



2017 Butterfly Blog

26 November 2017 - Uncertain Future For Many Species

As another year draws to a close, it is becoming increasingly clear that many butterfly species in Hampshire are facing an uncertain future, and for some, a bleak one. 2017 turned out to be a rather odd season, characterised by an early spring and an unsettled summer, with a few species faring quite well or even very well, whilst others fared badly. Although official records will not be known for some months yet, anecdotal indications are that several hibernators and species associated with spring did quite well, including Brimstone, Speckled Wood, Peacock and Duke Of Burgundy, perhaps taking advantage of the early, mild spring. It could also be mentioned here that the Red Admiral enjoyed an exceptionally good season, being seemingly ubiquitous and abundant during late summer and autumn.

At the other end of the spectrum, several species had poor or very poor seasons, including two of our small fritillaries, the Pearl-bordered and Small Pearl-bordered, with the future of the latter in Hampshire now being perilous. Small Copper, Small Tortoiseshell, Wall and Silver-spotted Skipper also fared badly in the county. Indeed, it will be interesting to see if there were any officially recorded sightings of Wall in Hampshire this year.



Varying fortunes: The Red Admiral enjoyed an exceptionally good season, whereas the Small Tortoiseshell had a poor one.

Away from these extremes, there is a plethora of species somewhere in the middle, which have fared neither especially well nor badly, although no doubt some of these will end in one of the more extreme categories when the official records become available. Nevertheless, for me there is nothing to suggest that the general slow decline for many species has been halted, especially in the case of several of our summer species, whose flight period was adversely affected by a prolonged spell of unsettled weather.

Year by year it is becoming clear from examples around the country, that targeted conservation measures can be locally effective for some species (e.g. Duke of Burgundy). Extending and maintaining successful conservation projects to a larger scale, and tackling the decline in some of our wider countryside species, including familiar ones such as the Wall and Small Tortoiseshell is a huge challenge. The resources needed for conservation (involving education, farming, woodland management, habitat conservation etc.) are finite. It may be better to target aspects where the benefits will be greatest rather than, in effect, delaying the inevitable for a few struggling species which seem unable to cope with the pace of change.



4 November 2017 - Ten Species Still On The Wing In The South

It often surprises me that a significant number of butterfly species (and not just hibernators) still manage to be on the wing weeks after the nominal end of their season. Just in Hampshire and Sussex, 10 species have been reported during the first days of November. These are: Red Admiral (by far the most numerous), Brimstone, Clouded Yellow, Speckled Wood, Small White, Holly Blue, Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell, Painted Lady and Comma. I have seen Red Admirals in my garden on most of the sunnier days. Whilst sightings of non-hibernators will gradually decrease to zero as year-end approaches, the mild autumns and winters are gradually blurring the season boundaries, with the implication that we can expect to see multiple species of hibernator during sunny days, from November through to March.

21 October 2017 - Flying Insects In Rapid Decline

We have known for years that many of our butterfly species are in serious decline, so it is not really surprising that flying insect populations overall have also suffered major losses in recent decades. This is the finding of a recent study in Germany which looked at the total biomass of flying insects (which includes bees and flies as well as butterflies and moths) and concluded that flying insects have declined by more than 75% in 30 years. Furthermore, the decline was seen regardless of habitat, weather and land use, including nature reserves. I would add that, whilst the study measured flying insects, it would be rather illogical if the situation for insects as a whole (including crawling insects) was not similar.

Whilst the study has not identified the specific causes of these declines, I would not be uncomfortable in postulating that evolving land use, changing land management practices (including use of pesticides) and climate change are at least somewhere in the mix. Indeed one of the researchers commented: 'In the modern agricultural landscape, for insects it's a hostile environment, it's a desert, if not worse'. I recall a blog entry on mine in November 2015 on another study which showed that a particular type of pesticide (neonicotinoids) is able to spread far beyond the local area of use, and is having a much wider impact on the environment than expected.

The consequences of large declines in insect populations will be far reaching. Insects are close to the lower end of the food chain and provide an important food source for birds, (hence their decline may not be unrelated?) and of course many insects, including butterflies, are pollinators, which are important to agriculture and food production for an ever increasing human population.

23 September 2017 - Break From Website Upgrade For Third Brood Wall

I am about half-way through the website upgrade (so on track for mid-October switch) and a well-deserved break saw me heading for the second year running to West Sussex, for a species which seems to be becoming ever more scarce in Hampshire – the Wall butterfly. My only serious attempt to find the species on home turf, so to speak, was in early August at Keyhaven, which drew a blank. The species is however, more than holding its own in Sussex, with its rich supply of downland.

My visit today was to the Lancing Ring Nature Reserve near Worthing. I thought it might be a little easier on the legs (now in their early sixties!) than my visit last year to Mill Hill last year and avoid an even longer journey to good sites in East Sussex. Using the Lancing Ring car park marked on the OS map (accessed via Mill Road), a first exploration of the eastern side of the reserve, as far as the dewpond, produced almost no butterflies at all (one Peacock) and certainly no Walls, so I decided to carry on walking up Steep Down (the hill overlooking Lancing Ring) which is also a known site for the species.

By the time I was passing the trig point marker at the top of Steep Down, I was beginning to have second thoughts about this outing being easier on the legs! However these were soon dispelled by the spectacular views, and a few minutes later by my first Wall sightings of the afternoon, in a meadow on the other side of the trig point. Two males were seen briefly with only one offering a fleeting photo opportunity.



Realising that searching for Walls in this exposed hillside environment was going to be hard work and having already wandered a long way, I decided to return to Lancing Ring, this time opting to divert prematurely from the main track to explore the western side of the reserve (and possibly beyond its western boundary). This actually proved to be a good decision, since an area containing a mixture of meadow, scrub and woodland with a maze of mown grassy tracks and conventional footpaths, produced 5 more Walls – all of which seemed to be males. Their condition ranged from very good to a little faded. Some were even jousting with Speckled Woods which were probably the closest match, but a poor second, to a female Wall. So that makes 7 third brood Wall in all – not a bad count! 4 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



3 September 2017 - September Can Be A Time Of Surprises

A quick survey of the regional butterfly blogs reminds me that, although the main butterfly season is very much on the wane, this time of year can throw up a few surprises. Sussex seems to be having more than its fair share at the moment, with several Queen of Spain Fritillaries reported, which are believed to be genuine migrants resulting from the fair weather earlier in the summer.

A few second brood Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries have also been on the wing at release sites there. This phenomenon is unlikely to have occurred in Hampshire however - apart from the species being scarce here, the Sussex colonies are from reared stock which probably emerged very early, hence providing the additional impetus for a partial second brood. Good news nevertheless.

As if that wasn't enough, third brood Wall have also been spotted in the same county, with the unusual, but not unprecedented occurrence of late second brood individuals mingling (and possibly mating) with third brood. This situation can happen when the emergence period is long and drawn out (which has happened for the second brood due to the unsettled August weather). As for Hampshire, I failed to find any Wall at Lymington during my visit in early August, so even a second brood sighting would be nice - although I know of one being recorded at Shipton Bellinger.

So, officially there are still 3 weeks of Summer remaining (until the equinox), although the meteorologists consider that Autumn has already begun. I think I'll stay with Summer in the hope that the season is prolonged a little longer!

24 August 2017 - Final OWH Visit Highlights Pause In Summer Emergence

Whilst the summer flight period commenced a couple of weeks early for many species, it seems this has not been the case at Old Winchester Hill. Whilst the site is well known for its later emergence, it would appear that Adonis Blue and Silver-spotted Skipper have probably emerged around their typical dates here. I put this down to the unsettled and cool August weather, which in effect put the emergence of those species on hold at this site.



My visit this afternoon, focussed on the south facing slope below the fort, produced at least 10 Adonis Blue (all quite fresh males) and 4 Silver-spotted Skippers. All the skippers were located on or close to the grassy path diagonally bisecting the slope, where the sward is shorter.

A bonus was a Clouded Yellow which, thankfully on this occasion, did stop to feed on the abundant nectar. Many of the other butterflies present are now fading, symptomatic of late summer, including Meadow Brown which was by far the commonest species.

I will follow up with a few more blog postings documenting some reflections on this unusual season, and may be tempted out again if we have some decent days in September. 3 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery, including the Clouded Yellow.



15 August 2017 - Male Adonis Provides Highlight On St Catherine's Hill

It might seem surprising that, although St Catherine's Hill near Winchester has been on my to-do list for a few years, I had never actually been there - until my mid-morning visit today. The reporting of Adonis Blue a few days ago acted as the catalyst. Not knowing the site, I concentrated on the south facing slope, which is the largest and most user friendly in terms of gradient, with fine views, not only of England's ancient capital but also towards the south coast.

There are still plenty of Chalkhill Blues flying all over the slope as well as Meadow Browns. Other species noted initially (in low numbers) were Brimstone, Common Blue, Small White, Brown Argus and Small Heath. Finally after some serious searching, my quarry appeared, as a male Adonis Blue stood out from the paler Chalkhills. Not absolutely fresh, but still plenty of iridescence on show as it flitted amongst the wild flowers, sometimes stopping to feed on its larval foodplant, Horseshoe Vetch.

Although I can only confirm the one sighting, there were a few fresh-looking female Chalkhill Blues, which of course look very similar to Adonis females, so a partner for the aforementioned male could not be ruled out. I returned via the easy route (the 'towpath' by the River Itchen) with my thoughts that St Catherine's Hill should become a more regular destination. 3 photos of Adonis Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



13 August 2017 - Brown Hairstreak Breeding In South Hampshire?

I have been made aware of 3 separate sightings of Brown Hairstreak in South Hampshire during the last week, two occurring in different gardens in Swanmore village (which could potentially be the same insect) and the other at the Swanwick Nature Reserve. Neither of these locations are within the natural dispersal range from the known Brown Hairstreak nucleus sites in Hampshire, namely in the Noar Hill/Selborne and Shipton Bellinger/Cholderton areas.

Whilst the release of captive bred specimens cannot be ruled out, I am more inclined to believe that these are natural occurrences. Firstly, I suspect that Brown Hairstreak, being an uncommon and elusive species anyway, is under-recorded in the county and secondly, there is habitat at or close to both locations which could support at least a transient small colony. Such habitat would contain a mixture of young/mature blackthorn, flowers providing a good nectar supply, nearby trees, such as Ash, and in a woodland edge/scrub setting with adjoining hedgerows to facilitate mobility.

I have not visited the Swanwick nature reserve for a few years, but I did visit Swanmore on Friday morning, soon after one of the sightings. Close to the location, there is a local nature reserve (called Marsh's Meadow) which meets the above habitat criteria. Indeed one of the blackthorn rich hedgerows bordering the meadow reminded me of the county boundary hedgerow at Shipton Bellinger, which is favoured by the species, albeit on a smaller scale. In the meadow itself there were Common Blues, Meadow Browns and Gatekeepers, and I understand also Large Skippers, Ringlets and Marbled Whites, indicating a healthy butterfly habitat.

The confirmation that Brown Hairstreaks are breeding in parts of Hampshire, outside their known nucleus areas, would indeed be good news in these challenging times for all our butterflies, and an excellent way to bring the curtain down on a difficult season. Hence please submit news of Brown Hairstreak sightings during what remains of their flight period, to the Hants & loW Branch website and follow up with one of the 3 methods to formally record sightings, described on their website.

10 August 2017 - Passing Clouded Yellow Provides Highlight During OWH Visit

It's still technically early August but the 2017 butterfly season is now clearly on the wane, with even the Silver-spotted Skipper and Brown Hairstreak flight periods already past their peak. That's not to say butterfly interest cannot keep going for a few more weeks. There are still plenty of summer species on the wing and a few second broods to maintain some interest.

I had hoped to find a few second brood Adonis Blue during my visit to Old Winchester Hill this morning (they are on the wing at Broughton Down) and meet up with a few Silver-spotted Skippers too. However, neither showed themselves during short explorations of both the car-park slope and the south field, below the fort. The highlight was a passing Clouded Yellow at the bottom of the car-park slope, although sadly this one wasn't stopping for photos, closely followed by a posing Painted Lady.



Whilst I expect the Adonis will appear in the next few days, albeit in small numbers, I do have serious concerns about the plight of Silver-spotted Skippers at this site (and to some extent in the county). The sward is generally too long for them, driven by the longer growing season and increased rainfall (climate change again!) which is not being compensated by fully effective grazing.

So whilst the site still looks, at a superficial level, to be good for butterflies with masses of wild flowers - and indeed the likes of Chalkhill Blue are doing well, the short sward specialists are struggling. I shall reflect more on points such as this during autumn blog entries. 2 photos of Chalkhill Blue and Painted Lady posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



4 August 2017 - Noar Hill Brown Hairstreak Luck Turns At Last!

Noar Hill has not been a particularly successful site for me of late, when it comes to Brown Hairstreak, with views usually confined to long range. I knew when setting out this morning that it would probably be my last visit to the reserve this season, so I was really hoping for a good outcome. Thankfully lady luck was on my side in more ways than one, as I chose, unusually, to access the reserve by the Charity Farm route. Just minutes after entering, I spotted my quarry - a Brown Hairstreak (and yes, in this case a female) feeding contentedly on Hemp Agrimony close to the stone circle.

Spotting this particular lady was slightly bizarre. There is a mass of Hemp Agrimony in this area and I tried to choose a spot providing a good vantage point to visually scan the flower heads for feeding hairstreaks, patch by patch. After one particular scan, I was left with a subliminal imprint of a feeding hairstreak. At first, I thought my imagination had got the better of me, and it was only after a few more seconds of carefully scouring the same area, that the feeding female was indeed spotted - and it was not my imagination!

Had I eventually reached this area after first exploring the other side of the reserve, as I usually do, I may have missed her amongst the mass of flower heads, or been too late. She stayed for around 20 minutes within the same small area in blustery, mainly cloudy conditions, before making a 10 yard flight over the bank, Try as I might I could not relocate her, so suspect she was en route into nearby trees. A few sunny intervals produced some brief open wing views.

A quick tour of other parts of the reserve produced no further hairstreaks, although other species seen included Brown Argus, Common Blue, a faded Silver-washed Fritillary and various Nymphalids - Peacock, Comma and Red Admiral in particular. 5 Brown Hairstreak photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



1 August 2017 - Grayling Doing OK But Fears For Keyhaven's 'Walls'

Attempting to see Grayling and Wall Brown on the same outing is a first for me, but with colonies of the former in the New Forest and the Lymington-Keyhaven Nature Reserve (for Wall) being a stone's throw from there, it is actually quite a logical choice. It was refreshing to be out in the New Forest during the morning: the light on a bright, early August morning seems somehow different. I had chosen Holmsley Ridge for Grayling which is one of their lesser known sites, but the butterflies did nevertheless oblige, even if not in great numbers. Around 6 Grayling were seen, seemingly all males, which suggests the season is still in its early days there. In the blustery conditions most of them, when disturbed, were landing amongst vegetation, but a few decent photo opportunities were presented and gratefully accepted.

I moved on to Keyhaven during late morning and walked the circuit from the main car-park, along the 'Ancient Highway' track to the end of Pennington Lane, then down to the sea-wall and back to Keyhaven, using the sheltered tracks by the lagoons where possible. I had hoped to see several second brood Wall butterflies along this route, but alas saw none. In fact there were surprisingly few butterflies about, save for Meadow Browns and Gatekeepers. Looking back at my diary, I saw Wall butterflies along the same stretch of sea-wall on 3 August last year, and this is an early year for most species.

Furthermore, they have been on the wing in neighbouring Sussex for almost a month, so it's almost inconceivable that they have not yet emerged at Keyhaven yet. I will refrain from saying much more at the moment, in case of a false alarm, but I have to admit to concerns for the survival of the species at its only long-standing Hampshire colony. Hopefully other visitors will report success in the next days, despite no reports this year of 1st brood Wall (from anywhere) on the Hampshire and IoW branch website. 3 photos of Grayling posted to Recent Photos Gallery.





30 July 2017 - Silver-Spotted Skipper Holding Its Own At Oxenbourne

I have visited Oxenbourne Down most years for Silver-spotted Skippers, being the closest location to me for this species. As an introduced (or re-introduced?) species to this site many years ago, there is always a risk that the butterfly fails to thrive, especially in these challenging times of climate change. Whilst the population in the small area they occupy is modest, the Silver-spotted Skipper at Oxenbourne is still holding its own, and the population seems reasonably stable.

An early afternoon visit today produced at least 6 Silver-spotted Skippers, varying from good to excellent condition, with the flight period still in its ascendancy. In the bright, but very blustery conditions, most were making only short darting flights and then resting on vegetation or stones with open wings. The majority were on the right hand side of the path, where the turf is shorter as one heads up the slope from the entrance. There are still good numbers of Chalkhills flying here - at least 30 including several females in various conditions. 4 photos of Silver-spotted Skipper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



25 July 2017 - Shipton Bellinger Delivers In Style After Slow Start

Following a couple of, let's say, not too successful trips recently, I was keen to make today's outing a success - a second 100-mile round-trip to Shipton Bellinger in search of Brown Hairstreak. In the end the site certainly delivered.

After travelling through significant cloud on the way there, which I had not been expecting, the site seemed very quiet on arrival at around 10am, with few butterflies of any description showing. However, as the sun soon began to win its battle against the cloud and dry the remaining dew, all was about to change. A check on several of the large Ash Trees around the site confirmed Brown Hairstreaks were already active, however it would be gone 11am when the first was spotted in the county boundary hedge nectaring on bramble.

Five more males were seen along the hedge, during the next hour or so, all nectaring contentedly or resting on foliage. One even provided a full open wing display. Some of the males had minor wing damage and one had suffered a bird strike to its tails, consistent with the season starting some days ago (first sighting I am aware of was exactly one week ago). After so many males, it would have been slightly disappointing not to find a female, and sure enough one appeared just as I was about to leave, in the hedge just on the other side of the tree gap from the main hedgerow. Even she had a minor nick on one forewing and sadly she didn't hang around for long. Nevertheless, a very successful outcome. 5 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



21 July 2017 - Poor Weather Saves Season From Premature Curtain Call!

This season, which began early and has enjoyed above average temperatures and lower than normal rainfall, was hurtling towards an early curtain call, perhaps with a few surprises regarding the emergence of additional, but small, late summer/autumn broods. The two remaining Hampshire species, Brown Hairstreak and Silver-spotted Skipper have confirmed sightings reported from more than one site, but the intervention of unsettled weather means their flight periods will only build quite slowly, so plenty of time remains between the squalls and showers to see them! The weather, in combination with other commitments, has also prevented me from any further outings this week.

Somewhat perversely, the return to more typical British summer weather should prolong the season. Downland sites in particular are completely awash with wild flowers at present, but the scene by the beginning of August could otherwise have been quite autumnal, with brown dead-heads dominating and most of the remaining butterflies having seen better days.

So make the most of the remaining month or so of the season - it has already given us plenty to reflect on, both positive and negative.

17 July 2017 - Shipton And Broughton Circuit

Following multiple reports from Sussex that both Brown Hairstreak and Silver-spotted Skipper are on the wing there and an unconfirmed report that Brown Hairstreaks have been seen at Noar Hill, I allowed my heart to rule my head this morning and set off for Shipton Bellinger. Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed the outing to two of my favourite sites in glorious sunshine, but did not manage to find any evidence that Brown Hairstreak are emerging in the so-called 'Roughs' at Shipton Bellinger nor Silver-spotted Skipper at Broughton Down.

At Shipton Bellinger, a couple of hours spent scouring the thick hedgerows and observation at several Ash trees favoured by Brown Hairstreaks did not yield any sign of this elusive little butterfly. Apart from that, everything seems ready for them, with other species making the most of the rich hedgerows, including fresh Red Admirals, Commas, Peacocks and even the odd Silver-washed Fritillary, as well as common hedgerow species.

At Broughton Down, there were at least a dozen Dark Green Fritillaries on the wing, including females in egg-laying mode, although I did not manage to catch any in the act and none were in good condition, as the end of their season nears. Despite abundant wild flowers, butterfly numbers were quite low. Smaller butterflies included Common Blue, Brown Argus and Small Skipper. There were only a few Chalkhill Blues, essentially confined to the lower slopes, and it is clear they have not really recovered from a very poor season there last year.

Two photos from Broughton Down of Comma and Common Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery. Any further outings this week will be confined to local sites.



13 July 2017 - Season Still Keeping Us Guessing On Emergence

Following an improvement in the weather from earlier in the week, I visited a couple of relatively local sites to check on the possible emergence of key species. I have not had great success at Noar Hill in recent years with Brown Hairstreak, but the large Beach tree beside the main entrance track, opposite the first entrance gate to the reserve, provides a reasonable indicator of whether they are on the wing. In bright but mainly overcast conditions, I watched it for 20 minutes or so this morning - but no sign of any hairstreak activity.

I then headed south to the coast, having decided to check out the heathland on Browdown North for Grayling activity. I was aware that Browdown South is closed today and would be out of bounds (although I am confident Grayling will be on the wing there having already been seen in the New Forest). However Browdown North is a later site and, guess what - no sign of Grayling today! So my SD card had to make do with a male and female Gatekeeper instead. There was actually very little butterfly activity despite brighter conditions, the most notable sighting being a Small Copper on the edge of the heath which flitted off without a photo record.

So this unusually early season is not only keeping us guessing on when species will emerge in our county, but where! Two photos of Gatekeeper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

10 July 2017 - Late In The Season Feel To The Pastures - But Some Surprises

I went for a late morning walk in Whiteley Pastures today, which will probably be my final woodland focussed visit of the season. It seems odd to be saying that when we are barely in mid-July, but with the flight periods of our most flamboyant woodland species now past their peak, woodlands are now taking on that 'late in the season' feel, with nectar supplies such as bramble dwindling and fresh specimens very much in the minority.

Having said that, this morning's walk was reasonably productive. OK so no Emperors seen today, but I did record 3 White Admirals which was more than I was expecting (albeit somewhat worn) and a decent number of Silver-washed Fritillaries spanning an almost full spectrum of conditions, from the odd fresh male to worn females.

I was surprised to obtain a photo of a Purple Hairstreak which had descended to the bough of an oak at head height and I spied a fresh Small Copper in the verge - I don't recall seeing this species here before. Numbers were made up from common species such as Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Gatekeeper and Small Skipper, a few Nymphalids such as Peacock and Red Admiral, as well as Whites, including Brimstone.

So as one phase of the season (the main woodland species) begins to wane, the next is about to start with the two remaining Hampshire species about to emerge - Silver-spotted Skipper and Brown Hairstreak - in fact they have already been seen in Sussex, about 10 days earlier than normal. 4 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.





7 July 2017 - Early Season In Focus Again As Small Blue Takes Wing On Portsdown

The summer brood of Small Blues are flying on Portsdown Hill! An early afternoon visit to the downland below the Paulsgrove Quarry produced 3 males, One was fresh but one looked as though it had been around for at least a couple of days. It once again brings into focus how early this season is, since I would not normally go looking for second brood Small Blue until 3rd or 4th week in July. Other species seen included 12 Chalkhill Blue, 5 Common Blue, 8 Marbled White and 3 Gatekeeper, as well numerous Meadow Browns and Small Skippers.

It would not surprise me now to see reports of Silver-spotted Skipper or even Brown Hairstreak in the next 7-10 days! 5 photos of Small Blue, Chalkhill Blue and Common Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



5 July 2017 - Dark Greens Supercharged, Chalkhills Just Out And Empress Keeps Her Distance

I made return visits to both Stockbridge Down and Farley Mount this morning to check how the season was moving on for some of their key species. Downland habitats seems to change so quickly in these days of climate change, with good spots one year being overgrown by tough shrubs the next. At Stockbridge Down, one favoured spot for Dark Green Fritillaries is replaced by a lesser one where thistles have grown up, but the weather was simply supercharging the half dozen or so that I saw (not a great count).

Dark Greens are also noticeably fading with some quite worn specimens. A pair however, did have a brief courtship on the ground with the male shimmering his wings at the female, however they went their separate ways soon after, still on speaking terms. As a bonus, a short exploration of the eastern end of the down produced my first Chalkhill Blue of the season (a male) - but not even he was stopping!

On Farley Mount, I found Dark Greens on the flowery meadow just north-west of the Folly (none here a couple of weeks ago) and also at the western end of Pitt Down, including the odd quite fresh male. Having followed it for a few minutes, and gathered a few less than close photos, it must have taken pity on me and landed on a knapweed head just inches in front of me - still I did manage a close up which is normally quite a challenge with this species.

My final stop was at West Wood, which is where I disturbed a male Emperor exactly two weeks ago to the day - a long time in this warm, dry season. So my visit was more in hope than expectation. My outward walk was not spectacular - a few Silver-washed Fritillaries enjoying the sunshine with common species. On the return, as I approached the exit however, I noticed movement above in the tree on the right, 20 yards from the gate. I looked up and what seemed like a huge butterfly was flying amongst the boughs, partially obscured from sight. From its size and wingshape, I was pretty sure it



was a Purple Emperor - well probably an Empress from its size. I did not see precisely where it landed and 5 minutes scouring with small binos failed to locate it.

In the end, I resorted to tossing a few small stones to try to disturb it and confirm identity. The third one hit near enough the spot and a large Purple Emperor (Empress almost certainly) took off up the track, then veered off to the right and out of sight. Inspection of the leaves show they are very willow-like but not sure what type of willow it is. 4 photos of Dark Green Fritillary posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



1 July 2017 - Not All Species Following Purple Emperor's Very Early Emergence

It is well known that a few species are emerging for their summer flight period extremely early, and it would be easy to assume that all species will do the same. However, whilst the Purple Emperor season this year broke records in terms of early emergence, some other species seem to be wisely exercising a little more caution.

One might expect that Grayling would have already emerged on early sites such as Browndown (S), where they have been recorded in June in hot years (and they have already been seen elsewhere in UK), however, at least as of yesterday, there was no sign of them. Chalkhill Blue could make an appearance in the first days of July, but my short visits to Portsdown Hill and Oxenbourne Down this afternoon, indicate they are still tucked up in the relative safety of their pupal casings. In very unusual seasons, such as this one, it does become quite difficult to predict when individual species are going to emerge, unless someone with a lot of time is tracking the early life stages (which is done for species like Purple Emperor), In any case, the uncertainty adds to the fun!

I am normally quite happy to recommend visits to particular sites, but I would definitely not recommend the other part of this afternoon's outing at this time of year - a walk along the full length of Wascombe Bottom near Oxenbourne Down. A few years ago I did see several Dark Green Fritillary and Silver-washed Fritillary there and wanted to check status again. The vegetation at this time of year is rank and almost impassable in places (evidenced also by disturbing a couple of deer resting in the undergrowth). Whilst there were many Marbled Whites, Small Skippers, Ringlets, Meadow Browns, the odd Red Admiral and Small Tortoiseshell as well as a good show of orchids on some slopes, I only saw one fritillary (a Silver-washed which did not land). So give this one a miss! No photos today - too busy grappling with the undergrowth!

28 June 2017 - Find Healthy Elms And You May Find White-Letters In Residence

I was recently made aware of another White-letter Hairstreak colony in SE Hampshire close to a busy road at which residence of the species has only been confirmed this year. Elms (both Wych and English) seem to be more widespread than most of us realise, with areas of SE Hants seeming to be particularly favoured, although sadly some trees are diseased. With a slight lull in the emergence of



new species, the next week or so is a good time to look for elms in different locations (including in semi-urban areas, near parks, playing fields, golf courses, overlooking small areas of waste ground etc) and check for the presence of White-letter Hairstreaks.

Just to whet the appetite, I post two photos of a male White-letter Hairstreak feeding on Creeping Thistle which I saw yesterday morning in SE Hants. (Please note that I have been requested to keep the location of this site confidential at present).



26 June 2017 - Fermyn Delivers What It Does Best (Emperors!)

In a decade or so of butterflying in Hampshire, I had never visited any location specifically for Purple Emperor outside the county (or straddling its borders). I set that record straight today by making the 300 mile round trip to the Fermyn Woods complex in Northants. It is one of the best places in the country to see Purple Emperor, although now challenged by Knepp Wildland in Sussex. I arrived a little later than I was expecting (10.30am) due to Monday morning traffic, arriving initially to sunny periods, the sunshine gradually becoming more hazy with dull patches by early afternoon.

Visitors were plenty (there must have been about 20 cars) but I had the option of accessing some of the furthest parts of the complex, having packed my folding bike. Most of the PE action was early on, with several hotspots noted around the complex, where there would be up to 3 males (but often only one) coming down to take minerals from the gravel track. In all I had around 8 groundings in two and a half hours. The light conditions were not at all optimum for showing the male iridescence, so on the photo front, the outcome could have been better. The Emperor season at Fermyn is now 10 days old and most of the males are less than pristine, some having nicks or scratches in their wings. I had hoped that one of the groundings was a female, but closer inspection of my photos indicate that all were males, despite the complete lack of 'blue' in some cases.

At lunchtime, as the sky became more overcast, Emperor activity subsided significantly, so my attention turned to some of the other residents - Silver-washed Fritillary (around 12 seen), White Admiral (4) and Commas (many scores - never seen so many!) . I was pleased to see several fresh Small Tortoiseshells too. So my first trip to Fermyn was certainly an enjoyable experience and I regret not having visited earlier. 6 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery (including Commas taking minerals, Small Tortoiseshell and Silver-washed Fritillary) as well as Emperors.

(Footnote: BBC Countryfile to be broadcast on July 9th includes 'The Emperors Breakfast' filmed at Fermyn last week).



22 June 17 - Habitat Management Challenges Very Evident On Pitt Down

I have been following reports of Dark Green Fritillary in our region since the first was reported way back on 2 June from Old Winchester Hill. Whilst this is very early, it is not totally inconsistent with the summer period being up to two weeks early for some species. So why have reports since (including a singleton seen by myself on Stockbridge Down last week) been so sporadic?

My visits to both Pitt Down and Stockbridge Down go some way towards explaining the reason. As a result most likely of climate change, the quality of habitat on downland sites can change dramatically from one season to the next, driven by rampant growth of grasses and invasive scrub, which can overwhelm the delicate biodiverse habitats needed by species like Dark Green Fritillary (and also many of the blues).

At Pitt Down, the eastern section of the down, having been in a reasonable state last year (with decent numbers of Dark Green Fritillary) seems now to have been temporarily deserted by the species, due to scrub invasion and almost complete lack of suitable nectar sources such as thistles. Thankfully Dark Greens are retaining a presence on the western section, which does not seem so badly affected. Whilst only around 4 were seen there yesterday, they spanned an age range from fresh to several days old, with one photographed having suffered a probable bird strike. It is clear that the robustness and aggressiveness of habitat management methods, such as grazing, need to be adapted to take into account climate change.

Finally for this post, my short excursion from the Purple Emperor location in West Wood yesterday, produced a couple of Silver-washed Fritillary sightings, one of which settled long enough for photos. 4 photos of Dark Green Fritillary and Silver-washed Fritillary posted to Recent Photos Gallery.





21 June 17 - Emperor Gives Second Chance After Disturbing Him In West Wood

For my last opportunity of an outing before the weekend, I decided an each way bet was probably appropriate, so set off on a mid-morning visit to Farley Mount Country Park. The park is blessed with both downland and woodland habitat in close proximity. Since there is quite a lot to post, I will focus on one specific event in this post and follow up with the rest tomorrow.

In West Wood, I intended to make my way to the 5 way junction, but that plan was speedily adapted as a result of an encounter with a male Purple Emperor! Yes, I managed to do my usual trick of disturbing one from the ground, just as I was turning left at the first junction from the main gravel path. Next thing I know, he is circling around me at head height before ascending into a nearby Ash tree to perch 15ft above ground. After waiting a few minutes, well out of its radar, I continued my journey to the 5 way junction, hoping the Emperor would return to feed on my return, making only a very short pause at the junction.

Thankfully on returning to the Ash tree about 15 minutes later, I was delighted that the Emperor was back down on the track, continuing his feed. He only showed momentary glimpses of purple as he occasionally flicked open his wings, and his sunny side was partially obstructed by grass. He did not move from this one resting place for 10 minutes - and even the placement of dog excrement gathered from down the track did not tempt him - indeed he seemed rather annoyed, taking off soon afterwards! 4 photos of the Emperor posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



20 June 2017 - Emperor Seen At Whiteley, Silver-Washed Still Going Crazy

I made my first short exploration of Whiteley Pastures during the middle of the morning, hoping for a glimpse (or more) of an Emperor. It was also an opportunity to cover a few more miles in the same time on two wheels rather than two feet (or rather the same miles more often). So out came the folding bike. So much more efficient for gravel tracks than walking, albeit with a few disadvantages too.

So now to the butterflies - I won't concentrate too much on the common species, save to say that the grassy margins and hedgerows were well stocked with Meadow Browns, Ringlets and Large Skippers. There were a few Marbled Whites too and just the odd Small Skipper, but I did not see any Gatekeepers.

White Admirals appeared quite regularly almost along the length to the cross tracks at Ridge Copse (7 seen) though usually out of comfortable camera range, Silver-washed Fritillaries were still going crazy in the building heat (12 seen) although between them, they only managed a couple of very brief landings, which at least was an improvement on Saturday's outing. If I been happy to instantly drop the bike, I might have managed at least an evidence shot.



As for Purple Emperor, well I didn't see any activity, however whilst riding slowly, I was not spending much time looking skywards. Another observer however, said PE activity had been seen high in trees by the main track earlier in the morning, so it looks as though they are starting to emerge here. 2 photos of White Admiral posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



18 June 17 - Browdown South Is Purple Again!

Yes, Purple Emperors are on the wing in Hampshire, however this blog relates to their very distant cousins, the Purple Hairstreak. Browdown South is almost unique in that it has a significant colony inhabiting scrub oak, which rarely grows above 15ft tall and hence makes the task of photographing them much easier - indeed they often perch at eye level or even lower.

An exploration of the scrub oak in this afternoon's sweltering heat confirmed that Purple Hairstreaks are again beginning to emerge. Only a few of the stunted trees at present have hairstreaks flying, including some which I had recorded last year as GPS locations, with 9 seen in all. These, mostly males, were being careful to occupy shaded oak leaves or hold their bodies aligned towards the sun to avoid overheating. No hairstreaks were found in the ground cover oak, which may occur later, as numbers build.

Since the area is close to the Grayling breeding area on this site, I took the opportunity to check if Grayling were starting to emerge in this early season, but none were seen. The season maybe early, but not that early! An area close to the shoreline has been cleared of scrub, slightly encroaching on their breeding area. 3 photos of Purple Hairstreak posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



17 June 2017 - High Summer Period Really Kicking Off

With the weather set fair (well actually sunny and hot!) for days, the butterfly season will soon reach its pinnacle, with only a small handful of late summer species, such as Brown Hairstreak, still to



emerge. My first woodland visit of high summer is often to my local patch, Whiteley Pastures, but that can wait a few days until there is the prospect of Purple Emperors there.

So I visited a different local wood for a change - more specifically part of the Southwick Estate. My mid-morning visit explored the criss-crossing public bridleways, focussing especially on the Portland Coppice area, which produced 7 sightings of Silver-washed Fritillary. None of them stopped for nectar and seemed only interested in searching for females, of which there were none. Perhaps even better, 4 White Admirals were also seen, some presenting reasonable photo opportunities. After a dismal season last year for this species, let's hope they have a better one this time.

If the hot, dry weather continues for days, we will need to be wary that the season could burn itself out quickly, as the summer species emerge almost en masse, and enjoy a shortened, but fulfilled flight period.

3 White Admiral photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



16 June 2017 - High Summer Butterfly Period About To Race Away?

I returned from a few days break to find that isolated sightings of several high-summer species (White Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary, Purple Hairstreak and indeed, Purple Emperor) have already been recorded from south-eastern counties, adding to Dark Green Fritillary reported last week from Hampshire. The appearance of Purple Emperor in Surrey on 11 June represents the earliest first sighting of this species for more than 100 years! This spurred me to get out this afternoon to at least see if I could progress my own high summer checklist, fearing the season could be about to run away with me trailing in its wake!

I made short stops at both Pitt Down and Stockbridge Down, with Dark Green Fritillary being the target. At the end however, my anticipation was slightly misplaced. I did in fact see one Dark Green Fritillary on Stockbridge Down, but I didn't even manage to get within 30 yards of it! There seems to be somewhat of a shortage of thistles at both of these sites this year, which are a favourite nectar source for these fast flyers, so photography will be even more challenging than usual.

Whilst at Stockbridge Down, I visited the location of the White-letter Hairstreak colony, but was disappointed to find that several of the elms seem to be diseased, with some leaves shrivelling and the canopy thinning out. I did not see any White-letters either, although I suspect they are not yet emerging at all sites, and that might be the least of this colonies' problems.

So not quite the outcome I had expected, but at least it means panic over, and maybe I can take the high summer period at a slightly more leisurely pace after all.



12 June 2017 - White-Letter Hairstreak And Marbled White Take Wing At Cosham

The path along the northern perimeter at North Harbour, in Cosham, is a useful indicator of the progress of the season (as well as being conveniently close). It seemed the perfect destination for a short mid-afternoon visit, once the skies started to brighten.

The path beside the row of Elms is becoming very overgrown, making views of the elm canopy difficult, however a few minutes gaining a crick neck produced several sightings of White-letter Hairstreaks in one section of canopy, mainly pairs of males engaged in sporadic aerial battles. Whilst there was no chance of a decent photo (only a distant silhouette and antenna), I noted that a few yards further on there is a reasonable amount of privet in flower, which may tempt the odd hairstreak down in a few days.

As if to emphasise the early season, even further on in the meadow area, the site produced another season first - a pristine Marbled White, as well as several Common Blues, Meadow Browns and a patrolling Comma. 4 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



9 June 2017 - Bramshott's Thriving Colony Of Silver-Studded Blue

It's always nice to see a familiar species doing well in a different habitat to the usual one. That certainly applies to the colony of Silver-studded Blue on Bramshott Common, near Liphook, which I visited this afternoon. The habitat occupied here by this heathland loving species, is best described as a grassy meadow with small flowers (including bird's foot trefoil), patches of scrub, bracken, gorse, and occasional trees. The fact that there is a thriving colony of Silver-studded Blue here at all seems even more surprising, when there is an abundance of conventional heathery heathland just a stone's-throw away, covering large areas of the common! To add to the oddity, this colony always emerges early (late May is not unusual) and is likely to be the first colony to emerge in Hampshire.

I was beginning to think I had made a mistake in visiting today, passing under shower laden cloud for much of the journey north, but the air on arrival was quite balmy and the sun poked through at times. Make no mistake, this colony of Silver-studded Blue is thriving, despite its modest area, with numbers easily in the several scores. Males far outnumbered females and were in various conditions from fresh to slightly fading (and it's still early June!). The few females were all in good but not pristine condition and I suspect their egg-laying chores are already well underway.

Since sunshine was at a relative premium, the butterflies were spending a significant proportion of their time at rest, quite often with open wings. There were a number of occasions when there were several of them at rest within a few feet of each other - a scenario which I tried to capture on one of the photos posted (thumbnail below) where there are 5 males in the frame! 4 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



8 June 2017 - An Early Summer Flight Season Beckons

A quick trawl of the butterfly blogs and news pages suggests that an early flight season for our summer species does indeed beckon. The 2017 flight season as a whole did experience somewhat of a correction from its very early start, as a result of cool weather during the first half of May, however appearances during the last few days of Dark Green Fritillary (in Hants and Dorset), Silver-washed Fritillary (in Sussex and Herts), White-letter Hairstreak (in Essex and Kent) and Silver-studded Blue (Hants, Sussex and N Wales) indicate summer flight periods are starting earlier than normal.

As a result of another cool and damp week, it will be a few more days at least before numbers of summer butterflies really start to take off in Hampshire. Thus there is a window of opportunity for those interested, to travel further afield for species not found within the county. Swallowtail, Heath Fritillary, Large Blue, Black Hairstreak, Lulworth Skipper, Large Heath and Mountain Ringlet have all been reported as being on the wing.

1 June 2017 - Eastern Clearing Losing Its Frit Appeal?

I made my final visit of the season this afternoon to the Eastern Clearing and surrounding area in Bentley Wood, during what should be the peak of the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary flight period. I did manage a few photos today with the help of broken cloud, which made the butterflies slightly less active, but butterfly counts of key species were poor, despite almost perfect flight conditions. Around 7 Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries (in good condition) were seen in the clearing and in areas just to the north, along with 2 fading Pearl-bordered Fritillaries.

Extensive fencing has been erected to the north of the clearing, presumably in preparation for the introduction of grazing. Urgent action is indeed needed if we are not to lose the Small Pearls from what is now considered the only remaining colony in Hampshire. It was clear from their behaviour today that the clearing and surrounding area is no longer acting as the breeding focus that it previously provided, with insufficient nectar supply in particular. The butterflies are spending much of their time on the wing wearing themselves out, searching for a mate and food, both of which were in short supply. Today they were feeding on a limited supply of Ragged Robin and Wood Spurge. One specific observation was a Small Pearl weaving between and even above young Birch trees for what seemed like a long time (tens of seconds), trying to find more suitable habitat and wasting precious energy.

One could say that the area is now just too green (with few flowers) and becoming overgrown. It is hoped grazing will be beneficial, however, as climate change is affecting the balance of whole ecosystems, due to higher temperatures, higher rainfall and more frequent extreme weather events, fully returning the clearing to its former glory will be a tall order indeed, and perhaps an unattainable one. To some extent the same applies to Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, although their situation in Hampshire is not so perilous at the moment. 4 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



25 May 2017 - Small Pearls Stage Mini Revival In Bentley

After a very poor year last year, which saw just one record of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary from the New Forest and only total of 21 individuals (for which records were submitted) from Hampshire, a late-morning visit to the Eastern Clearing in Bentley Wood was encouraging.

Whilst I recorded 12 sightings of the species in 45 minutes, (unfortunately all on the wing in the warm continuous sunshine), my estimate is that there were around 6 or 7 individuals present, in addition to a few fading Pearl-bordered Fritillaries. A check in the log book indicated that more than 15 Small Pearls were recorded by an observer yesterday, which, if these do not include double counts, would be very respectable. Nevertheless I am inclined to stand by my estimate from today!

In addition to the warm sunshine making the butterflies very active, there is very little nectar on offer to tempt them to feed, with the modest quantity of Bugle now almost over. As a result, I am not able to post any photos today, which for me is always a bit of a disappointment, but happens occasionally!

22 May 2017 - Mating Adonis On OWH And Small Blue Doing Well On Portsdown

It's good to be able to report some encouraging news, as many of our butterflies face an uncertain future. The efforts by English Nature to re-establish Adonis Blue to Old Winchester Hill has had its ups and downs, but today's evidence, based on an exploration of the car park slope, suggests we are on an 'up' at present. 4 males and 1 female were seen on the lower slope, including a mating pair, hopefully at least securing the summer brood. There has been much scrub clearance undertaken during the winter months in this area, which should favour the short sward loving Adonis and some other species, such as Silver-spotted Skipper. As a bonus, I also saw a couple of Grizzled Skippers and a Dingy Skipper in this area, which I have not seen there for a while. A few Common Blue and Small Heath were also recorded.

As if that wasn't enough, I made a stop at the Paulsgrove Quarry area of Portsdown Hill on the way home. Small Blues were distributed in low density with a few hotspots over the western section of the slope from the quarry - probably close to 20 seen, although some are now fading. Other reports indicate there are several colonies on the hill (e.g. north of Meadowsweet Way), and the Paulsgrove Quarry colony may not be the largest. 4 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



18 May 2017 - Fresh Dukes And Marsh Fritillary In Wiltshire Wood

Following a mid-morning circuit of the Eastern Clearing to see if Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries have made an appearance, I visited two further woodland clearings, both in Wiltshire, before the showers threatened. On the first point, it seems Small Pearls have not yet appeared in Bentley, but I did record 8 Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, including a couple of fresh ones. Barnridge Copse, on the Wiltshire side of Bentley Wood, used to have a modest colony of Marsh Fritillary, however the colony was lucky to survive the 2012 flight period wash-out and now seems to have succumbed, with none seen last year and none in evidence today.

It seems we all are just having to get used to seeing many species in small or very small numbers (even singletons). However, my next destination of Hound Wood was enjoyable nevertheless. Woodland Duke Of Burgundy, Grizzled Skipper and Marsh Fritillary colonies are few and far between nowadays, so seeing them together in a woodland setting is still quite special, and turns the spring calendar back as much as two weeks, compared to their downland brethren.

I saw 4 Dukes in one small section of the clearing in Hound Wood, including a fresh male. The site does have all their needed ingredients, including plentiful primrose, young trees/shrubs for cover, as well as nectar. The needs of Marsh Fritillary also seem well served, with Devil's Bit Scabious in abundance and a decent supply of Bugle for nectar. Last but not least, plenty of Tormentil for Grizzled Skipper. Indeed it's surprising that neither Grizzled nor Marsh Fritillaries can be said to be thriving here - just one of each seen during my short visit, although I suspect there were others, and it is possible that the Marsh Fritillaries are just beginning to emerge in this woodland setting.

Four photos of Marsh Fritillary, Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Grizzled Skipper and Duke Of Burgundy posted to Recent Photos Gallery.





13 May 2017 - Fresh Marsh Frits and Adonis Showcase Martin Down

Martin Down is undoubtedly one of my favourite butterfly sites, but it's quite a long drive and I don't manage to get there every year. If you are going to visit Martin Down, this is probably the best time to visit - when the vegetation is at its spring best and both Marsh Fritillary and Adonis Blue are emerging, with most of the other spring species still on the wing. For my visit this afternoon, conditions weren't ideal with more cloud than blue sky and a stiff breeze, but certainly usable.

Most species were seen in or near to the Bokerley Ditch and the best section of it for butterflies runs south-east for about a mile from the firing range 'ramparts'. Today around 14 Marsh Fritillaries (mostly male) were seen in discrete locations along this stretch, along with 7 Adonis Blue (all male) and many other small butterflies (Small Blue, Brown Argus, Dingy Skipper, Common Blue). I even managed 3 Green Hairstreaks, including 2 males doing battle around Hawthorn just south of the firing range.

Earlier in the week, I understand a freshly emerged female Duke Of Burgundy was seen in the Bokerley Ditch and whilst this area is not normally associated with this species, it would seem to have all the needed ingredients. 5 photos of Marsh Fritillary, Adonis Blue and Brown Argus posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



10 May 2017 - Pearls And Dukes In Central Hants

I took the opportunity today to visit 3 lesser known locations in central Hampshire where either Pearl-bordered Fritillary and/or Duke Of Burgundy can be found. Having already encountered both of these species at some of their better known sites, today's outing was somewhat of a luxury, but an enjoyable one. Nevertheless I was reminded that success is far from guaranteed when visiting lesser known sites.

The first port of call was a small woodland clearing in the Test Valley where both Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Duke of Burgundy are recorded in most years, albeit in modest numbers (well that seems to apply to pretty much anywhere now!). I am not fully sure of the access permissions for this site, so I will refrain from publishing the location here, however I can be contacted via my contact page.

My first circuit produced a male Duke (slightly faded), a Common Blue and several common species (Brimstone, Peacock, Orange Tip and GV White). I was just beginning to consider that my visit might not produce any Pearls, when one flew past! Others began to appear as the temperature warmed and my estimate was that 5 of 6 Pearl-bordered Fritillaries were present, including at least two fresh females. Two more Dukes were recorded subsequently, including a fresh male.

Then it was off to Bradley Wood near Whitchurch. This lovely wood had a small colony of primrose feeding Dukes (and also Grizzled Skippers) which I had recorded on my previous visit in 2011 (doesn't time fly!). Today's outcome was disappointing - a search of the track margins at the southern end of the wood produced only common species, including Orange Tips. It is possible that Dukes (if



they are still there) are at an early stage of emergence, so if anyone succeeds later where I failed today, I would be interested to know.

My final call was Deacon Hill near Winchester and another colony of Dukes at the bottom of the steep escarpment. This was quite an unusual encounter, having negotiated my way through the scrub to the bottom, I had counted five Dukes within the first few minutes and hence was hoping for a bumper count. In fact only two more were seen, so suspect that my arrival had widely dispersed those in the area. The Dukes here were generally less fresh than at the Test Valley site, but this is of course a north-facing downland site. Thankfully I found an easier way up a chalk track to exit the site. Five photos of Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Duke Of Burgundy and Common Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



6 May 2017 - Small Blue On The Wing At MHD

I spent a pleasant hour on Magdalen Hill Down this morning, with a good variety of species seen, albeit in modest numbers. My first port of call was the chalk pit at the top of the down to see if Small Blue had emerged yet. They had but only one seen (Kidney Vetch used to be abundant here but no longer it seems).

The next location was by far the most productive for butterflies - a large patch of Garlic Mustard which is in flower at the SW corner of the extension. It almost goes without saying that there were plenty of Orange Tips here, including courting couples, but I was not perhaps expecting to find two more Small Blues, a Dingy Skipper and three Green Hairstreaks, all flitting around amongst the Garlic Mustard. Two Holly Blues were also seen in this area.

An excursion along the scrubby lower slopes of the original reserve produced another season first - two Brown Argus, although neither wanted to hang around for more than a cursory photo. Two more Dingy Skippers (a species I have not seen often on MHD), another Green Hairstreak and common species, such as Brimstone were added to my list for this short, but enjoyable outing. 6 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



2 May 2017 - Pearl Count Well Below Par At Bentley

In broken cloud, I made a couple of lunchtime circuits of the Eastern Clearing in Bentley Wood today, with a foray into the cleared area just to the north of the main clearing. Whilst not unexpected from other reports I had heard, the count of Pearl-bordered Fritillaries was rather disappointing at a meagre five. Still this was better than most counts recorded in the visitor book (typically two's!) with the first sighting way back on 23 April. However, another observer I was speaking to had seen around 7-8 during the late morning, mainly at the bottom end of the clearing, including a mating pair.

Whilst the conservators have been doing significant clearance work around the clearing, the clearing itself is gradually becoming overgrown, with stands of hazel being a particular problem. Before saying more on the subject, the Pearl season is still in its early days relatively, so I will wait to see if the its fortunes here improve over the next couple of weeks.

On the way home, but by now with cloud increasing, I called in at Stephen's Castle Down. Again significant clearance work has been performed during the winter, but in terms of butterfly count, the outcome here was also disappointing. Just one key species was seen - a Dingy Skipper, albeit looking very fresh. No Dukes, Grizzled Skipper or Green Hairstreak recorded during my short visit (although parts of the site do look quite reasonable for all of these species). 3 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



29 April 2017 - Pearls Begin New Forest Emergence

Following an easing of the cool weather over the last few days, and being aware that the first Pearl-bordered Fritillaries have been on the wing in Sussex for a few days, I decided to check on progress at two New Forest inclosures - firstly Parkhill and then New Copse. At Parkhill, suitable habitat in what used to be a large clearing, is now largely confined to its edges and the bisecting track, as the plantation of young conifers matures, crowding out the ground flora. Nevertheless the visit, in



prolonged, if not exactly warm sunny spells, confirmed Pearl-bordered are on the wing there, with 3 very active fresh males seen. I only managed a few evidence shots, since with time at a premium, I wanted to move on to New Copse.

Previous experiences have indicated that the small colony of Pearl-bordered Fritillary in New Copse tend to emerge slightly earlier than in Parkhill, so I was expecting to record at least as many there. Instead, the visit to New Copse produced no sightings, despite some sunshine. I can hopefully conclude that I was just a day or two early rather than anything more serious (you can never be sure these days!).

It seems clear that in Hampshire, the Pearl season is very much in its infancy and for those planning outings, it might be worth holding off for a few days or at least until Bank Holiday Monday. 2 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



22 April 2017 - Duke Aberration At Oxenbourne But Butterfly Numbers Disappointing

Noting that the weather is going to return to winter temperatures soon, I made the expedition to the far end of Oxenbourne Down (high level part) this afternoon. There was plenty of sunshine and conditions were pleasant enough. As on my visit to a different area of the Butser complex during the week, the first species seen of note was a Green Hairstreak, in Hawthorn to the right of the path. It did not stay around for a photo but not to worry I thought - there will be others.

In fact sightings after that were disappointingly sparse, with the habitat here seeming to deteriorate each year. Tall gorse bushes are becoming too dominant, leaving only a few 'islands' of reasonably open scrub habitat. The Dukes are surviving, but only two males seen, including one aberration, with the yellow/gold in the chequer-board pattern on the left forewing fading to cream, at the outer edge (see below).

Most species I expected to see were recorded, including Dingy Skipper (2) Grizzled Skipper (1) and the Green Hairstreak (only the one seen) although species of the wider countryside were passing through, including Brimstones and Orange Tips as well as a Holly Blue and a Small Tortoiseshell. Four photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



18 April 2017 - Duke And Dingy Show Up In Rake Bottom To Complete Full House

I had debated whether to visit Magdalen Hill Down or Butser Hill (Rake Bottom) this afternoon, taking into account the cool weather and its effect on slowing up the spring emergence. I am very pleased I chose the latter, since the outcome could hardly have been better. I have visited Rake Bottom at this time of year when it has been cold and windy (wishing I had stayed at home), but today, with decent spells of sunshine, the butterflies were flying despite maximum temperatures of about 13 degrees.

I almost knew it was going to be a productive visit, when the first butterfly disturbed from the scrub close to the valley floor was a Green Hairstreak, fortunately landing again closeby, followed by Grizzled Skippers (plenty of them - 14 in all)). A little further on it was a Dingy Skipper's turn to put in an appearance, the first of 5 seen and all very fresh.

I was thinking that the only other key species which I could encounter along here would be a Duke Of Burgundy, but they tend to emerge earliest in Rake Bottom a little lower down the valley, nearer the entrance gate (and I had not met any on the way in). As I returned to the entrance gate, listening to the almost constant piping of a cuckoo, I made a short climb up the slope from the entrance gate and waited in the sunshine for a few minutes, just above the scrub line.

The wait was rewarded as a small brown and gold butterfly made an appearance, flitting from perch to perch amongst the low vegetation. It was a fresh male Duke of Burgundy - and my full house of the early spring scrub species for this site was complete. It was a satisfying walk back the car, with butterfly interest maintained by a couple of male Orange Tips foraging along the luxuriant verge. 6 photos of Green Hairstreak, Duke Of Burgundy, Dingy Skipper and Grizzled Skipper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.





15 April 2017 - Chill Wind Ensures Quiet Walk On Stephens's Castle Down

This afternoon I made the first of what I hope will be multiple spring visits to Stephen's Castle Down. Being east facing, this is not an early site for butterflies and the largely cloudy morning accompanied by a chilly northerly breeze ensured expectations were low. Just as well, since I did not find any key species on the wing during a 1 hour visit (there are small colonies of Duke of Burgundy, Grizzled Skipper, Dingy Skipper and Green Hairstreak here).

A substantial area of scrub in the area opposite the farm has been cleared and there are several areas where the habitat looks particularly good for Grizzled Skipper - a species that certainly needs all the help it can get, having endured its worst year on record last year at UK level. There were however, a few Orange Tips, Brimstones, Peacocks, Commas and other "whites" on the wing to brighten the walk, a male and female Orange Tip even obliging for the odd photo.

So all in all not too disappointing, and I will return, hopefully with greater key species success during the coming month. 2 photos of Orange Tip posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



14 April 2017 - Butterflies Failing To Cope With Climate Change

UK butterflies suffered their fourth worst year on record in 2016. The annual UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (UKBMS) led by Butterfly Conservation, the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (CEH), British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) revealed that some 40 of the 57 species studied recorded a decline compared with 2015.

The study also showed that 5 species found in Hampshire (Grizzled Skipper, Wall, Grayling, White-letter Hairstreak and White Admiral) recorded their worst ever year in 2016, whilst the Heath Fritillary has now recorded two consecutive worst ever years, raising fears about its long term survival in the UK.

A few species bucked the trend to record a good year. These included the Large Blue which recorded its second best year on record with numbers up 38% on 2015, whilst the widespread and migratory Red Admiral recorded a rise of 86% compared to 2015.

Professor Tom Brereton, Head of Monitoring at Butterfly Conservation, said: "Worryingly, not even the pleasant summer weather of 2016 was enough to help butterflies bounce back from a run of poor years. "The results show that butterflies are failing to cope with our changing climate and how we manage the environment." Dr Marc Botham, Butterfly Ecologist at the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, said: "The weather at critical times of species development can cause dramatic changes in population numbers in the short term. What is of greatest concern is the regularity with which these short-term changes in recent years are negative, resulting in significant long-term declines for many species."



Thankfully, the 2017 season has commenced quite promisingly, and the winter was largely free from significant weather events and extremes. It is very early days yet of course, so we can only hope the promising start continues.

9 April 2017 - Soaring Temperatures Bring Out Noar's Dukes

Early April (as technically it still is) rarely sees me going off to Noar Hill to find Dukes, but news of the first one yesterday, convinced me to make a short visit this afternoon. My journey up the Meon Valley only served to emphasise the very early arrival of spring this year, with the yellow blooms of oilseed rape swaying in the breeze - a sight normally associated with late April.

At Noar Hill, in beautiful warm sunshine, it was not long before I saw my first Duke - the first of 4 males, all in the central area chalk pits. Despite that, other butterfly pickings weren't particularly rich. A Green Hairstreak had also been seen there yesterday, but so much scrub clearance has been done during the winter, that finding them here this season (often around Juniper) is going to be pot luck, and mine was out today on that front.

A few Orange Tips, Holly Blues, Speckled Woods, Brimstones and other hibernators including Comma completed the species seen - and my first enjoyable visit of the year to this iconic butterfly site.

Temperatures are expected to fall significantly for the week ahead, and maybe it's just as well, to avoid the butterfly season burning itself out too quickly. 3 photos of Duke Of Burgundy posted to recent Photos Gallery.



2 April 2017 - Spring Butterflies Out In Force On Portsdown

A late afternoon walk along one of my favourite springtime routes on the lower slopes of Portsdown Hill was more reminiscent of mid-April, with the young green growth of spring well advanced, blackthorn in full bloom and clumps of bluebells not far from flowering. The butterflies too were out in force enjoying the spring sunshine. I was hoping to see my first Orange Tip of the season but was not expecting to record half a dozen of them, all males! As the sun hid behind cloud for a couple of minutes, one did settle on blackthorn for a few closed wing photos.

Peacocks were the most numerous species, seemingly every twenty yards or so there was one zipping around, often settling on the path to bask. Male Brimstones were patrolling, investigating anything that vaguely resembled a female and there was a sprinkling of Commas, Speckled Woods and the odd 'white' to complete the afternoon's butterfly list. So, whilst my species count was somewhat short of double figures, it was a definitely a successful and enjoyable first outing of the season. 5 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



31 March 2017 - Butterfly Sightings Increase As Spring Weather Arrives

It seems that the last week has seen a substantial increase in sightings of both hibernators and emerged species in both Hampshire and neighbouring counties. Orange-Tip sightings in particular are encouraging, with several reports on multiple sightings, suggesting their season is quickly gathering pace following a poor showing last year. Holly Blue and Speckled Wood are also reported quite regularly.

A visit to a decent woodland and a decent downland site (or somewhere like Noar Hill which has a mosaic of habitats) in early April, should deliver most of the species around at the moment, perhaps with a combined total close to double figures (i.e. most if not all of Brimstone, Red Admiral, Peacock, Comma, Small Tortoiseshell, Speckled Wood, Holly Blue, Orange Tip and at least one other 'white' species).

My expectation is that they will be joined within a couple of weeks by the first sightings of Grizzled Skipper, Green Hairstreak and Duke of Burgundy at their earliest sites.

18 March 2017 - First Emerged Species Flying In Hampshire

It is now less than month until the 2017 butterfly season really kicks off. The milder weather is already encouraging more frequent sightings of hibernators from around the county (Red Admiral, Brimstone, Peacock, Comma, Painted Lady and particularly pleasing numbers of Small Tortoiseshell). Perhaps even more notably, the last week has seen the emergence of the first non-hibernators, with multiple sightings of Small White and a single Holly Blue.

Whilst we have not really experienced any meaningful snow in the county (not unusual), the winter at least has not been especially wet or mild (which is good news for several species), so I'm hoping for at least an average start to the spring butterfly period. Only time will tell!

18 February 2017 - Cold Loving Species Being Badly Affected By Habitat Loss And Climate Change

A new study conducted in collaboration with Reading University, shows for the first time how land management methods, combined with the effects of climate change, is driving the loss of species from local areas.

Furthermore, species which are associated with colder climates such the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary as well as Grizzled Skipper and Northern Brown Argus are being impacted more severely, as they have difficulty coping with rising temperatures. The situation is even worse in areas with intensively managed grasslands and large arable areas. One explanation is that more intensive land use means fewer resources and micro-climates remain, which are important to allow species to persist in unfavourable climate conditions.



The research goes some way to explaining the decline of the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary in Hampshire, which has all but disappeared from the New Forest and is in serious decline at its only remaining county foothold in Bentley Wood.

(PS on a happier note, I recorded my first Red Admiral of the year this morning, doing a few circuits of the garden - spring is on the way!)



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary Is Being Badly Affected By Habitat Loss And Climate Change

4 February 2017 - Extreme Weather Linked To Record Low In Butterfly Populations

During the post-Christmas period, I have been reviewing the findings of recent studies on the effects of climate change and habitat loss on our butterflies. Although they don't make for joyful reading, research is beginning to provide a better insight into the alarming reductions in butterfly populations. This is the first of probably a couple of blog entries on these studies and relates to the impact of extreme climatic events.

A recent study published in the Journal of Animal Ecology has confirmed the importance of extreme climatic events in determining changes in the populations of 41 resident UK butterfly species. The study investigated the sensitivity of butterflies to four extremes (drought, extreme precipitation, extreme heat and extreme cold) across each species' life stages.

The study has demonstrated previously unknown sensitivities of our UK butterflies to extreme climatic events, which are becoming more frequent with climate change. It found that rainfall level during the cocoon life stage of butterflies adversely affected more than a quarter of butterfly species in the UK. However, the greatest harm was caused by excessive warmth during the "over-wintering" life stage, which had an impact on more than half the species. On the other hand, hot weather was found to benefit heat-loving adult butterflies, leading to a positive population change in more than a third of species. Nevertheless, on balance, the harmful effects of extreme climatic events outweighed the benefits.

Taking into account future projections of warmer, wetter winters and more severe weather events, our butterflies could come under even more pressure given the findings of this study.

5 January 2017 - Be On The Lookout for Chalara In Hampshire

As we enter a new year, I am reminded of the significant threat posed to our countryside and woodlands in particular, by Chalara. In case you have not come across the term, Chalara is the scientific name for Ash Dieback, a fungal disease of Ash Trees, first reported in the UK from Eastern England in 2012. Sadly, the disease seems to be gaining a foothold and has already spread to Hampshire (since 2014), and is gradually spreading northwards and westwards across the UK.



Whilst no butterflies are completely dependent on Ash (although a favourite of the Brown Hairstreak), Ash is such a common tree that any large-scale loss through disease, would have a very significant impact, not only visually but on the balance and health of our countryside and its wildlife.

It is important that the progress of the disease is monitored and butterfly observers can play a part by reporting suspected cases to the Forestry Commission. You can find more information about Chalara, the threat it poses, how to recognise it (even in winter) and report suspected cases via the Forestry Commission website.