



## 2020 Butterfly Blog

### **12 November 2020 - Memorable Moments: A Little Give And Take And Everyone Wins!**

This will be the final instalment of memorable moments and does depart from the previous ones, since the events occurred before this website began its life. Nevertheless, it is relevant because such moments were instrumental in the creation of the website. The year was 2004 and my boyhood interest in butterflies was just being rekindled, finding myself with more time on my hands as our adult children were 'flying the nest', so to speak. Work demands however, were certainly not reducing, requiring frequent travels both in UK and abroad. At this time in early July 2004, I had not yet seen a Purple Emperor, but was hoping to do so soon.

On this particular day as I arrived at work, I was asked by my line manager if I would be prepared to go to the British National Space Centre in central London, and make a short presentation around mid-afternoon. Starting the presentation preparation immediately, I had basically finished it a couple of hours later. My planned tasks for that day had essentially gone out of the window, but I managed to do a couple of the most urgent ones in the next hour or so. It was also becoming clear that this could be a long day, since I wouldn't be 'done' in central London until late afternoon and I certainly wouldn't be home for tea with the 6 o'clock news as the usual backdrop - more like 8pm if I was lucky!

So what better, as partial compensation, than to take a nice long lunch break on a fine day, relaxing in a local woodland before travelling to London? I might even be able to do some presentation rehearsal in my head, away from the hustle and bustle of the office? Well the woodland wasn't actually that local (Bentley Wood) and it transpired that any so called 'rehearsal' would have to be done on the train! I did have a great lunch break however, witnessing my first ever Purple Emperor from Bentley Wood car park, as a fresh male performed a couple of circuits, coming down to head height, then briefly landing on a car tyre. Seeing its effortless flight and glimpses of that unmistakable bluish purple sheen for the first time was a special moment.

This first emperor encounter only whetted my appetite for more, next time hopefully with some photos, bearing in mind on this occasion, I didn't even have a camera with me. So I set off for Southampton Parkway to catch the train to London for the second part of my day's work, all the more invigorated by the experience and having flashbacks of that emperor as I gave my presentation! So you see everyone was a winner here, thanks to a little give and take!

*Footnote: this will be my final butterfly related blog entry for the season, as my attention turns to handing on this website to a successor. Future blog entries this year will focus on handover progress (including at least one later this month) but will not be included in the downloadable PDF version of the blog.*



*Male Purple Emperor enjoying a favourite snack in Bentley Wood!*

## **5 November 2020 - Memorable Moments: Dedication To The Cause Or Plain Stupidity?**

In this second instalment of memorable moments, I highlight something that many butterfly enthusiasts have done at some time or other in pursuit of their hobby, namely to undertake what are, on the face of it, ridiculous journeys!

I was particularly guilty in my early days running this website with a few expeditions which I would never seriously contemplate now. Probably the most outrageous was a visit to Arnside Knott in Cumbria back in July 2005. Travelling almost 300 miles to Cumbria overland from south Hampshire would be considered enough travelling in one day for most, but to do it there and back on the same day - well that's something else! The journey was made by train starting from Southampton Parkway to Arnside and involved two changes each way including Birmingham. It was indeed a marathon day of around 18 hours in total, commencing before 5am, but still allowed more than 4 hours on site at Arnside Knott (which is only about 1 mile from the station).

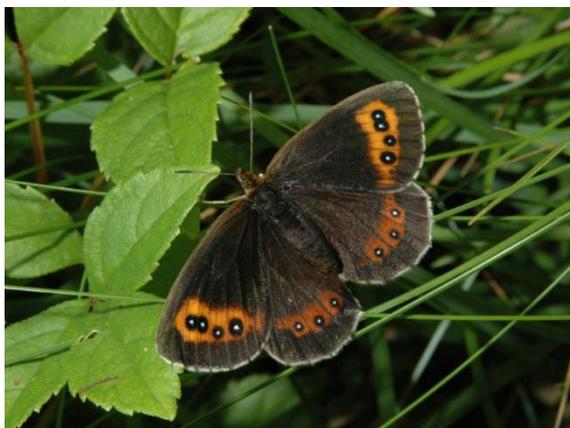
The main target species was Scotch Argus, a species which I had never seen before - but happily there were plenty of them at Arnside Knott. As a bonus I also saw a few Northern Brown Argus (also a first for me) and several fading High Brown Fritillaries. Did I ever consider the trip not to have been worth it - not for one moment!

If that wasn't ambitious enough, I recollect visiting Noar Hill in early August of the following year looking for Brown Hairstreak. It wasn't a particularly great day weatherwise, being almost completely cloudy, and the reserve was fairly quiet in terms of visitors. I recall seeing this one chap near the centre of the reserve as I made my way through the Brown Hairstreak hotspots, initially without success. Luckily on this occasion I did find one male Brown Hairstreak nectaring in the final chalkpit, and having gathered a few photos, began to make my way back down the reserve. This chap was still more or less in the same place as previously, so I decided to approach for a chat.

As we exchanged greeting formalities, I recognised that English was not his native tongue. We continued our conversation, and as expected he was also looking for Brown Hairstreak, with no success so far. I asked him where he was from: "Amsterdam" came the reply, having arrived on a flight that morning, then by train to Liss (the nearest station to Noar Hill) followed by a 3 mile walk to the reserve. He was going to do the same in reverse for the return journey that day! His mood certainly brightened when I said I had seen a Brown Hairstreak at the far end of the reserve, and offered to go with him to see if it was still there. Luckily it was (although it had moved) and one Dutchman was able to return home happy! One thing still puzzles me however - Brown Hairstreak are



found in the Netherlands, although they are quite scarce, so maybe there was an alternative to this epic trip!



*One of the Scotch Argus seen at Arnside Knott*

## **28 October 2020 - Update On Website Future And Recalling A Few Memorable Moments**

The inclement weather has more or less brought the 2020 butterfly season to a close, save for a few hibernators likely to turn out on the better days. It has been a very unusual season, not least because of Covid -19 which has been casting its dark and unwelcome shadow over almost everything we do (or in some cases, things we can't do). Indeed, it has been somewhat refreshing to know that the natural world, with all its ups and downs, has been largely untouched by it, and may benefit in the short term due to less pollution. During my remaining few weeks running this website, I will keep you up to date with developments in respect of its future, and am pleased to report that someone has now come forward to take over at the end of the year - and they are well known within the Hampshire butterfly community. We had our first session on the subject this week and others will follow (Covid restrictions permitting).

I do expect to post a few more blog entries over the coming weeks, as we approach the end of the year and thought it might be fitting to recall some of those unexpected, sometimes amusing and even 'magical' moments which have occurred in pursuit of my hobby. These moments have not been previously reported and have occurred whilst I have been out and about. Perhaps not surprisingly, they do tend to focus on outings I have made beyond Hampshire, bearing in mind their enhanced scope for the unexpected, being longer trips and often to locations I had not visited before. They also show that some of the most memorable moments are often totally unplanned.

The subject of first 'memorable moment' was a native of Exmoor, but not the one I was expecting to see, and occurred on 3 June 2011, during a visit to Bin Combe in Somerset. The target species was Heath Fritillary. Having parked in the Dunkery Beacon car park, I set off across the heather moorland in the direction of the Combe (which you cannot see directly from the road). Unfortunately, my navigation skills were a bit wayward on this occasion and I ended up well off course, having then to follow the wooded edge of another small combe to reach my destination.

As I began to close in on Bin Combe, I became aware of a very imposing and formidable beast ahead. It was a magnificent Red Deer stag! It sported a huge set of antlers, and its pulsating body was literally steaming in the cool mid-morning air. As I stood watching motionless in awe, the stag lifted its head to bellow its message several times across the Exmoor landscape.



This was the first time I had ever witnessed such a spectacle and one which has stayed with me ever since. Needless to say, there was no way I was going anywhere near this creature, and I ended up retracing my steps almost back to the road to find a better route. In the end the trip was successful and became the subject of a visit diary (accessed via the Galleries pages), with plenty of Heath Fritillaries seen in this beautiful little Exmoor Combe, complete with babbling brook!



*One of the Heath Fritillaries seen in Bin Combe*

## **29 September 2020 - Big Butterfly Count Results Published, But Be Careful In Jumping To Very Negative Conclusions**

The results of this year's Big Butterfly Count have recently been published on the Butterfly Conservation website, and do not overall provide very encouraging reading about the state of our butterflies. On average there was a reduction of 34% in the number of butterflies recorded during each 15 minute count period compared to last year, with considerably more losers than winners. Those recording the largest increases compared to last year were Holly Blue (+48%), Large White (+44%) and Small Copper (+40%). The largest decreases were Peacock (-42%), Small Tortoiseshell (-41%) and Painted Lady (a whopping -99%).

The results will still need to be analysed fully and we should be careful not to draw too many negative conclusions at this stage, however I'm not going to pretend the results are great! Butterflies are anyway subject to perfectly normal fluctuations from year to year and the more significant findings will be based on trends rather than individual year results. I will however, make some comments on the generally poor showing of the Nymphalids. The Painted Lady's poor showing is at least partly attributed to the fact that 2019 was a 'Painted Lady Year' due to a large influx of migrants. Nevertheless this year does seem to have been exceptionally poor for this species based on my own observations.

In the case of Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock, anecdotally I considered that the Peacock has actually enjoyed a decent season with the butterfly being much in evidence in mid/late July during my visits to downland sites. We must remember however, that many Big Butterfly Count records will be from gardens rather than very rural sites (could the butterfly have done much more poorly in gardens?) and of course there are likely to be regional variations. The Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell made the most of the early spring, after emerging from hibernation, resulting in an accelerated breeding period in late spring/early summer compared to normal. Thus many of the new generation butterflies would be settling down to an early hibernation before the count ended in August, and there is evidence of this.

The compressed breeding cycle and early hibernation may also have another downside. In particular, it seems counter intuitive for species which are traditionally associated with summer to be completing



their breeding cycle so early and starting hibernation even before our warmest summer days have arrived (although the Small Tortoiseshell did produce a small second generation in the south). There may be, as yet unknown consequences of this behaviour in the years to come.

(Footnote: In an earlier blog I indicated that I would provide an update on my invitation for another enthusiast to take over this website. The encouraging news is that I have received a serious expression of interest, but it's still early days to say any more at present. I will include a further update in an October blog entry)

## **23 September 2020 - Why Is The Wall Virtually None Existent In Hampshire?**

A generally fine and warm September has provided a welcome extension to the summer, and a few species have made the most of it by producing strong third broods. The Common Blue and Small Copper seem to have done especially well, and my recent visit to West Sussex for Wall Brown showed this species was also enjoying a fine third brood there. This led me to ponder why the Wall is almost none existent in Hampshire, when it seems to be doing well (or at least OK) in areas which are a metaphorical stones throw from our borders. In addition to the South Downs in Sussex, these areas include Salisbury Plain and the Vale of Pewsey in Wiltshire.

Whilst climate change and loss of habitat (e.g. due to intensive agriculture) are almost certainly playing their part in the rapid decline of the Wall at a national level, these factors do not in themselves explain why the Wall has been so weak in Hampshire for years and has now virtually disappeared. Multiple sightings of the species seem to be confined to the far north west of the county, close to Salisbury Plain together with sporadic sightings (usually singletons) recorded close to the coast, sometimes at former haunts, such as near Keyhaven.

For the answer, I think we need look no further than the character of the landscape. The Wall seems to need plenty of interconnected open country to thrive, with the generous occurrence of rough ground or unimproved grassland for breeding. It also requires bare areas for basking, such as stony ground, bridleways or walls. Being a mobile species, the Wall likes to wander, congregating at breeding areas (where they can be encountered in multiples) or following bridleways or field margins, where they are more usually seen as singletons. This behaviour also ensures that a larger gene pool is available to the metapopulation in a wider area, which may be important for long term survival.

The South Downs in Sussex and the Vale of Pewsey in Wiltshire provide all of these ingredients, since here the downland is often characterised by steep slopes and valleys which are unsuited to intensive agriculture, ensuring plenty of rougher, unimproved areas for the Wall. Salisbury Plain too provides a less intensive agricultural area but in this case due to a different reason - its use as a military training area.

In Hampshire however, rough and unimproved grassland areas are more widely spaced and localised, On the Hampshire part of the South Downs such locations would include Butser Hill, Old Winchester Hill and Beacon Hill, with a few outlying locations elsewhere, such as Martin Down in the west and Pilot Hill in the north. In between the landscape is much gentler and either intensively farmed or wooded, and despite still being very attractive to the eye, this characteristic in effect isolates the Wall friendly areas from each other. Thus from a Wall viewpoint, an interconnected open country lifestyle and the ability to form metapopulations over a wider area, break down. I fear these specific characteristics of the Hampshire landscape have also contributed to the county becoming an almost completely Wall-free zone.



## 17 September 2020 - Mating Walls And Pristine Clouded Yellow In West Sussex

Having been curtailed earlier in the season from making out of area visits (due to lockdown), I have at least partially made amends at the end of the season with a couple of visits to Sussex. For today's outing, which is probably my final one of the season, I combined the familiar with the unfamiliar by visiting two so called 'Rings', namely Cissbury and Lancing. The former represents a new destination for me, the latter being a little more familiar, having visited a couple of years ago.

My target species were... well... whatever was flying, but 3rd brood Wall were certainly in mind and are known to reside at both sites. First up it was the huge Hill Fort of Cissbury Ring, the largest in Sussex and second largest in England, covering some 60 acres. I focussed on the southern ramparts and areas just to the south where there is pristine chalk downland criss-crossed by many tracks, interspersed with some scrub and small wooded areas. The most visible common butterflies were Common Blue (some fresh), Small Heath and Meadow Brown, with a few Nymphalids (mainly Red Admirals), Small Coppers and Whites. However, the highlights for me were multiple sightings of Clouded Yellow and Wall.

I saw 5 Clouded Yellows, including two in the ramparts, one of which was a pristine female straight out the box and happy to pause for brief feeds. The Walls were much more local, with one area to the south of the ramparts being favoured, where the land falls away rapidly to a path below, exposing plenty of bare earth. 4 Walls seen in and around this area (3m, 1f), however all were somewhat past their best, despite almost certainly being 3rd brood.

Since I was struggling a little to find Wall in decent numbers, I moved on a few miles to Lancing Ring, which I know to be a good site for the species. Here the Wall population seemed at least as good as on my previous September visit, two years ago, with around 10 Wall seen (8m, 2f) during my short visit of around 40 minutes. Most were in the area just south of the pond (currently dry), especially along the scrubby margins of paths backed by tall bushes/trees and were generally restless in the unbroken sunshine. Again, most were slightly faded, suggesting that 3rd brood probably began around the beginning of the month and indicative of this very early season.

I followed two Walls which were chasing each other, and watched them drop abruptly into scrub. No sooner was the 'cosying up' completed beside a discarded drinks can, and the pair were coupled. As I tried to manoeuvre for a decent camera angle, a short ungainly flight of a few yards was made, before the pair dropped even deeper into the undergrowth to complete their important work!. At this point I thought it best to leave them alone. In addition to common species (similar to Cissbury Ring), Clouded Yellow were determined to get in on the act here as well, with two seen, but in this case neither were stopping. 6 photos of Wall and Clouded Yellow posted to Latest Photos Gallery.

(Postscript: My next blog entry is expected towards the end of the month which will include an update on any offers to take over this website.)





## 10 September 2020 - Visit To Whitehawk's Long-Tailed Blues Provides Surreal Late Season Bonus

Some of you will be aware that Long-Tailed Blues have been recorded in consecutive recent years close to the TV transmitter mast at Whitehawk Hill in Brighton, E Sussex. So in my final year of running this website, I decided it was time to go and see them for myself. Long-tailed Blues are common in Southern Europe, but UK sightings are limited to waves of migrants arriving on our southern shores and then breeding where their foodplant (comprising members of the pea family) can be found.

So first let's cut to the chase and report that, along with several other observers, I saw about 5 Long-tailed Blues (mostly males) in the meadow/scrub area just to the NE of the fenced TV transmitter compound at Whitehawk Hill, and only a couple of miles from the centre of Brighton. On the face of it, this might seem an unlikely place to find one the country's rarest breeding butterflies, but it has scrub, nectar (including patches of everlasting pea, also providing larval foodplant) and bushes for shelter. The use of the term 'breeding', of course needs to be carefully qualified, since there is no evidence that the Long-tailed Blue can overwinter here (too cold) and the specimens I saw today undoubtedly included a fresh Sussex born male along with other males and females which are either late wave migrants or Sussex born individuals.

What I find quite intriguing is that the Long-tailed Blue has no inherent continuous legacy with this specific location (in the absence of overwintering), so new migrants must find this place every year, almost by chance. This would be very strange if Whitehawk Hill was the only place close to the Sussex coast where they are found. There are however, a few sightings reported from other locations along this coastal strip, where the foodplant is found, ranging from waste ground and railway margins to allotments and gardens. It's no coincidence that, for whatever reason, everlasting pea plants seem reasonably easy to find in this area.

I can certainly say that observing a species in the wild which doesn't really belong here, within almost a stones throw of a busy city centre, was quite surreal and an unusual late season bonus! 7 photos of Long-tailed Blue posted to Latest Photos Gallery.

(Postscript: Look out later in the month for another late season outing report)



## 3 September 2020 - This Season's Butterfly Fortunes May Run In Families?

As I reflect on the now waning 2020 butterfly season, I am aware of a few patterns emerging. It has not been a great season overall, especially for some of our priority and iconic species, with a few exceptions. Indeed there are examples where virtually whole families of butterflies or groups of closely related species have experienced a difficult year.



Based on my own experience, it has been a poor season for several of the hairstreaks, in particular, Green, White-letter and Brown, which have often been 'hard work' to find. The one exception is perhaps the Purple Hairstreak which has been quite numerous this year. So too Skippers have not been much in evidence and I suspect have declined in all cases since last year, except perhaps for the Silver-spotted Skipper which has made up some lost ground at a few sites.

The Pearl bordered and Small Pearl bordered Fritillaries have not enjoyed good seasons in Hampshire with Pearl-bordered numbers at best steady and probably slightly down on normal, and the Small Pearl just about hanging on in the county at Bentley Wood. Two more closely related species, namely the Purple Emperor and White Admiral, also seem to have struggled this year.

Against this a few species have fared well - those that readily come to mind are the Duke of Burgundy, Small Heath, Chalkhill Blue, Meadow Brown and Peacock. The Adonis Blue, Brown Argus and Holly Blue also seem to have fared decently in the county, perhaps reflecting the converse effect to the butterfly families which are having the toughest of times.

I am not going to hypothesise very much on why these phenomena seem to be occurring, since there are almost certainly a number of factors at play. However, the fact that the fortunes of closely related species and those in the same family show some similar features, should not be too much of a surprise. I am convinced that the more frequent occurrence of weather extremes, resulting from climate change, presents a huge challenge for many species. Just in the last month as an example, we have experienced baking heat and near drought conditions through to heavy and prolonged rain and gales. Our winters now rarely produce much snow and are often dank, mild affairs, interrupted now and then by severe storms.

## **27 August 2020 - A Case Of The Old And The New On Thorney Island**

I made a slight change from my usual late August destinations this year, and yesterday afternoon walked the length of the eastern side of Thorney Island, just over the border in West Sussex. A number of Clouded Yellows have been reported recently from the island (which is actually a peninsula), although I am not certain of their focus there. It made a pleasant change to visit a coastal site, quite reminiscent of the Lymington/Keyhaven Nature Reserve, but on a smaller scale. The first part of the walk follows the sea wall, backed in places by salt marsh and with the added quirkiness of gaining access via the push button MoD gate. Thorney Island used to be an RAF base, complete with airfield, but is now home to an army barracks.

My decision to walk the eastern side right down to Longmere Point may not have been the correct one in terms of Clouded Yellow, as none were seen - maybe there are some clover fields on the western side where they congregate? However, several of the commoner species were observed along the quite varied habitat of the route, with some shaded paths and grassland bordering the now disused airfield. Many of the smaller butterflies including Common Blue, Holly Blue, Small Heath and yes, Brown Argus, are now well past their best, however several very fresh Red Admirals graced the area of the sea wall, and both Large and Small Whites on the inland side are still in very decent condition.

As another season draws to a close, I anticipate occasional (e.g. weekly) blog entries for a few more weeks and hope to make one or two outings in September for late broods. I will also keep you up to date with any developments regarding the future of this website (unfortunately no interest in taking it over so far). In addition to a couple of photos from yesterday afternoon being posted to Latest Photos Gallery (Red Admiral and Brown Argus), I have also added a couple more photos of the female Brown Hairstreak taken during my visit to Shipton Bellinger on 6 August. It seems finding them this year is like striking gold in your back garden!



## **21 August 2020 - Adonis On/Off Affair With Stockbridge Down Continues**

I made a mental note during spring that Adonis Blue had once again been seen on Stockbridge Down, aware that no Adonis records from the site had been posted to the branch sightings page during at least the previous two years. Although I have not visited myself recently, I am pleased that Adonis Blue are enjoying a significant summer brood emergence on Stockbridge Down, with one observer recently reporting they were 'everywhere'.

It is nevertheless intriguing when a butterfly reappears in good numbers at a site during one season, after a couple of years apparent absence. Stranger things do happen occasionally, but one wonders whether this can really be a natural recolonisation or if there was a helping hand, either via an official or unofficial reintroduction, the latter being strongly discouraged of course. Natural recolonisation is also possible, with the nearest known colonies being several miles away at Broughton Down and St Catherine's Hill.

Adonis Blue were officially reintroduced to Stockbridge Down some years ago and there is no reason why they should not do reasonably well there, as the site overall is in good condition, and bearing in mind Chalkhill Blue, which are well established, use the same foodplant. Nevertheless the previous official reintroduction attempt was not successful in the long term and Adonis numbers dwindled to zero or almost zero.

## **17 August 2020 - Silver Spots Make Good Comeback At Beacon Hill, But Noar Brownies Playing Hide And Seek.**

As the thundery rain cleared from south Hampshire around lunchtime and the sun started to appear, I brought forward my visit, planned for later in the week, to this afternoon. The target species were Brown Hairstreak at Noar Hill and Silver-spotted Skipper at Beacon Hill (Warnford). Whilst I was reasonably confident in finding the latter, my rationale for the former was that they are a somewhat unpredictable species and perhaps today's activity (e.g. egg-laying) would be condensed into fewer hours after the rain.

I was more or less chasing the clearing skies north, as I made my way to Noar Hill and arrived to find no other cars parked. The lack of visitors was unfortunately matched by a lack of Brown Hairstreak sightings, my search focussing mainly, but not exclusively on the Charity Farm side of the reserve. The nearest I came was one possible sighting, as a butterfly matching the description and characteristics of a male made off in a slightly zig-zag fashion up into a Hazel tree.



There were definitely fewer butterflies overall on the wing today compared to my two previous visits, and although the vegetation was still damp from the rain, skies were bright with sunshine at times, which leads me to believe that the weather was not a factor. Maybe we just have to accept that the season is now on the wane for many species. Not even the Clouded Yellow seen on my previous recent visits showed up today.

On my way home I called at Beacon Hill (Warnford) having been tipped off some days ago that Silver-spotted Skipper were continuing their comeback there. A quick search of the upper echelons of the main south facing slope (heading diagonally on to it after the green gate and livestock pens) confirmed their presence. In the minutes I spent there, I saw around 10 Silver-spotted Skippers, some still very golden, others now a little jaded. The strong breeze which had developed was whisking them away as soon as they took off, so I only came away with record shots, having already photographed the species recently at Old Winchester Hill and Oxenbourne Down.

Whilst this part of the south slope seems to be the best area for them at Beacon Hill this season, the species does tend to seek out areas of shorter turf, so their focus could change season by season. For those up for the challenge and with plenty of surplus energy to burn up, isolated sightings are reported from the lower south facing slope and the eastern facing slope too. Single photo of Silver-spotted Skipper posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## **14 August 2020 - Large Blue Returns To Cotswold Site After 150 Year Absence**

Large Blue butterflies are once again flying on Rodborough Common in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds, following their reintroduction (as larvae) last year. It represents the culmination of a 5 year partnership involving the National Trust, which owns the common, Butterfly Conservation, Rodborough and Minchinhampton Commoners Committees and other agencies, to plan and prepare the site to meet the Large Blue's very specific habitat needs.

Around 1100 Large Blue larvae were released on to the common in August 2019, the larvae having been provided by various donor sites in SW England, where the butterfly is thriving following previous re-introduction initiatives. The Rodborough Common programme represents the latest phase in what has been a huge nature conservation success story, to reintroduce the Large Blue back into UK since it became extinct here in 1979. It also represents the single largest individual reintroduction of the butterfly so far, and sees it return to a site where it has not been recorded for 150 years.

This year it is reported that around 750 Large Blues have emerged on to the common, which is a truly phenomenal number, but it will only be possible to judge the real success of the programme after a few years, when the colony has properly established itself and hopefully is starting to colonise other nearby locations.



(Note: It is being reported in some press releases that the butterfly is once again flying in the Cotswolds for the first time in 150 years. This is not strictly correct, since it was successfully introduced in 2002 to a Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust site a few miles away at Daneway Banks, near Sapperton. I visited this site in June 2019 and recorded Large Blue for myself, including a mating pair!)

## **11 August 2020 - Elderly Noar Brownie Searching The Hemp Agrimony For His Missing Tails!**

Following my visit to Old Winchester Hill yesterday morning, I continued up to Noar Hill in the hope of repeating my success, but this time with Brown Hairstreak. The reserve was quiet on the visitor front during late morning, with perhaps some put off by the relentless heat. Previous visits suggest that Brown Hairstreaks (especially the males) don't relish the heat either, preferring to sit in the shade up in the trees when it's very hot and sunny, perhaps feeding on honeydew or tree sap.

I did speak to a couple of other visitors who had been there much earlier and at that point had not seen any Brown Hairstreaks. My thorough search around the Charity Farm side of the reserve produced just a single male Brown Hairstreak, feeding in the shade on Hemp Agrimony. He was quite an elderly chap (the hairstreak that is!) and had suffered a close shave with a hungry bird which had robbed him of part of his hind wings, including the tails. I observed him for around 10 minutes, but when I returned to the spot around half an hour later, he had gone.

It is turning out to be another strange season for Brown Hairstreak at Noar Hill, with a few sightings of males early on (almost 3 weeks ago) including several feeding low down, then very little visible activity for almost two weeks, followed in the last days by isolated sightings of males (now generally worn) and just one or two females.

In addition to common butterflies, my attention was regularly interrupted (as at Old Winchester Hill) by the captivating sight of a Clouded Yellow in flight, which seems to have taken up residence at Noar Hill. In fact I think there were at least two of them, with one being significantly darker (orangier) than the other. Two photos of Brown Hairstreak posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## **10 August 2020 - Silver Spots And Summer Adonis Take Wing On Old Winchester Hill**

A mid-morning visit to the south field of Old Winchester Hill in strong sunshine and soaring temperatures confirmed that Silver-spotted Skipper and summer brood Adonis Blue are on the wing there. I suspect that the former are just starting to emerge, with 3 seen, all towards the eastern side of the field, where the turf is a little shorter and hence provides a slightly warmer micro-climate. The



Adonis Blues however, weren't so fussy, and were spread along the lower slopes, with around 8 males seen, all looking fresh. My attention was distracted on a number of occasions by a Clouded Yellow charging around the field, north to south, east to west, yet never seeing it settle once!

Chalkhill Blues seem to be having a very good season, at least on Old Winchester Hill - probably as many as I've seen there for several years. They seemed to be everywhere, mostly males but plenty of females too with 3 mating pairs seen. Over the whole of this large nature reserve, I would not be surprised if we are into the low thousands!

4 photos of Silver-spotted Skipper and Adonis Blue posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## 6 August 2020 - Female Brown Hairstreak In Egg-laying Mode At Shipton Bellinger

My visit to Shipton Bellinger this afternoon reminded me that the difference between success and failure when searching for our scarcer species, can come down to very fine margins (and good luck)! I had originally planned to visit tomorrow, but aware of the sweltering temperatures expected for the next few days, I opted to go this afternoon instead. This was despite the forecast for cloudy skies until late afternoon, which turned out to be less than accurate. I had seen a couple of male Brown Hairstreaks at Shipton Bellinger last week, so was obviously hoping for at least one female today.

However, it wasn't until the sun did start to break through the cloud around mid-afternoon that I saw my first (and only) Brown Hairstreak. I was making the final pass of my visit along the county boundary hedge, watching the umpteenth small orangey-brown butterfly of the afternoon flitting among the shrubs. Thankfully, this time its ID was confirmed on landing as a female Brown Hairstreak (most of the others had been Gatekeepers!). It was even more pleasing to see it was in very tidy condition.

She was well and truly in ovipositing mode, crawling the young blackthorn stems with abdomen lowered, then flitting up to take an open-winged rest on the leaves of mature blackthorn or other shrubs, before returning to the job in hand. This behaviour continued for several minutes before she flew out over the meadow and was lost from view. Unable to check the blackthorn stems she had visited in real time, I returned to the last blackthorn bush she had crawled before flying off, but could not locate any eggs. 5 photos of Brown Hairstreak posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



#### **4 August 2020 - Pleasant Surprise At Oxenbourne As Silver Spots Doing Rather Well**

Oxenbourne Down has hosted a small (introduced) colony of Silver-spotted Skipper for many years, but as the area they occupy is crowded out year on year by invasive scrub, I often wonder for how much longer they will be there.

However I was pleasantly surprised this afternoon, since these skippers seem to be doing quite well this year, despite the high proportion of scrub invading their little patch. They like to sit on the grassy path alongside their main habitat area, and in a stretch of 20 yards of path I noted four individuals - a very good start. Then I set about searching the habitat area, and was seeing these golden skippers whizzing around quite regularly, occasionally perching on low vegetation or feeding. Being a small area, double counting is a risk, but I estimated a further 8 skippers, making a total of 12 in all, mostly fresh or very fresh.

It is possible that the very short sward on the path, and enough usable habitat alongside with abundant flowers, is providing all their needs for the moment. In addition, there maybe further good news on the horizon for this location, with some management work planned in the autumn - fingers crossed! Although I was focused on the Silver Spots today, there were plenty of other butterflies on the wing, including many Chalkhills.

There were plenty of butterflies on the wing at Noar Hill too, which I visited before Oxenbourne. Unfortunately, it was much more cloudy than expected (or forecast), so my visit to Noar Hill was truncated prematurely in favour of Oxenbourne. Needless to say, despite good numbers of butterflies, once again no sign of the one I was really looking for (Brown Hairstreak!)! 4 Photos of Silver-spotted Skipper and Red Admiral posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



### **30 July 20 - Brown Hairstreak Prove Hard Work At Both Hampshire Bases, But Deliver In The End**

I had noticed, on a private blog, several encounters with male Brown Hairstreaks at Noar Hill earlier this week, but I have been around long enough to know that what happens one day does not necessarily translate to subsequent days. On arrival at Noar Hill around 10.15am, I was greeted by a Clouded Yellow in the scrub on the Charity Farm side of the reserve. However, it was not offering any easy photo opportunities, so I decided not to give chase and instead focus on my main quarry.

Several other observers were already at Noar Hill, including the transect walker, however no one I spoke to reported any early 'Brownie' success. In fact, almost one hour later, the situation had not really changed (apart from a rise in the thermometer!) and despite plenty of other species being overtly visible, the only Brown Hairstreak activity had been high in a diseased Ash tree.

I therefore took the decision to up sticks and head for Shipton Bellinger. Visiting both of Hampshire's main Brown Hairstreak locations on the same day is a first for me, so I was hoping the effort would pay off. It was still only just after midday as I approached the village, taking a few minutes for a short lunch break before starting the task of finding Shipton's Brownies.

Again several people were carefully eye-balling (in some cases with binoculars) the county boundary hedge and there had been isolated sightings earlier in the day. However my first pass along the blackthorn rich hedge drew a blank, so I continued to the location (down a minor track) where I had seen a male during my visit last week. A small group of people were standing in any area of predominantly thistles on the right side of the track, and sure enough a male Brown Hairstreak was feeding. He had been there for about half an hour, having performed the odd short flight between thistle heads.

With time now at a premium, a quick tour of other 'Brownie favoured' areas was needed, including the parallel tracks to the village. It was only as I was nearing the end of this exploration, that my second Brown Hairstreak of the day was spotted, this time without assistance. It was another male feeding contentedly on Hogweed and was still there after I had gathered a few photos. Ironically a third male was seen close to the gap in the boundary hedge as I prepared to leave, but did not descend low enough for a close encounter.

It had been quite a tiring few hours, visiting both sites with significant driving in between, but we got there in the end. Hopefully my next outing to either Noar Hill or Shipton Bellinger (which will not be before next week) will produce a female or two! 6 photos (including a pristine Red Admiral) posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## **28 July 2020 - No Show Silver Spots As Season Normalises After Changeable Weather**

The midsummer period has so far seen several spells of changeable weather, which has slowed the emergence of our July butterflies, to the point that this season, relative to recent standards, is now just slightly earlier than normal. It is true that Brown Hairstreak are now emerging at both their Hampshire headquarters, around Shipton Bellinger and Noar Hill, however Silver-spotted Skipper have not yet been reported within the county. This was corroborated by short visits I made this afternoon to Old Winchester Hill (south field) and Beacon Hill (Warnford).

For the first time this season, I noticed the inevitable late season feel at both sites, as the grass grows longer and browner, and a greater proportion of the wild flowers (of which there are still many) are morphing into dead-heads. Despite the rather cloudy and very breezy conditions, there were still good numbers of the commoner downland butterflies at both sites, such as Chalkhill Blue, with fast flying Nymphalids (especially Peacock and Red Admiral) adding a dash of flamboyance. Perhaps my most noticeable sighting, at Old Winchester Hill, was a Clouded Yellow patrolling the top of the south field. This was my second Clouded Yellow in just over a week (although both have evaded my camera!), which hopefully bodes well for a decent showing this year, following a poor one last year.

2 photos of Chalkhill Blue posted to Latest Photos Gallery.

## **23 July 2020 - Isolated Brown Hairstreak Sightings At Shipton Bellinger (But No Pics!)**

From a calendar point of view, this morning's visit to Shipton Bellinger was my earliest ever, in recognition of the advanced season, and it delivered my first Brown Hairstreak sighting of the year. This was a somewhat impromptu visit (I had planned to go tomorrow) but with a window of opportunity opening for me and the expected cloudy conditions holding off for a few more hours, I set off on the 100 mile round trip.

In fact, conditions were almost perfect - generally bright with some sun, warm but not hot, and virtually no wind. Another observer (who was local) had seen a male Brown Hairstreak during the previous afternoon, feeding on bramble along the main track from the village. My first area of exploration today however, was the county boundary hedge - plenty of butterflies there (Peacock, Red Admiral, Brimstone, Meadow Brown, Whites, Ringlet etc), just not the one I was looking for, and far too many Gatekeepers interfering with my search!



It was then on to the minor track which links the Cross Belt with the Tidworth Road. This is an area where Brown Hairstreak have been seen in previous years and, as I was about to discover, would soon to produce my first sighting of the season. A fresh male Brown Hairstreak was feeding on bramble at a narrow part of this track. Unfortunately, as I tried to manoeuvre for a better angle, off it went, doing a couple of circuits around the area, before heading up into the trees.

It was now time to explore the two parallel tracks which lead towards the village. There are several Ash trees along here which are favoured by Brown Hairstreak, however most seem to be, to a greater or lesser extent, affected by Ash die back. The eastern junction of these two tracks is the location where I saw several Wall Browns last summer, so a thorough examination here was called for. Sadly no Walls today and no more Brown Hairstreaks either!

I just have an intuition, that despite today's limited success, Brown Hairstreak will be quite hard to find this year! No pics today!

## **20 July 2020 - Masses Of Butterflies At Beacon Hill Including My First Clouded Yellow Of The Season**

My visit to Beacon Hill (Warnford) this afternoon had Silver-spotted Skipper as the notional target species, with feedback from recent years indicating that they are staging a modest comeback there. My circuit on this large site encompassed the eastern flank, including the earthwork, before making a right turn at the bottom to head along the foot of the steep south facing slope, then making my way slowly up to the top in a zig-zag fashion, passing close to the chalk scrape area.

There were literally hundreds of butterflies on the wing, making the most of the fine weather and flower rich downland. At the scarcer end of the scale was a single Clouded Yellow (which did set down very briefly at a distance), 2 Small Blue, 8 (faded) Dark Green Fritillaries, 6 Red Admirals, 4 Small Tortoiseshells, 8 Brimstone and 10 Brown Argus. As for the other species, we are talking dozens or in many cases, scores. These include Peacock, Marbled White, Gatekeeper, Chalkhill Blue, Common Blue, Meadow Brown, Ringlet and Small/Essex Skipper. I am very much looking forward to a return visit, hopefully when Silver-spotted Skipper can be added to the list.

3 photos of Small Tortoiseshell, Brown Argus and Essex Skipper (likely ID due to sex brand orientation and black antennae tips).





## **17 July 2020 - First Visit Of Year To Noar Hill Produces The Good And The Bad (And Maybe The Ugly!)**

It might surprise you that my visit this morning to Noar Hill was my first of the year to this site, mainly because of the lockdown in April and early May during the Duke of Burgundy flight period.

That said, let me get the bad (and maybe the ugly) news out of the way first - Noar Hill, as the notice at the entrance informs us, is significantly affected by Ash die-back. Sadly, quite a number of trees have already been largely laid bare of foliage and many others are partly affected - a forlorn sight indeed. These include some of the trees favoured by Brown Hairstreak (eg in the triangle) although the site has many Ash trees and there should still be enough healthy Ash for them, at least for the moment. I suspect it is still a few days too early for Brown Hairstreak adults, taking my cue from the status of the Hemp Agrimony, which is for the most part not yet in open flower, despite the early season.

There was a significant (if not huge) number of butterflies around, including Peacocks (many), Red Admiral, Comma, Whites, Gatekeeper, Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Marbled White, Meadow Brown, Small Skipper, Common Blue, Silver-washed Fritillary and Small Tortoiseshell (odd ones). However the biggest surprises for me (and the good news) were the numbers of Dark Green Fritillary (now faded) and Small Blue (also faded), with about 5 seen in each case, mainly on the western side of the reserve. Considering the flight periods for both these species are nearly over (with no 2nd brood Small Blue seen today) these numbers would suggest both species are becoming established at Noar Hill. Two photos posted to Latest Photos Gallery (Peacock and Gatekeeper).

(Footnote: Today is the start of this year's Butterfly Conservation Big Butterfly Count. More information here on how to contribute!)



## **14 July 2020 - Well Behaved Grayling On Browdown North - Once I'd Found Them!**

Yesterday morning, I intended to make an early morning visit to my local Grayling site. However, with Browdown South closed for military training, it was an easy change to make Browdown North my destination for this species. They tend to emerge a few days later on the heathland of Browdown North and do tend to move around a little from year to year. Normally I look for them on the paths around the main heather area and along the fire breaks where the heather has been mowed, but this year the first wave of Grayling has emerged just a few tens of yards further to the north-east, where the heather is more sparse between patches of longer grass and bare ground - indeed, surprise, surprise, in an area of perfect Grayling habitat!



So having spent a fruitless few minutes searching their old haunt, I was pleased to find around 6 fresh Grayling, all males and surprisingly well behaved, often keeping their underside forewing eye and attractive orangey-yellow underside area visible long after grounding. So often they tuck the forewing behind the hindwing soon after landing and in doing so perform their trademark vanishing act.

For a year or two now there have been occasional reports of Silver-studded Blue from Browdown North (often singletons on any visit) and this year has been no exception. However, a post-Grayling search of the heathland area did not produce any sightings for me today. 4 photos of Grayling posted to latest Photos Gallery.



### **13 July 2020 - Return To Portsdown Produces Fresh Chalkhills And A Little Bonus**

My visit last Friday to the wild flower carpeted central area of Portsdown Hill proved just too early for Chalkhill Blues, however a return this morning was more productive, with six fresh males enjoying their new life in the sunshine. Once again Small Blues were seen amongst the plentiful kidney vetch, however joining the faded spring brood specimens (just two today), a fresh one stood out - probably a newly emerged summer brood male.

A female Common Blue also caught my eye which had more prominent than usual orange spots on the underside hind wings. The Common Blue is a species for which many aberrations have been documented, but I have not yet researched if this is one of them. 6 photos of Chalkhill, Small and Common Blue posted to latest Photos Gallery.

(Footnote: my outing this morning also included a stop at Browdown North. This will be the subject of a blog entry tomorrow)





## **10 July 2020 - Summer Woodland Species In Premature Downward Spiral And Portsdown Chalkhills On Strike!**

I have been out a couple of times this week, but very little to report in terms of the species I was hoping to see. Admittedly the weather has not been terribly kind, but I avoided the rain and the worst of the heavy cloud, and did see some sunshine during outings on Tuesday and this morning.

Short visits to West Wood, Whiteley Walks and Ashford Hangers, which are all known Purple Emperor sites did not produce any further encounters with him (or her). Indeed with just one White Admiral between them and a few Silver-washed Fritillaries, one could be forgiven for thinking that numbers of all these species are plummeting prematurely. Perhaps the multiple unseasonal bouts of very windy weather is a factor in their early demise. This is all the more disappointing after promising starts in the case of the white and silver named species, if not in the case of the purple one, whose season does not really seem to have got going, and may now be almost over.

I also called at a prime downland area on Portsdown Hill this morning, fully expecting to find a few Chalkhill Blues flitting around in the morning sunshine. Despite the fact they are emerging in other counties, there was no sign of them here (although there were still a few spring brood Small Blues around). In a normal year this would be around the typical time of Chalkhill emergence, so it would seem the poor weather has not only curtailed the flight periods of some woodland species but has also confounded the expected early emergence of the Chalkhill Blue. On this basis, it becomes very difficult to predict when our other two remaining species (Brown Hairstreak and Silver-spotted Skipper) will start to emerge (very early, slightly early or typical) let alone what sort of season they will have! No photos posted today.

(Footnote: It was my first visit to Ashford Hangers NNR. For those who might think it consists exclusively of steep wooded slopes, there are several clearings with great views, such as the one at the so called 'Shoulder of Mutton' viewpoint - but quite a climb from the bottom!)

## **5 July 2020 - Final Phase Of Season Beckons As Weather Imposed Lockdown About To Ease**

As the flight periods of our larger iconic species pass their peak (and I mean species such as White Admiral, Purple Emperor, Dark Green Fritillary), the final phase in the butterfly season is about to begin. This milestone is happening very early this year - mid July would be more normal - and it is fair to say that the period just ending, which marks the pinnacle of the season for many observers, has been marred at the beginning (in early June) and at the end (during the week just gone) by what has been nothing short of appalling wet and windy summer weather.

As a different form of lockdown is gradually eased by the improving weather, we can now look forward to seeing the few species which have yet to emerge this season, as well the summer broods of others. It will not be long before Brown Hairstreak and Silver-spotted Skipper emerge (with unconfirmed reports from Sussex and Dorset that the former is already on the wing there) and the first Grayling has just been reported from Hampshire. As for summer broods, all of our blue butterflies will be on the wing including Chalkhill, Common, Small and Adonis. In many places they will be joined by colourful summer brood Nymphalids such as Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell, Red Admiral and Painted Lady in variable numbers, ranging from scarce to abundant!

Finally it seems fitting to end this post with a couple more photos of perhaps our most iconic species - the Purple Emperor - taken on 26 June in Abbots Wood. Whilst the Emperor has not enjoyed a great season, with the weather almost certainly being a factor, you will be pleased to know I have not given



up on further encounters with him (or her) this season! 2 additional photos of HIM posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## 2 July 2020 - Another Purple Morning But Evidence Of Too Many Late Nights!

It is a frustrating week weather-wise, with the recent warm sunshine being replaced by windy, unsettled days and very little sun. However, bearing in mind it is also a significant week in the butterfly calendar in terms of the progression of flight periods for some key species, I visited two sites this morning before the showers set in.

First up it was Whiteley Walks, my local woodland. Despite leaving home with a good amount of blue sky above, the walk along the main track at my destination woodland, just 15 minutes later, was under heavy cloud with few butterflies to be seen (except Meadow Browns and Ringlets). Later, some brightness and even glimpses of sunshine tempted down a few Silver-washed Fritillary from their tree roosts in the Ridge Copse area. Having seen no Emperor activity at all on the outward leg, imagine my surprise at finding a male down of the track on my return, near the first junction. However, I suggest he gives the talent contest a miss this year, with far too many rough edges after a series of late nights (see below)!

Next, it was on to Browdown South, now referred to as Browdown Beach according to the sign outside. It is not unusual to find that, during unsettled, showery weather, the coastal area fares significantly better for sunshine, and certainly the improvement from 90% cloud cover to around 75% was welcome. The main target here was Purple Hairstreak, found on the scrub oak close to the shoreline. It was noticeable that several of the taller oaks were occupied by Purple Hairstreak, but only the more densely leaved (healthier?) smaller trees and scrub oak had purple residents. One smaller tree, forming a group with other shrubs had at least ten Purple Hairstreaks, several of them easily accessible at just above head height or lower, although the stiff breeze made photography difficult. The downside was that many of hairstreaks (both male and female) are now past their best.

So despite the poor weather, it would seem that this week is certainly significant in the flight period calendar of our two Purple named species (Emperor and Hairstreak). The week has seen the transition from typical specimens being in good or very good condition to generally fading individuals. This is all the more unusual, when both species are typically associated with July rather than June, and yet July has barely begun.

Whilst visiting Browdown, I made the short excursion to the Grayling area, but a quick search did not produce any early sightings. 6 photos of Purple Emperor, Purple Hairstreak and Silver-washed Fritillary posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## **29 June 2020 - First Wild Large Tortoiseshell Eggs/Larvae Detected In UK For 70 years!**

I must admit this one has gone under my radar for a while, but very exciting news nonetheless. The Large Tortoiseshell, which has been considered extinct in UK since the 1950's, is recorded sporadically from southern and eastern counties, with sightings attributed to continental migrants (or sometimes captive bred releases). In recent years however, on the Isle of Portland in Dorset, there have been just too many sightings from the same area for days at a time, for them all to be primary migrants.

Not surprisingly, there has been much speculation about the origin of Large Tortoiseshells on Portland, with the possibility that they are breeding there being strongly suspected. A search on 14 June 2020 of elm (a preferred larval foodplant) confirmed these suspicions, with spent egg cases, shed larval skins and larval leaf damage discovered in the Church Ope Cove area, even though no actual larvae or pupae were found during the search.

The discovery that the species is breeding in the wild on Portland has been further reinforced by an adult Large Tortoiseshell seen recently, not far from this area. The Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation is encouraging observers to go out looking for these butterflies on Portland and help to chart what will hopefully be their spread.

The Large Tortoiseshell, with adult records also from Sussex this year as well as Dorset, is certainly a species that observers in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight should keep in mind, as we enter what will be the start of their flight period, prior to hibernation.

## **27 June 2020 - White-letter Activity Still In First Gear**

I have been visiting a roadside White-letter Hairstreak colony in SE Hampshire during the last couple of weeks. The first activity detected was on the 15th June, when a female was seen nectaring deep in bramble, but no activity was seen in the elms above it. This was two days after my previous visit when no activity at all was seen. It is unusual in my experience to see a female white-letter before the males, however, I was still fully expecting the number of adults on the wing to build quickly, as in previous years, given the forecast for fine weather.

That expectation has not materialised! Several subsequent visits, whilst never drawing a total blank, have produced only odd sightings, with activity either in the elms (1 or 2 individuals) or exclusively males feeding on bramble or nearby daisies (again 1 or 2). I called in at the site again yesterday,



around midday on my way back from Alice Holt Forest, with again a lone male White-letter Hairstreak feeding on the bramble.

I think we can add White-letter Hairstreak to a list of species where the flight period pattern and behaviour has not been typical this season (and that list would now seem to include Purple Emperor) with numbers of adult butterflies suppressed compared to normal. 2 photos of White-letter Hairstreak posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## **26 June 2020 - Alice Consigns Chiddingfold Emperor No-Show To History!**

The word on the grapevine is that 2020 is not turning out to be a great season for 'His Majesty' with the expected good emergence at main sites not materialising so far. Following my disappointing visit to Chiddingfold (Surrey) on Tuesday, I was not sure what to expect from this morning's exploration of Alice Holt Forest, this time staying firmly within Hampshire's boundaries.

I was prepared to visit both the Straits Inclosure and Abbots Wood, but opted for the latter as the initial port of call, on learning that it seemed to be doing rather better for Emperor sightings so far. A one and a half hour exploration along the main track produced 4 encounters with male Purple Emperors, including fly-pasts, brief tree landings, and ground skimming. Best of all, however, was one male down on the ground for around 15 minutes, flying around close to ground a few times before settling to take minerals and then repeating the stunt a few times, briefly flicking open his wings to reveal his sheen. This male was at first glance in excellent condition - quite dapper in fact, but on closer inspection, was missing a small piece from his rear right wing.

As if that wasn't enough, I was teased by the shadow of a probable fifth Emperor and a brief glimpse of dark blue, but on looking all around to find the owner of these manifestations, he'd gone! After the emperor encounters, I should not forget other species seen which included White Admirals, Silver-washed Fritillaries and common woodland species.

Instead of visiting Straits Inclosure I called at another (non PE) site on the way home which I will report on tomorrow. 4 photos of Purple Emperor posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## **23 June 2020 - Support Act Becomes Main Event After Chiddingfold Emperor No Show**

I set off this morning quite hopeful of seeing my first Purple Emperor of the year at supposedly one of its best sites in the South East (Chiddingfold in Surrey), but was in the end beholden to the emperor's ability both to thrill and disappoint (the latter applying to today's visit!).

Thankfully the morning did not end without anything substantial to show. On my way to Surrey, I called at Broxhead Common, just before leaving Hampshire, since I had not yet seen Silver-studded Blue this year and their season is already 3 weeks old. Fortunately these little butterflies are not usually difficult to find in the right habitat, and so it proved, although numbers certainly seemed down on what I was expecting. Several of the males seemed quite fresh too, although some were fading and far outnumbered the females. Having checked a couple of locations on the heath where the heather is thinning, and found the butterfly present at both, it was time to move on to what I hoped would be the main event.

It's an obvious advantage during Emperor time to arrive at the Botany Bay entrance to the Chiddingfold Woodland complex earlier than I did, and avoid a 1/2 km walk from the nearest available parking spot. Still it meant mine would not be the only pair of eyes searching for regal activity. Unfortunately, at the time I departed 90 minutes later, all seemed to have been disappointed on this front, especially after the site had a good start on Saturday with a pristine male Emperor down on a pile of logs.

So I fall back on the supporting act, being the other occupants of Chiddingfold seen today, which included Silver-washed Fritillaries, White Admirals, a late Wood White and an obliging Purple Hairstreak, which was happy to pose for a photo. 5 photos of Silver-studded Blue and Purple Hairstreak posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## 21 June 2020 - Summer Butterfly Season Gathers Pace In Whiteley

Following my visit to the roadside White-letter Hairstreak colony yesterday afternoon, I took my first stroll of the season in my local woodland of Whiteley Pastures (now called Whiteley Walks). My arrival occurred during a period of heavy cloud, so with no large butterflies to be seen along the first sections of track, I was able to take a closer look at the verges.

The odd Ringlet and Meadow Brown were still active and two or three Large Skippers were resting on grass stems. Approaching the bridge, it was evident that some widening of the verges and tree thinning has taken place during the previous months, with undoubtedly loss of willow in the section approaching the bridge, which can be a good spot for Purple Emperor (in a week or so here). Thankfully there is still a decent quantity of willow along the track leading from the other side of the bridge..

By now the sun was starting to glint through the breaks in the cloud and soon the woodland would be bathed in almost unbroken sunshine. That seemed to be the cue for some larger species to start appearing, but the main focus of activity did not occur until I reached the shady glade, beyond the ridge.

Here Silver-washed Fritillaries were dashing around, high and low, occasionally feeding on bramble, and watched over by the occasional White Admiral, weaving intricately among the boughs. At least today I did manage to see 2 White Admirals (from around 8 in total) feeding among thick stands of bramble but never for long enough or accessible enough for a photo. 4 photos of Silver-washed Fritillary and Large Skipper posted to Latest Photos Gallery.





## 20 June 2020 - White-letters Gone AWOL But One Did Turn Up For Photo Shoot!

I have paid several short visits to a roadside White-letter Hairstreak colony in SE Hants so far this season, with much fewer sightings than is usual for this site. You can usually spot them flitting around high in the elm and other trees around the site, but this year activity has been much lower than usual (maximum of two individuals on any visit seen in the trees and no more than one feeding down low, often briefly).

Today I did not see any tree activity at all, but thankfully that was more than compensated by a male which was feeding deep in bramble on my arrival, but made a brief foray to feed on daisies and allow a few quick photos. 2 photos of White-letter Hairstreak posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## 17 June 20 - White Admirals And White-Letter Spotted, But Both In A Hurry!

I made my first woodland foray of the season this morning in hazy sunshine, but very pleasant conditions for butterflies and photography. It's a pity the species I was seeking didn't share my views on the photography however!

My main destination was Portland Coppice near Purbrook. There are extensive felling and logging operations going on there at present, so it was a relief to reach one of my favourite butterfly rides away from the commotion!

I did manage to see 3 very active White Admirals too, all flying along the overhanging boughs, occasionally dropping down for a 'drive through' pause on the plentiful brambles, but never actually stopping. This is usually quite an early site for Silver-washed Fritillary but none seen today.

On the way home I called in at a roadside White-letter Hairstreak colony near Havant. After a few minutes eye-balling a large bank of brambles, a White-letter Hairstreak made a brief appearance zig-zagging around the crown of the bushes. I did not see where it came from (it could have been tucked away feeding!) but I did see where it went - back up into a nearby elm! From its size, I suspect this was probably a female.

So it's still early days for our summer species and hopefully there will be plenty more opportunities as numbers build over the next couple of weeks, with the likely appearance of Purple Emperors too in our area. Sadly no photos today.



## 15 June 2020 - Dark Green Frits In A Frenzy On Oxenbourne

My most usual time to visit Oxenbourne Down is during late July or August when I visit for Silver-spotted Skippers, but I usually notice a few (by then) faded Dark Green Fritillaries, including females egg laying. This year I bucked that trend by visiting at the start of the Dark Green Fritillary season and was rewarded by plenty of them, with their focus being the large open meadow which opens up after climbing the hill past the skipper area.

Almost all were males, flying incessantly but pausing to investigate anything which could resemble a female. One or two however were in feeding mode, taking their fill on the plentiful patches of yellow hawkbit. Whilst I saw about 10 Dark Greens in the central and SE area, this large meadow must support at least double that number.

With the summer butterfly season just starting, it was perhaps not surprising that there were few other butterflies around, save for a few Marbled Whites, Meadow Browns and Small Heaths. The wait for our most iconic summer species is now basically over with White Admiral seen in Hampshire, Silver-washed Fritillary on the IoW and Purple Emperor in Sussex - and let's not forget the little White-letter Hairstreak, with a few early starters now flying around Hampshire's elms. 4 photos of Dark Green Fritillary posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## 8 June 20 - Main Summer Season Kicking Off In Hampshire

It might be a week or two earlier than usual, but the main summer butterfly season is just starting in Hampshire. At lunchtime I visited a White-letter Hairstreak site not far from home in SE Hants, following isolated reports from elsewhere in the county that this species is starting to emerge.

Well it seems that they are not quite on the wing yet at this particular site, but the journey was certainly not wasted, with several fresh male Marbled Whites showing (stunning when newly emerged), as well as a female Comma of the pale *hutchinsoni* form. It certainly makes photography easier when there is only a little sun on offer and the butterflies are not racing around!

Woodland summer species such as White Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary, Purple Hairstreak and of course, Purple Emperor, will be starting to emerge in Hampshire soon, although the season's progress will have been slightly slowed by the current spell of less than summery weather. 3 photos of Marbled White and Comma posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



#### **4 June 2020 - IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT AND INVITATION!**

There is no good time or easy way to say this, so I will cut to the chase. After much consideration, I made the decision at the end of last year to make 2020 my final year running this website on Hampshire Butterflies.

Whilst it has overall been a very rewarding and positive experience spanning more than 15 years, things do evolve over such a significant period of time, which for me includes retirement, the arrival of grandchildren and taking on voluntary work for Hampshire County Council. Whilst I will continue my interest in butterflies and the natural world in general (probably for life), in future I would like to do so without the commitments and constraints of running a website at its hub. It should also allow space for me to pursue some other summer interests during my retirement. In other words the time is coming for me to move on.

Nevertheless, I am keen to see the service and value this website has provided continue, both for the local butterfly community in Hampshire, and for those further afield. Hence this message also serves as an invitation to other butterfly enthusiasts living in Hampshire (or very close) and with the motivation to take over the running and development of the site, to express their interest via the contact form. Continued development of the site under a new owner could be either in a similar or somewhat different direction and, of course, my name would no longer feature in the website title.

Finally, and hopefully also in preparation for a new owner, the site content is being replicated on to a new Wix platform during the next days, with a switchover later this month. This action, whilst perhaps coming at an inconvenient time for me, has been forced because the current 'long in the tooth' product on which the site is built, is no longer being supported. The change to a more modern and capable platform should be for the better in the longer term.

#### **2 June 2020 - Dark Greens Take Wing As Smaller Cousins Fade Out**

This afternoon, I made a circular tour from home to Bentley Wood (Eastern Clearing) calling at Farley Mount (Pitt Down) on the way, before returning home. My principal purpose was to take a final look at the tail-end of the small fritillary season in Bentley Wood and check if their larger and more powerful cousin, the Dark Green Fritillary, has indeed started to emerge in central Hants.

At Pitt Down my exploration in hazy sunshine was proving fruitless, at least for the target species, but I did come across a Small Blue at the western end of the down - a species which has been trying to establish itself there but was thought to have been dealt a mortal blow by grazing livestock eating its foodplant. Well, there is at least one still there!



As for Dark Green Fritillary, after twenty-five minutes searching I was about to give up. However, just as I started to head back to the car, one flew up from almost under my feet (Grrr!) and a few minutes later another was seen in flight. Both were last seen travelling at 50mph! Without a doubt these are the earliest dark greens I have ever seen, by almost two weeks, showing how early the 2020 season is.

It was then on to Bentley Wood. Unfortunately, there is not too much to say. I did not see a single Pearl-bordered or Marsh Fritillary in the Eastern Clearing in about half an hour of searching. They are recorded up to a few days ago (in the visitor's book) but I suspect the continuous dry, sunny weather has, in effect brought their seasons to a close here.

What is perhaps worse, however, is that I only saw one Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, a species which in normal years would not even be peaking yet. Unfortunately, they are becoming scarce here year on year it seems, and the very dry spring has desiccated their favoured breeding habitat. On a slightly better note, I did see my first Large Skipper of the season in the clearing. Sadly no photos to post today.

### **31 May 2020 - Very Early Summer Season Beckons (But Maybe An Early Finish Too!)**

It is likely that the spring of 2020 will turn out to be the sunniest on record with confirmation expected in the next days from the Met Office. Dry, sunny weather is a factor which is leading to butterfly flight periods starting and finishing earlier, and in some cases significantly earlier than usual.

I am already aware of isolated sightings of Dark Green Fritillary at two Hampshire sites (Martin Down and Old Winchester Hill) indicating their flight period is now beginning in the county (and it is still only May!). Woodland species such as White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary, subject to no dramatic downward change in the weather, can be expected to take wing in Hampshire later this week, followed in mid-June by Purple Emperor. Based on monitoring of the Emperor's larval stages, this should be a good season for 'His Majesty', but it may also be a short one if the fine weather remains for a further few weeks.

That might all sound great at face value, but there is no such thing as a free lunch, and the consequences of a very dry summer for butterflies is likely to be mixed (even for heat-loving ones). Many species which do not overwinter as eggs, rely on their foodplants being available in late summer and early autumn to allow them to achieve their needed pre-winter condition (as larva or pupa).

As we know from a similar situation in 2018 (which was the hottest ever summer in England), by early August ground cover vegetation had largely dried up, leaving many feeding larvae struggling, and the same is likely to happen this year. It would be also be accompanied by an early tail off of butterflies remaining on the wing into late summer and early autumn. We have not quite reached true Mediterranean climate yet in southern England, where the extended fine weather results in additional broods. Rather for us, additional broods tend to be at best partial and can actually be detrimental to the species, by removing breeding stock from the following spring.

### **28 May 20 - Dukes At Last Reveal Their Beacon Hill Bolthole!**

On my way back from Bentley Wood yesterday morning, I returned once again to Beacon Hill (Warnford) for a third and final attempt to find its secretive small colony of Duke of Burgundy, this time armed with additional information.



In order to reduce the amount of walking (which is a long slog round from the main car park to the western end of the north slope), I had been told it was possible to make a shortcut through the beech woods. There is no specific path to follow, just what seemed like trailblazing through the leaf litter floor and thin brush below the beech canopy to the fence at the top the north slope, somewhere near its western end. I succeeded in finding a way through at the second attempt, but wouldn't necessarily recommend it!

In and around a shallow valley at the extreme western end of the down, several male Duke of Burgundy were engaged in typical Duchy of Burgundy business, tussling with each other, perching on low vegetation and rising up to chase whatever flew past. Isn't it typical that the Duke has found a bolthole for itself in the most remote, most inaccessible location on the whole reserve! Despite the fact that in some places the Duke season is now all but over, those seen today were in tidy condition, probably as a result of a later emergence on this north-facing aspect.

There was no more trailblazing for the return walk - instead, I opted for the more interesting but long route, with plenty of small butterflies and wild flowers to see. Indeed there seemed to be many more Dingy Skippers around today than on my previous visits. 2 photos of Duke of Burgundy posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## **27 May 20 - Eastern Clearing Quiet But Small Pearl And Marsh Make Appearance.**

An early visit to Bentley Wood this morning found me exploring the Eastern Clearing by 9 am! After being shocked and saddened on arrival by a consignment of household debris, which has been fly-tipped at the far end of the car-park during lockdown, I made my way to the clearing to start searching, following a quick check of the now re-instated the visitors book.

I have to say butterflies were quite scarce by Bentley Wood standards, and during an hour or so I only recorded about a dozen butterflies, including a few faded Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, one lovely female Marsh Fritillary (probably the highlight), one Dingy Skipper, and one enigmatic Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, which appeared for a few minutes, but sadly wasn't stopping for my camera, before disappearing.



## 24 May 20 - Still No Duke Success On Beacon Hill As Spring Downland Season Wanes

Following reports in recent years of a small colony of Duke of Burgundy in the scrub area on the north slope of Beacon Hill (Warnford), I paid a return visit there early this afternoon. The usual cast of downland species was evident on the long walk around the beech plantation, including Dingy Skipper, Small Heath, Common Blue, a few Grizzled Skipper and a fresh Small Blue. The four-legged fast-moving grazing mammals evident on my previous visit, in the form of Brown Hares, had now been replaced by a somewhat slower variety, namely sheep!

On a more serious note, a thorough search for Beacon Hill's Dukes once again did not produce any sightings, despite the habitat looking very duke friendly. It is possible that the fledgeling colony reported last year did not manage to arrange for Duke and Duchess to meet, resulting in a lack of heirs to the House of Burgundy throne from the Beacon Hill Duchy! If anyone knows differently, however, and has seen the Duke at this site in the past few weeks, please let me know.

Finally, it is clear that for the most part, this year's spring downland butterfly season is now on the wane with a number of species well past their peak, perhaps with the exception of Small Blue and Common Blue. Four photos of Common Blue, Dingy Skipper, Grizzled Skipper and Small Heath posted to Latest Photos Gallery.





## 20 May 20 - Good Variety Of Species On The South Field, Including Adonis

On my way back from Botany Bay yesterday, I made a stop at Old Winchester Hill, exploring only the south field area, just below the fort. By midday, the cloud had almost fully dispersed to leave a beautiful late spring afternoon, so I knew the butterflies would be very active. They certainly were. The most numerous species were Small Heath, Common Blue and the stunning Adonis Blue.

On this occasion, as well as around 10 male Adonis, there were a couple of females, one of which seems to have been found by her handsome suitor even before her wings were fully expanded. The two were joined and perched on a flower head. Luckily one or two of the males opened their wings whilst feeding, which sometimes doesn't happen in very sunny conditions.

The variety on the south field was completed by singletons of Small Blue, Dingy Skipper and finally, a Green Hairstreak, disturbed from low scrub. During my walk from the car park, common species such as Brimstone and Speckled Wood were also encountered as well as a fresh Small Copper. A very productive short visit! 5 photos of Adonis Blue, Small Blue and Dingy Skipper posted to Latest Photos Gallery.

## 19 May 20 - Expedition To Botany Bay Sees Wood Whites In Courtship

Now that lockdown has been eased somewhat, my journey this morning to Botany Bay in Surrey did feel like something of an expedition, after being limited to travels for exercise to one's local area.

On arrival, the early cloud was dispersing to leave sunny spells, which was probably perfect for seeing the target species - the dainty Wood White, which I have not seen for several years and is not found in Hampshire. I am told they don't get up very early, and in warm, unbroken sunshine, once the males have got out of bed, they tend to fly incessantly, unless they come across a female of course.

Well, the males seemed to get going a few minutes into my walk, with most of the action being along the lush verges in Tugley Wood, a little further on from Botany Bay. On two occasions a flighty male's radar homed in on a female roosting on vegetation, so beginning the ritualistic courtship behaviour consisting of the pair facing one another at close quarters, with the male waving his antennae and proboscis towards the female, accompanied by some wing flicking. Apparently females will sometimes 'lead on' males, even if they have already mated. Anyway, on neither occasion did mating result, with the male eventually giving up and flying off. I saw 8 Wood Whites in total, and there were stretches of my walk where they were completely absent.

I managed to capture a video snippet of the courtship behaviour and will post that in a subsequent blog. 5 photos of Wood White, including courtship, posted to Latest Photos Gallery.





## 15 May 20 - Visit To Hampshire & IoW Trust's Latest Acquisition - Deacon Hill

On 1st May 2020, Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust were able to complete its purchase of Deacon Hill, near Winchester, following a successful public funding appeal and a donation from Hampshire County Council, having achieved its target of raising £150,000. This north-facing scrub and chalk grassland escarpment is home to one of the only colonies of Duke of Burgundy around Winchester. It is a location I have visited several times over the years and have sadly seen a deterioration in the chalk grassland quality, partly due to the excessive encroachment of scrub.

In view of the news that Deacon Hill has now been purchased by the Trust, I called in there on my way back from Bentley Wood yesterday. It is clear that the site is in desperate need of grazing and scrub clearance, but hopefully, its full potential for wildlife can soon be fulfilled as a result of the acquisition.

My previous visits to Deacon Hill have focussed on the lower part of the escarpment, however much of this is now overgrown and almost impassable in places. Thankfully I did manage to see one Duke of Burgundy (a somewhat faded and slightly damaged male), for which I was grateful, and the weather conditions, which were by then quite cold with 70% cloud cover, could have been a contributor to the lack of sightings. Nevertheless, the scrub encroachment and lack of grazing mean that there could soon be insufficient suitable habitat (including sparsity of cowslips) to maintain the small colony of Dukes for much longer. Several years ago I used to see Grizzled Skipper here too, but suspect they are now long gone.

One photo of Duke of Burgundy posted to Latest Photos Gallery. By the way, whilst the main appeal target was achieved (and I happily donated!), the public can still donate to the important work of managing the site for wildlife.



## 14 May 20 - First Outing To See Bentley's Frits, After Lockdown Eased

A chilly but sunny start to the morning saw me heading out to Bentley Wood for my first outing after the travel restrictions were eased. My precise destination was Barnridge Meadow on the Wiltshire side of the wood, in the hope of seeing a few fritillaries for the first time this season. Traffic was, as expected much quieter than usual, allowing an earlier than expected arrival at the western entrance to the wood, with the temperature still in single digits.

Nevertheless, after a 10 minute socially distanced walk to the meadow area (i.e. no-one else around!), I was watching my first Marsh Fritillary of the season, followed a few minutes later by my first Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Butterflies were by no means plentiful, and this was the only Pearl I saw, however a further 2 Marsh Fritillaries showed up - all the butterflies being fresh or quite fresh. The Marsh Frits,



in particular, became very docile when the sun disappeared, seeking to hunker down amongst the grass stems as the apparent temperature plummeted.

Oddly enough, all the Marsh Fritillaries were seen in a relatively small area, whereas in some previous years they have been more widely distributed around the meadow, and one wonders if the low numbers are an indication that their struggles here are not over. With just one Pearl saw, one could say the same about them of course, but Barnridge is not their main focus within this large woodland complex.

I had debated whether to complete my visit to Bentley Wood by visiting the Eastern Clearing and maybe would have done so if there was a reasonable chance of finding an early Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (bearing in mind this has so far been an early season). However, it seems that one other casualty of COVID-19 is the Bentley Wood visitors book, which I presume has been removed as a potential source of infection. So, with no specific indication that Small Pearls were out, and with cloud building, I decided to call at a different site on my way home, with a blog entry to follow tomorrow. 6 photos of Marsh Fritillary and Pearl-bordered Fritillary posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## 9 May 2020 - Butterfly Conservation Plea To Help Measure Impacts Of Climate Change

The COVID -19 pandemic and consequent restrictions have resulted in the suspension of normal butterfly monitoring activities. The value of butterfly monitoring is as much about determining trends in the medium and long term to aid research, as well as providing a snapshot of the ups and downs of an individual season. Trends, of course, include the impacts of climate change on our butterflies and the natural world as a whole. Whilst intuitively we might expect that a warmer climate with seasons starting earlier would be beneficial to butterflies, the science is actually showing a rather mixed picture, with some species benefitting, whilst others continue to decline.

A vital indicator of the effects of climate change in the UK is butterfly phenology (i.e. the study of the timing of natural events) and whilst official recording is going to be severely affected this spring due to the restrictions, Butterfly Conservation is asking the public for help, by submitting butterfly observations from their gardens or local open spaces. Observations of common species such as Brimstone, Comma, Speckled Wood, Holly Blue, and Orange-tip will provide valuable phenology data as an input to the study of climate change, as well as providing specific data on these species, including the evolution of their distribution with climate change.

If you would like to help, you can do so via a dedicated page on the Butterfly Conservation website.



## 6 May 2020 - Small Blues Emerging On Portsdown

A walk this afternoon in unbroken sunshine below the Paulsgrove Quarry produced 4 fresh Small Blues - all males. This area at the foot of Portsdown Hill has had tracts of scrub methodically mown to leave a mosaic of habitats to suit different species. Some tracts are close-cropped, others have a longer sward and in some areas, the gorse and bushes have been left intact. I also had two confirmed encounters with Green Hairstreak disturbed from the scrub, as well as seeing 7 male Common Blues and several Brimstones.

## 4 May 2020 - Courting Orange Tips At The Moors

Having truncated my visit to Beacon Hill (No Dukes!) on Saturday, I called in at The Moors LNR near Bishops Waltham on my way home, to complete my day's exercise. Being a damp site, there is usually a reasonable supply of Cuckooflower, which is, of course, a favoured foodplant of the Orange Tip and Green-veined White.

During the few minutes I was there, both species were in evidence including a courting pair of Orange Tips. Sadly the courtship came to nothing as the male flew off after a minute or so fluttering around the willing female, as can be seen from the single quick photo of the female.

Hopefully, in about a week, we should be learning of the government's plans to ease lockdown and start the country on the no doubt, long road back to normality (or near normality). Perhaps we can look forward to much fewer restrictions for the summer period of the butterfly season? A single photo of female Orange Tip posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## 2 May 2020 - First Visit To The North Face (Of Beacon Hill)!

This afternoon I visited an area of Beacon Hill (Warnford) which I had not previously been to. This site, being around a 20-minute journey is about the furthest I can reasonably adventure during lockdown for an hour's walk. Beacon Hill used to be listed on my butterfly sites page and was a decent site for Silver-spotted Skipper which were present on its steep south-facing slopes. However, the site degraded over a few years, due to lack of grazing/management and the lengthening sward no doubt contributed to the demise of its Silver-spotted Skippers.

Happily, things have now improved significantly, and whilst we still have to live with the steep slopes, the quality of the downland is being returned to its former self (and even better!) through effective management. It is also pleasing that Silver-spotted Skippers are returning, albeit in small numbers and were recorded last year during August.



This afternoon I visited the north-facing downland slope on the other side of the beechwoods. This slope is not quite as steep and contains an area of scrub with bushes where a small colony of Duke of Burgundy have been reported in recent years. Although the area looks very suitable for Dukes with plenty of cowslips, bushes for shelter and tussocky grass, alas it seems I was not lucky today on that front. However, during the long walk around the woods from the car park, both Dingy and Grizzled Skippers were encountered sporadically along with two fresh Small Coppers as well as a couple of Brown Hares, which I did not try to outrun (wow... can they shift!).

I suspect I may have been too early for Dukes on this site, as it is north facing and the beechwoods do cast a lengthening shadow from mid-afternoon. So maybe there will be an opportunity for a return visit in a week or two, to see fresh Dukes when they are fading elsewhere. In the end, I actually cut short my visit to allow a short walk at another location, which I will report on later. 3 photos of Dingy and Grizzled Skipper posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



## **27 April 2020 - Common Blues Mating On Portsdown But No Sign Of Small Blue**

I have noticed one or two reports of Small Blue from southern counties in the last days (yes it is very early!), so thought I would take my exercise walk on Portsdown Hill this afternoon, below the Paulsgrove Quarry, which is a good site for them. It would seem on this occasion however, I had jumped the gun for this particular species with none seen. Common Blues, however, were wasting no time in meeting up for the important things - a mating pair was anchored to a grass stem with two other males making a nuisance of themselves.

With only common species on view today, I ventured up to the shallow pond at the foot of the quarry face, which had lots of tadpoles resting or swimming close to the pond edge. A more easily identifiable older version of the same species was also present - a smooth or common newt (but if anyone knows better, please let me know!). I have posted a photo of the amphibian in addition to 2 Common Blue photos to the Latest Photos Gallery. It looks as though our spell of fine weather is finally coming to an end, so I may take a break from these exercise outings for a few days, although cannot rule out additional posts.



## **26 April 2020 - Butterfly Season Races Ahead, Despite Normal Life On Pause**

It seems rather ironic that when normal life is on pause for many people, the butterfly season seems to be racing ahead. With a number of websites understandably suspending new postings, it is more difficult to gauge where the season is, other than anecdotally knowing that it is already well advanced for the time of year. Indeed, I learned yesterday from an observer living close to a site, that our first fritillary of spring, the Pearl-bordered, is not only emerging early in Hampshire but that a female was seen egg-laying!

With most sites where our small fritillaries are found being some distance from population centres, many of us (including myself) will likely miss seeing these delightful species this year.

## **24 April 2020 - Good Spring For Butterflies On Stephen's Castle Down**

Now that the guidelines on making short journeys to the countryside to take exercise have been clarified (ie it is permissible to make a car journey provided the journey duration is much less than the exercise), I made the modest journey to Bishop's Waltham this afternoon, spending an hour or so walking on Stephen's Castle Down. Much clearance work has been done since last year, clearing invasive scrub, particularly on the southern section, and the down is now looking in very good condition for some of our smaller downland species, including Duke of Burgundy, Dingy Skipper and Grizzled Skipper.

Whilst sightings of these species started off a little slowly, by the end of an hour I was easily into double figures for all three (Grizzled probably the lowest), although I cannot exclude a few double counts. Despite the fact that the down faces East, which is a cool direction, it was clear that some of the Grizzled Skippers had been around for probably more than a week, and the odd Dingy was fading too. The Dukes, however, were mostly fresh males, darting around, engaging in tussles with anything flying and taking short breaks to perch on leaves or feed on Lady's Bedstraw.

I did not explore the northern third of the down and most of the sightings were in or within a stone's throw of the lower section of the shallow valley, running west-east towards Dean Farm. Having seen several Green Hairstreaks on Portsdown Hill last week, I was not especially looking for this species today - perhaps I'll save that for another visit! The main downside for me was that I really missed my DSLR camera today (I have been using a compact during these challenging times) and struggled at times with the display in the bright sunshine, obtaining several decent photos with a brown leaf perched proudly as the main subject!

6 photos of Duke of Burgundy, Grizzled Skipper and Dingy Skipper posted to Latest Photos Gallery. I have also posted 1 photo of the down, looking north, with the shallow valley clearly visible.



## 21 April 2020 - Grizzled Struggling In Botley Wood But Orange Tip Settles At Last!

Whilst I have visited Whiteley Pastures numerous times in the last few years, my last spring visit to its neighbour, Botley Wood, was in 2014. On that occasion, I was successful in recording one of its less well-known spring residents - namely Grizzled Skippers, in its damp flowery rides (the wood's Nightingales are perhaps one of its more audible spring residents!). Sadly, another walker who knows the wood much better than I do, confirmed that funding cuts have meant much less ride management being undertaken nowadays, resulting in some of the once open and airy rides becoming overgrown and shaded. Botley Wood's small population of Dingy Skippers (which may not yet be emerging) is also reported to be in serious danger for the same reason. Although I was not successful today, one Grizzled Skipper (in wayleave close to an electricity pylon) had been seen earlier by the other walker.



## 16 April 2020 - Green Hairstreaks Clashing On Portsdown

Bearing in mind that a few unsettled/cloudy days are in the forecast, another exercise walk on Portsdown Hill this afternoon was an easy decision, hopefully in the company once again, of a decent crop of fresh Green Hairstreaks. In broken sunshine conditions, I managed 5 Green Hairstreaks during a 45-minute walk, mostly well-spaced along the thick hedgerows and scrubby margins. However, two were engaging in an aerial duel, one later revealing minor wing damage, perhaps from the encounter (photo in gallery).



### **14 April 2020 - Season Further Advanced Than Expected**

My exercise walk on the western section of Portsdown Hill this afternoon was somewhat of an eye-opener, clearly demonstrating that the spring season is already further advanced than expected. Orange Tips were plentiful and even more surprisingly, Green Hairstreaks were being encountered in singletons in several sections of thick hedgerow, and it's only 14th April!

My aim of essentially keeping moving during this surreal period in our lives was very well matched by the Orange Tips (mostly males) which barely stopped for a second during the continuous sunshine, and the Green Hairstreaks, usually first glimpsed in flight, were extremely difficult to follow. Of the two species, thankfully one Green Hairstreak did settle briefly within range, tilting its wings to catch the full rays of the sun. Small whites, Holly Blues, Commas, Brimstones and Speckled Woods completed today's species.

Significant scrub clearance has been undertaken during the winter, and my guess is that this will be a good season for butterflies on Portsdown if today's 'taster' is representative. It's just a pity that opportunities will be limited for the foreseeable future. 3 photos of Green Hairstreak, Small White and Holly Blue posted to Latest Photos Gallery.



### **12 April 2020 - At Least COVID-19 Can't Stop Spring!**

Just as well too, but it seems likely for the next few weeks we will only be able to directly experience the joys of spring from our gardens, or during outdoor exercise in our local area. Maybe it will force some of us butterfly enthusiasts (including myself) to diversify and take a broader interest in the



natural wonders close to home, or at the very least take greater interest in the commoner and more widespread species which we can still encounter during a walk or cycle ride. As I queued outside my local supermarket last week, several squirrels were scampering around above me in the trees bordering the car park - so you see that is something I would have completely missed during normal times!

The start of the butterfly season is often a stop-start affair as the weather tries to make its mind up, between lingering wintry spells and a few warmer spring days - like we are enjoying at present. There are now regular sightings of Orange Tip being reported in Hampshire (including mating pairs) as well as a few Whites, Holly Blues, Speckled Woods and of course hibernators. The first Grizzled Skipper has been reported from Sussex, Green Hairstreak from Derbyshire and Kent, and Small Copper from Dorset. One suspects these species will now be emerging at many sites following the mild winter and warm recent weather. They will soon be joined by Duke of Burgundy and even Dingy Skipper at their earliest sites. Sadly the flight periods of these early spring species are set to go massively under-recorded this year, albeit for the best or reasons (to stem the spread of the dreadful virus). We should remind ourselves, however, that butterfly recording is a long term activity anyway, where not too much weight should be attached to a single season, especially one where data gathering will be limited due to events outside our control.

Finally, I want to return to the point made in my first paragraph about diversifying. This afternoon my exercise walk took me along the bridleways between Funtley and Knowle, near Fareham, returning via an old railway trackbed, now converted to a bridleway. The young leaves of spring, blackthorn blossom and tree blossom were much in evidence as was birdsong and the regular drumming of woodpeckers. The meandering River Meon, with its clear water and quaint wooden bridges, was more reminiscent of the Test Valley than the Meon valley and somewhat surprising in a good way to have such a picturesque spot so close to home. Perhaps also surprising, but in a more disappointing way were that lack of butterflies - just two whites saw and one of those was in Funtley. However, as I said, spring can always be a bit like that. Hopefully some further local and enjoyable walks coming up.

## **22 March 2020 - Life As We Knew It Is Being Turned On Its Head**

It was almost unimaginable at the beginning of this year that within a short few weeks we would be in the midst of a devastating public health crisis, which is without parallel in living memory.

Life as we knew it in the UK, and indeed across the world, is being turned upside down by the Coronavirus pandemic. Perhaps contrary to temptation, the best chance of minimising the severity of the epidemic, is to follow the drastic measures being advised by the government (which are evolving quickly) on social distancing, avoiding unnecessary travels, self-isolation (where appropriate) and on personal hygiene.

By now I would normally be planning my first butterfly outings of the year. Hibernators are on the wing in increasing numbers and the first emerged species are just around the corner, bearing in mind we expect this to be an early-season after the mild, but wet winter. As it is, I have shelved the prospect of any butterfly outings before Easter. For the moment, going out for fresh air and to exercise individually or in small family groups is not out of bounds, but my concern is that it could be within a few weeks, if the virus is out of control and spreading ferociously, as a result of insufficient people heeding the advice.

I expect my next blog entry will be around Easter when I will review the situation. Let's hope by then we are starting to turn the corner in the battle with this invisible enemy!



## **8 March 2020 - Warmest Winter On Record For Europe**

This winter (Dec-Feb) has officially been the warmest on record in Europe, according to Copernicus, the European Climate Change service. As if that wasn't enough in itself, this winter has blown away the previous record for average winter temperatures across Europe (set in 2015/16) by no less than 1.4 deg C!

## **6 February 2020 - Shining A Light On Cryptic Species**

You will recall that one of the butterfly species mentioned in my previous blog on 'Time To Start Planning' was the Cryptic Wood White - a species which, in the UK, is only found in Northern Ireland and only formally named in 2011. This metaphorical acquaintance with the Cryptic Wood White (which is the only UK resident species I have never seen) prompted me to do some background reading into the subject of cryptic species as a whole, discovering in the process what a fascinating, yet challenging subject it is.

Cryptic comes from the Greek word *Kryptos*, meaning hidden, and at a broad-brush level that is just what they are. The 'cryptic species complex' to which the Wood White, Cryptic Wood White and Réal's Wood White belong, is one of many examples throughout the natural world of the phenomenon, from parasites and worms to giraffes and elephants. They are groups of species which look alike (at least to the human eye) but which are genetically different and cannot interbreed, thus rendering them reproductively isolated to follow their own evolutionary path.

The existence of cryptic species is important in many ways. For instance, there are implications on biodiversity - where we thought we had a single well-defined species, we now have several cryptic species which all look alike, but are different. Some cryptic species may be in danger of extinction, and others may still be 'hiding' and await unmasking. Recall that the Cryptic Wood White was only recognised in 2011 when it was unmasked as distinct from Réal's Wood White, and this despite butterflies being one of the most studied of all wildlife groups. Thus, there may be conservation implications too, impacting the habitats and environments in which they live, bearing in mind different members of a cryptic complex may prefer different habitats (as in the case of the Wood White and Cryptic Wood White). There are also practical consequences. In the early 1900s, attempts to control the spread of malaria in Europe were thwarted because, as we now know, the *Anopheles* mosquito which carries malaria is actually a cryptic complex of 6 species, but only 3 of them are able to carry the disease.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many questions surround the existence of cryptic species, and these questions are still taxing the scientific community and are the subject of study and debate. What is their purpose in the grand scheme of evolution? Why does species divergence sometimes manifest itself through genetic changes, whilst in form and structure (ie morphologically) those species remain identical or almost identical? If this was the evolutionary norm, then the richness and diversity of the natural world would not have occurred in the way we know it. I could go on of course, but maybe it is time to stop and allow the reader to investigate for themselves the mystique which surrounds the cryptic species phenomenon!

## **12 January 2020 - Time To Start Planning (Part 2)**

This is not the first time in my history of blogs going back to 2006 that I have suggested visiting butterfly sites using public transport, however this time I am focussing on locations well outside Hampshire. Here in part 2, I cover a few sites where the journey can be substantially completed by rail (with one exception), however, the final destination may involve either a longer walk (up to say 1 hour), use of local bus services or a short taxi ride. Since these visits are somewhat more challenging



in terms of logistics, I embellish with some additional information, either based on my actual experience of visiting the site or by researching the location and journey. Sites on mainland UK also include a link to streetmap. For combined rail and bus journeys in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland) the Traveline site is useful for journey planning. So if you are ready, here we go:

**Irton Fell (Cumbria):** Mountain Ringlet. Irton Fell is one of the lowest altitude sites for the Mountain Ringlet, the butterflies emerging initially on the lower slopes as early as the end of May but slightly later on the higher slopes. The start of the ascent on foot is from from the car park at Irton Pike and close to the delightful narrow gauge Ravenglass and Eskdale railway, which joins the national rail network at Ravenglass. For Irton Pike alight at Irton Rd (request stop) and head almost one mile on a minor road north-west to the car park at the foot of the Pike. Take the footpath which starts just past the car park and heads in a north-easterly direction, initially through woodland, with Irton Pike on the left. If you get the timing right and the weather is OK (some sunshine) you could see Mountain Ringlet soon after emerging from the woodland on to the hillside of Irton Fell. The plateau (or shoulder) at the head of Greathall Gill, further up the ascent, is a usual hotspot for the species. This is a long journey from Hampshire and not compatible with a day trip!

**Daneway Banks (Glos):** Large Blue. This Large Blue site is close to the village of Sapperton in the Cotswolds. The most convenient station to get there by public transport is Stroud on the Golden Valley Line. From Stroud, there is a choice of bus services towards Cirencester which can be used. Services 54/54A, operated by Cotswold Green, take you directly to Sapperton (a short walk to the site) or service 52, operated by Stagecoach West, will drop you on the main Stroud to Cirencester road, by the Sapperton turn off (approximately 30 minutes walk to Daneway Banks). In 2019 I saw a few Large Blue not far from the western entrance of the Daneway Banks reserve, but being a mobile species, they can be encountered in modest numbers at several other locations on the reserve, generally where wild thyme is present.

**Meathop Moss (Cumbria):** Large Heath. We are back in Cumbria at this site for Large Heath, and more specifically the most prominently marked of the three UK subspecies, called Davos. The moss is accessed on foot from a minor road on its eastern side and is about 3 miles from Grange Over Sands station, again like Ravenglass mentioned earlier, on the Cumbrian coastline. Hence it is about a 1-hour walk unless you take the luxury of a short taxi ride - a taxi one way I usually think is a good compromise. The Large Heath and Mountain Ringlet flight periods in Cumbria nicely overlap during the second half of June, so a visit to Meathop Moss can be combined with Irton Fell.

**Spean Bridge (Highland):** Chequered Skipper. Spean Bridge is the stop before Fort William on the magnificent West Highland line from Glasgow (also served by Caledonian Sleeper service). If only the weather there matched the scenery - these being my thoughts after a failed chequered skipper visit in 2011! However, many others have been successful so don't let this put you off. Sites seem to be distributed on the south side of the River Spean to the east of the village and close to its junction with the Cour which flows into it (1.5 miles from Spean Bridge). If you are contemplating this trip, I would recommend seeking up to date location and abundance info from the Highland Branch of Butterfly Conservation.

**Craigavon Lakes (Northern Ireland):** Cryptic Wood White. This is a trip I have not done and is hardly green (involving a flight to Belfast) followed by a train. However, for those keen to see every UK species, the logistics aren't that daunting. Craigavon Lakes is 2 miles from Lurgan station on the Bangor to Portadown line, also conveniently serving Belfast City Airport (station at Sydenham). The journey by train from Sydenham to Lurgan is approximately 1 hour with trains every 30 minutes during weekdays. The train service is operated by Translink NI Railways where timetable info can be found. The lakes area is close to some pedestrian-unfriendly fast roads, so my research suggests the use of the entrance on Ballynamoney Lane if approaching on foot from Lurgan. The Cryptic Wood White, unlike the Wood White found in England, favours open scrubby grassland. At Craigavon Lakes, look in the open scrubby grassland on the south side of the railway which bisects the site.



## 6 January 2020 - Time To Start Planning For The New Year!

I have enjoyed a nice break from blog posts since November, but a new year has begun and it's time to start planning ahead, not only in respect of places to visit in Hampshire but also the odd outing further afield. With the consequences of climate change all too evident and accepted as reality (by most people anyway), it would seem improper to indulge in long journeys using non-green modes of transport to observe butterflies.

Electric vehicles are of course one answer, but for those who have not yet taken that step (including myself), public transport offers a greener alternative to the internal combustion-powered car, if one can work within its constraints. I have over the years tried to make use of public transport, especially by rail, to visit a few good butterfly sites. Travelling by train can compete with the motor car on journey times, making some destinations feasible for a day trip, and can actually be rather enjoyable!

The main limitation is, of course, the number of butterfly sites which are practical to visit by train - unfortunately not too many seem to have a station handy! However, a few do and this constraint can be partly alleviated if use is also made of the local bus network for the final part of the journey, or indeed if one succumbs to a less purist approach by renting a car or using a taxi at the destination end, in order to reach those more remote sites.

So after all that preamble, let's get down to business without further ado by suggesting a few key butterfly sites well outside Hampshire which are amenable to visiting by train, and the key (non-Hampshire) species which can be found here:

**Arnside Knott (Cumbria):** High Brown Fritillary, Scotch Argus, Northern Brown Argus. Flight periods slightly overlap, however, visit timing is probably best tuned to see one or other species in their best condition. Arnside Knott is a 30-minute walk from Arnside Station.

**Hockley Woods (Essex):** Heath Fritillary. Hockley Woods entrance is just a 10-minute walk from Hockley Station.

**Strumpshaw Fen (Norfolk):** Swallowtail. Brundall station is a 30-minute walk from the entrance to the fen.

**Ditchling Common (Sussex):** A recently discovered colony of Black Hairstreak outside the main UK territory on the Oxford clays. Ditchling Common is about 1 mile from Burgess Hill station.

In my next post I will be listing some further sites outside Hampshire which can be visited using public transport, but where the station is further from the site, requiring a longer walk, use of a local bus service or a short taxi ride at the destination end.