on 9 March (see [Newsletter No. 88](#), page 14) we returned on 18 May to try to re-find a few of the eggs that we had marked on the Hillingdon Borough Council area and found that the six we found had all hatched. This proves that storing eggs over winter can work at least

to the hatching stage.

[<https://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/Newsletters/Herts%20&%20Middx%20Branch%20Newsletter%20No.%2088,%20Spring%202024.pdf>]



The re-found Brown Hairstreak eggs.

Left - 9 March    Right - 18 May

In the right-hand image, there are clear holes in the top of the eggs,  
Through which the caterpillars have emerged

Rick's method for egg storage worked a treat, but we couldn't determine whether any of the caterpillars managed to find a bud though. We could have done with Rohan's expertise for that! We also rescued some Blue-bordered Carpet moth eggs. The one's relocated on 18 May had not hatched, but we are not familiar with hatching times with this species.

Since Liz and Ian Watts discovered the first Brown Hairstreak eggs in Hertfordshire earlier in the year at Merry Hill, Bushey, it gave me the perfect opportunity to go and explore some more of Merry Hill as I live within walking distance. On 28 July, I met up with Rick Vickers to look for adult Brown Hairstreak at Merry Hill. Rick had checked the location roughly where Liz and Ian had found eggs.

Thanks to Rick, who first spotted a really fresh looking male, I span round as soon as he said 'Brown Hairstreak' and managed to capture a reasonable photo (shown on [page 12](#)). Rick went on to video a female egg-laying at South Oxhey playing fields, not far from where he found an egg!

Over this period I have now seen 6 Brown Hairstreak butterflies at Merry Hill - 3 males and 3 females. I could not believe that approx. 15 minute walk from my home that I would end up seeing a female egg-



laying. There were some ash trees close by that looked reasonably healthy so far, although ash die-back is present. Cattle are also grazing presently where the egg laying was seen at Merry Hill. This is an interesting interaction, as the cattle create shapes with sheltered spots ideal for egg-laying female Brown Hairstreaks it would seem. One thing with egg-searches that I would like to bring up for further investigation is - How far away from an ash tree will a female lay an egg on blackthorn?

### **The Case for using Herbicides in Nature Conservation, by Stephen Mason**

I have worked the past 35 years for Conservation organisations and as a contractor. I would just like to make a case for the sensitive use of herbicides to control invasive species and scrub.

In terms of their use in relation to butterfly habitat management I would advocate that using herbicides, when woody species have been cut down to save species rich grassland such as chalk downland, is an effective conservation measure. Broadleaved shrubs and trees are “designed” to re-grow if they are cut and many exhibit “Coppice



An urban Sycamore cut down, which will provide work for contractors for many years to come!

Photo © Stephen Mason

Vigour” whereby the plant grows very quickly in response to the “threat”, hence how they survive. These plants evolved in ecosystems which had many large herbivores (like elephants!) that would cause damage to woody species. Hence if you cut down this scrub it will send up multi-stems. Without treatment, you will soon be back in the same position as if you hadn’t cut down the stems - in fact worse, as you have created many more to cut down. So you lock yourself into a cycle of more and more work which is not achieving your goals.

Small woody stems can be levered out using “tree-poppers”, but this is

many times more labour-intensive than cutting with a brushcutter and then treating with herbicide. On a recent contract, we did the two types of control and I would say that we achieved at least 10 times the area where we treated compared to popping. That means that popping is ten times more expensive for conservation organisations, meaning so much more management can be achieved by using herbicides. Additionally popping can disturb the soil which means more undesirable species can colonise.

Stem injection is a very effective technique for bigger scrub whereby holes are drilled into the stems and 2mL of herbicide (1:5 with water) is sprayed into it. This means that the herbicide is contained within the stems with no risk to the environment. This has been used effectively against *Rhododendron* for the last 20 years. Other invasives, such as Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed, are almost impossible to eliminate in rural situations without the use of herbicides. In the case of Knotweed a special needle injects it into the stem.

For other undesirable plants that take over species-rich grassland it is possible to use a knapsack sprayer or hand-held garden sprayer to spot treat the centre of the plant. Critics might point out that there can be “collateral” damage to other plants, but this is marginal and in reality is less than the original rosette of the plant. Where we have undertaken works over 15 years it is impossible to see where we have been as plant diversity is evenly spread over the site.

In an ideal world I wouldn’t want to use herbicides, but I feel we need to be pragmatic about their use in nature conservation. Lots of sites are bounded by arable fields where gallons of herbicide is applied each year.



A multi-stemmed Maple coppice, after someone decided to cut it down many years ago.  
Photo © Stephen Mason

## Some Local Butterfly Highlights from 2024

*The weather this year has made it a challenge to see lots of butterflies, but nevertheless there have been many great sightings in our Branch area. While I would normally only report on our organised field events in this newsletter, (many of which have been weather-affected this year), I present below a selection of extracts from all sightings reported to the News section of our Branch website, including a selection of fine images. Many thanks to all who contributed this information - editor.*

On 13 April, Dave Miller had a pleasant surprise on his usual local walk near Stanwell Moor Village. "I spotted a Holly Blue in a tussle with another small butterfly. When the latter had seen the former off, it came down and settled in front of me. This is the first Green Hairstreak I have seen in this area, and I've been looking for around sixteen years.." It was also the first Green Hairstreak reported in our Branch area in 2024.



Green Hairstreak  
Photo © Dave Miller



Orange Tip  
Photo © Pete Fewell

The clouds had rolled in before the start of the Branch event at Whippendell Woods on 5th May, and Pete Fewell reported that only 2 butterflies were seen - an Orange Tip and a Red Admiral.

During a quick lunchtime walk at Hexton Chalkpit on 13 May, Julia Hawkins fared better - "half a dozen Dingy Skippers, 2 Small Heaths, 1 Large White and 1 Brown Argus. Not bad considering it was also breezy with intermittent sunny spells."



Dingy Skipper  
Photo © Julia Hawkins

The Branch walk at Shrubhill Common in Hemel Hempstead on 18 May attracted 10 people. The site looked in good condition in spite of poor weather conditions and sightings included 7 Dingy Skippers, 3 Mother Shipton (including a mating pair), a Silver Y moth, 6 Small/Green-veined Whites, 5 Burnet Companion, 2 Small Yellow Underwing, 4 Brimstone, 1 Orange Tip and 1 Holly Blue egg laying on Dogwood. The earlier morning walk at Bovington Brickpits had less success. [Posted by Christine Ridley and Malcolm Hull].

The first spring-brood Adonis Blues were recorded at Therfield Heath on 24 May by James Somerville, who also reported that “Small Heath numbers are very good so far this year, they were out in force.”. The photo here was taken the next day (25th) at the Church Hill part of Therfield.



Adonis Blue  
Photo © Martin Johnson

Conditions were overcast for the Branch walk at Heartwood Forest on 1 June, but that did not deter 20 members from setting off. On the way to the Airfield, a Meadow Brown was spotted hunkered down in long grass and a roosting cinnabar moth. The Kidney Vetch at the Airfield was in good condition, but no Small Blues were identified (Andrew had seen seven there last week). Moving on to Valley Field we saw Burnet Companion, Small Heath and two Grass Rivulet moths. Finally, in an area sheltered from the cold northerly breeze, Andrew found a roosting Small Blue, which posed obligingly for photos. Several children joined the walk and their enthusiasm lifted the mood on a grey day. [Posted by Malcolm Hull and Andrew Steele].



Small Blue  
Photo © Andrew Wood

On 6 June, Andrew Wood reported that during a visit to a private site (visited with permission) near Royston, a Small Blue was recorded - the first for that 2km square.

On 21 June, Martin Johnson reported the first Dark-green Fritillary of the year, on his visit to Therfield Heath, together with “hordes (conservative estimate - 80) of Marbled Whites.” His other sightings included “Small Heath (lots) and Meadow Brown (lots).”



Dark-green Fritillary (left) and Marbled White (right)  
Photos © Martin Johnson

On 22 June, Peter Clarke reported “At least 5 White-letter Hairstreaks, including 2 pairs of males clashing, over the elm canopy at Six Hills Common, Stevenage”.

Ahead of the scheduled Branch visit to Whippendell Woods, on 30 June, Pete Fewell visited a few days earlier, on 24 June, and found White Admiral well out, with 4 seen. Unfortunately, the scheduled walk a few days later was not so fortunate, and only 2 were seen, right at the end of the walk, by which time some people had already left!



White Admiral. Photo © Pete Fewell



On 30 June, Nathan Ellis popped down to Danemead HMWT reserve, near Hoddesden after the morning rain with hopes of a close up of a Silver-washed Fritillary or White Admiral. While neither of these were seen, a Purple Emperor was seen on some dried-up poo at around 1.30pm during a sunny spell. He spooked before a picture could be taken, but 10 minutes later, further down the track he saw another Purple Emperor on a fresh (and smelly) dog poo (see photo below).

Several Branch members visited Heartwood Forest on 4 July hoping to see Purple Emperors. Some very smelly bait was sprayed in a few likely locations, but only 1 Purple Emperor obliged, providing some wonderful photo opportunities.



Purple Emperors at Danemead (left) and Heartwood Forest (right)  
Photos © Nathan Ellis (left) and Andrew Neild (right)

The scheduled Branch event at Bricket Wood on 7 July took place in cool, showery conditions, with Ringlets being the most abundant butterflies seen, including one seen flying in quite heavy rain! As luck would have it, conditions were much improved there the following morning, when Clive Burrows reported 5 Silver-washed Fritillaries and 2 White Admirals during his visit.



Silver-washed Fritillary  
Photo © Clive Burrows



On 24 July, Annie Sutcliffe summed up the feelings of many when she posted the following: “Abundance of butterflies at Therfield Heath. If your butterfly batteries need recharging in this tricky year, I recommend a trip to Therfield Heath. In the space of four hours I spotted 15 species of butterfly species plus lots of Six-Spot Burnet moths and Cinnabar caterpillars. The meadow at the foot of Church Hill had the most variety with dozens of Gatekeepers, the usual meadowland species, plus a couple of Brimstones and Dark Green Fritillaries, Peacocks and a Red Admiral. Oddly no Chalkhill Blues at all on Church Hill, but hundreds over on the heath (Lankester Hill and towards the Icknield Way), and a bonus trio of Small Coppers on the path between the burial mounds on the way back to the car park.”



Male Chalkhill Blue (left) and Small Copper (right)  
Photos © Annie Sutcliffe

This abundance was also witnessed a few days later (27 July) on the scheduled Branch trip to Therfield. Nick Keep posted “A nice-sized group peaking at slightly less people than the 16 species of butterflies recorded, met at the main carpark today. Chalkhill Blue males were seen almost as soon as we stepped on to the mown grass by the cafe, many more than I would expect in this area. Maybe the very long uncut grass, due to the wet weather this year, is driving them down to the mown non-SSSI area. Small, Essex and Large Skippers identified to species were seen near the scrub going up Lankester hill along with a single faded Ringlet. Small/Essex skippers were seen throughout the walk in good numbers as were Gatekeepers, Chalkhill Blues and Meadow Browns. Enough Marbled Whites were still on the wing for

everyone to get a good view.

We then moved on to the bowl of the Rifle Range where 2 faded male Common Blues, male and female Brimstones and 3 Dark Green Fritillaries were added to the sightings. Two somewhat out of season Small Heaths were seen in the valley area. Flyby Red Admiral, Peacock, Large and Small White completed the list. Moths consisted of several Burnets and a Silver-Y. We failed to find Small Copper where I saw one on Wednesday when checking the route. There have been more reports than usual of Small Copper this year but it remains a relatively rare spot on the Heath.”

The same day (27 July) saw another Branch event, this time on the opposite side of Hertfordshire, at our own Millhoppers Pasture Reserve. Being a rather different habitat than Therfield, the range of species seen and their relative numbers were somewhat different. Christine Ridley reported “: 2 Speckled Wood, 3 Brimstone, 35 Gatekeeper, 15 Meadow Brown, 3 Ringlet, 4 Small Skipper, 2 Large White, 4 Peacock, and 1 Red Admiral.”

The following day (28 July), Paul Busby reported 3 different species of Hairstreaks on a visit to Minet Country Park, Hayes, where there are extensive elm and blackthorn hedges. He reported “First a Purple Hairstreak in a small oak, then onto looking at the elm hedge which has been a White-letter Hairstreak hotspot - just the one in the canopy today. I have looked at the Blackthorn here over a number of years and today, right at the end of the walk, saw a fresh Brown Hairstreak in a small row of blackthorn in the cycle track. Lots of other butterflies despite an early cut of the meadow, including Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper, Speckled Wood, Brown Argus, Small Skipper, Peacock, Red Admiral, Holly Blue as well as a couple of Jersey Tigers.”

A few days later (1 August), Paula Moore reported that several Purple Hairstreaks were seen during the Branch walk at Claybury park.



Purple Hairstreak  
Photo © Ian Small

On 2 August, Andrew Wood posted a picture of an aberrant Chalkhill Blue seen at Therfield - he believes this is the female form with partially blue hindwings called semi-syngrapha.



Aberrant female Chalkhill Blue  
Photo © Andrew Wood

*(The corresponding blue form of the female Common Blue is more common, and my personal observations are that it is much more prevalent in wet years - certainly, I have seen a high proportion this year. (See also the comment in the report from 23 August, below. ) I wonder if others have also noted the correlation with wet seasons, and whether a similar (but lesser) trend occurs with the Chalkhill Blue ? ... editor.)*

On 7 August, Nick Furtek led our annual search for Brown Hairstreak around the fields at Ickenham. Malcolm Hull reported that in 2 hours he had 12 confirmed Brown Hairstreak, including 3 low down along the hedge. By the time the group left at 1pm they had seen 17 other species, including Small Coppers, Small Heaths, Common Blues, Brown Argus, a Large Skipper and Purple Hairstreaks. Moths included Straw Dot, Vapourer, Yellow Shell, Shaded Broad-bar and Cinnabar caterpillars.

On 18 August, Malcolm Hull led our walk at Clothall Common, Baldock. 8 members gathered for our first Branch walk at this new location, famed as the best place in Herts for seeing 6 different species of blues. Butterflies were fairly scarce to start with, but by the time they reached the top of the slope both male and female Chalk-hill Blues and Common Blues were seen in good numbers. Many blues were examined closely, noting the different colours and spots. Sadly no Adonis Blues were seen, but the second generation had not yet fully emerged. Back down at the foot of the slope they added Brown Argus, Small Blues and Small Heath. Ten species in total. Stopping off at Weston for lunch, Malcolm immediately spotted a Holly Blue, bringing his personal total for the day to five.

By 23 August, there were lots of Blues again on Therfield Heath. Martin Johnson reported good numbers of Adonis Blues were on the wing on the eastern side of Therfield Heath - he saw at least 15 males and there were probably plenty more. Most but not all of the activity was on Lankester Hill (Old Rifle Range). Most of the Chalkhill Blues

looked pretty ragged, but there were still quite a few about and others saw females egg laying. Similar numbers of Brown Argus and Common Blue were seen - most of the Common Blue females were suffused with blue. (*see editor's comment above, and photo below.*) A single Holly Blue was seen on the way to the heath. Martin also checked out Church Hill early evening: not a single blue could be seen on the south side, but some Chalkhills were roosting on the north side and in the chalk pit at the bottom (one female seen), so there is hope that they will re-establish themselves, given the right conditions (and some ants). Several Common Blues and a Brown Argus were roosting at the bottom of the hill, some dangerously close to the web of a Wasp Spider! Small Heath butterflies have been on the wing here continuously since the end of April.



Male Adonis Blue (left) and blue form of female Common Blue (right)  
Photos © Martin Johnson

On 11 September, David Miller saw a Clouded Yellow on his local patch close to Heathrow T5 and the River Colne and posted the photos below, including a very rare view of one with its wings open! - well done David!



Clouded Yellow      Photos © David Miller

**What Happened to all the Butterflies....and why does it matter? by Butterfly Conservation**

**Butterfly Conservation is declaring a butterfly emergency following a record low number of butterflies seen in this year's Big Butterfly Count, and long-term declines for many butterfly species since the 1970s.**

Butterfly Conservation and its supporters have been collecting data on butterflies and moths for over 50 years. Our data is an integral part of the Government's biodiversity indicators and will play an important role in monitoring delivery of the Environment Act species abundance target.

The average number of butterflies spotted per Big Butterfly Count in 2024 was the lowest in the 14-year history of the citizen science scheme. Even the two species that people spotted a lot more of this year, Marbled White and Ringlet, had one of their poorest years yet in the history of the Big Butterfly Count. This is because they emerged later in the year than usual due to the cold and wet weather, so people counted more than they had previously despite their numbers being low overall for the summer. Data from the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme also indicates 2024 has been a very poor year for butterflies so far.

The weather affects butterfly numbers, and this year's wet spring and low summer temperatures will have had an impact, but this is part of a longer-term trend of butterfly declines. 80% of butterfly species in the UK have declined, in abundance or distribution (or both) since the 1970s, and more than 70% of the most common species have declined in abundance over the past 14 years, some by up to 60% of their abundance over the lifetime of the Big Butterfly Count scheme. Half of all butterfly species are Red Listed as threatened or Near Threatened with extinction in Britain.

**Why does this matter?**

Butterflies are recognised as valuable environmental indicators. Butterflies have short life cycles, generally don't travel far, rely on specific food plants and have a close reliance on the climate, making many species highly sensitive to environmental changes. Butterflies

occur in all of the main terrestrial habitat types in the UK and so we have a huge amount of data on their numbers for a wide range of species and habitats, making them a vital indicator.

The **UK State of Nature Report 2023**, the most comprehensive report on UK wildlife showed that 1 in 6 of all UK species were in danger of extinction with an average decline across all species of 19% since 1970. [<https://stateofnature.org.uk/>]

There are substantial negative consequences of living in such a nature depleted environment: from human health to the impacts of ecosystem damage such as flooding and loss of pollination. Pollinating insects such as butterflies and moths are worth millions of pounds to UK agriculture and the continuing decline in pollinator numbers threatens future food production.

### **What is the cause of the declines?**

The ongoing loss, deterioration and fragmentation of habitats is the main driver of long-term butterfly decline in the UK exacerbated by the industrialisation of agriculture, pesticides, pollution and climate change.

Climate change is leading to increasing short periods of extreme weather, whether cold and wet or very hot. A resilient butterfly population would be able to bounce back from these setbacks. However, a depleted, threatened one existing in damaged, polluted habitats is put at greater risk of extinction following these extreme weather events.

### **What can we do?**

But it is not all doom and gloom; given the necessary resources we have demonstrated that we can reverse the declines of threatened butterfly species across the landscape. For example the Wood White project in Chiddingfold Forest showed the value of a collaborative project between Butterfly Conservation, government agencies, land owners and local people to deliver lasting benefits for a variety of species and the broader environment.

There is a cost to this, but there is also a cost to allowing continuing degradation – it is more cost effective to avoid the damage in the first place. Where damage has occurred, the Government's own advisors have shown that restoring nature can cost less in the long term than bearing the costs of continued degradation.



If this Government is genuinely going to tackle the nature crisis it must put species at the heart of nature recovery by addressing our 5 urgent asks:

**More budget for butterflies** We need the government to double the budget for species recovery.

**Take action for our landscapes** We need to improve the most important places for butterflies and moths through landscape-scale action.

**Access to nature for all** Recognition is needed for the wellbeing benefits of nature, everyone should have a wild space within 15 minutes' walk.

**Ban pollinator-killing pesticides for good** Environmentally damaging noenicitinoid chemicals need banning immediately, with no exception.

**Take light pollution seriously** Recognise light pollution, a huge threat to moths, as an environmental pollutant and set legally binding targets for its reduction.

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