



2016 Blog

3 December 2016 - A Few Species Still Likely To Be Flying In December

It is probably no surprise that Red Admiral sightings (one of very few species to have enjoyed a spectacularly good season) are still occurring regularly in Hampshire, even though the weather has turned much colder. It is also notable that fresh specimens of both Speckled Wood and Holly Blue have been recorded within the county during the last month, and could join the Red Admiral in making a few appearances in December.

Hampshire came within a whisker of recording a rather more exotic species too. A continental Swallowtail (hopefully not a release) was recorded on 13 November at Stubbermere, one mile east of Rowlands Castle, but just over the border in West Sussex.

Personally, my hope is that we have a 'normal' winter this year, with a few prolonged cold spells and even a little snow. We have been bestowed with too many mild, damp winters in recent years, which have been contributing to the perilous state of some of our wildlife.

6 November 2016 - UK Faring Badly In New State Of Nature Report

The State of Nature 2016 report, written by a coalition of more than 50 leading wildlife charities and research organisations, including The Wildlife Trusts, presents an assessment of the status of wildlife in the UK. Its findings are indeed stark and show that the UK has lost significantly more nature over the long term than the global average and is among the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

The report also indicates that invertebrates (which include insects and butterflies) have fared the worst of all the wildlife groups studied, a finding which is even more sobering when they represent approximately 97% of species. They also perform a vital role in maintaining healthy ecosystems on which our world depends, being at the lower end of the food chain as well as playing an important part in pollination.

The report indicates that many factors have resulted in changes to the UK's wildlife over recent decades, but policy-driven agricultural change was by far the most significant driver of declines (incidentally, a finding challenged by the farming community since high intensity farming ended in the early 1990's). Climate change has had a significant impact too, although its impact has been mixed, with both beneficial and detrimental effects on species. Nevertheless, the report indicates that we know that climate change is one of the greatest long-term threats to nature globally.

Hopefully my next blog entry will focus more on the positives and start to look forward to a New Year!

19 October 2016 - Summer Big Butterfly Count Shows Collapse In Common Species

The alarming outcome of this summer's Big Butterfly Count indicates that common butterflies suffered a collapse in their numbers at UK level during the summer, despite experiencing weather conditions which usually help them to thrive. In short, the scale of the collapse has come as a shock and is somewhat of a mystery. Specific findings, which are presented in a recent article on the Butterfly Conservation website, include:

- Widespread species such as the Gatekeeper, Comma and Small Copper experienced their worst summers in the project's history and were down 40%, 46% and 30% respectively compared to last year.
- The Small Tortoiseshell saw a 47% drop in numbers and Peacock slumped by 42% with both species recording their second worst years.
- Numbers of Peacock have now dropped from an average of 3.6 individuals per count in 2013 to just 0.5 per Count in 2016, a six-fold decrease over three years.

- Participants also saw the lowest number of butterflies per count since the scheme began with an average of just 12 butterflies spotted.
- These figures were even lower than those experienced during the cold and wet disaster summer of 2012 - the worst year on record for UK butterflies.
- A few species bucked the negative trend including the Red Admiral and Green-veined White to experience good years. The Red Admiral was up 70% compared to 2015 and had the largest year-on-year-increase of any species.

Whilst the detailed sequence of events and the specific mechanisms which have led to the overall poor season may not be well understood, for me there is little doubt about the main driving force which is behind it - climate change.

8 October 2016 - Conservation Expectations Need To Be Realistic

We'll need to wait until next year when this season's butterfly sightings data becomes available to objectively assess how our different species have fared. Based on my own observations however, there have been very few species which have stood out as having a good season. The very few would include the Red Admiral which enjoyed a spectacular late summer/early autumn period and the Clouded Yellow, noting not coincidentally that they are two migrant species. In the spring, the Duke of Burgundy eventually enjoyed a good season, despite the late start. Beyond that I'm struggling - a tranche a species did OK, making do with mediocre or average seasons, even taking into account my reduced expectations compared with just a decade ago.

When it comes to species which seem to have had a particularly difficult time (in some cases following other recent poor seasons), they reel off easily. This category would include Chalkhill Blue, Common Blue, Small Heath, Pearl and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, Silver-spotted Skipper, Small Tortoiseshell, Wall and White Admiral. For me, sightings of normally quite easy species, such as Orange Tip, Green Hairstreak, Gatekeeper, Small and Large Skippers and Small Copper seemed significantly less numerous than usual.

This season comes on the back of a continuing very difficult period for our butterflies. One of the main drivers of the problems we are seeing (but not the only one) seems to be climate change. Whilst it is helping a few species extend their range, overall it seems to represent a huge threat to many of our species, either directly (due to changed climate conditions to which species are not adapted) or indirectly through the changes in habitat it is causing (such as sward length).

Man's activity on the planet, as the architect of climate change, has unleashed a power which is almost unimaginable in its strength (like that of the oceans or seismic events) and is untameable on a timescale of decades or maybe even generations. I think we have to be realistic therefore, in our expectations for the outcome of conservation measures, in the face of such irresistible forces. In particular, I cannot envisage returning to the halcyon days of a few decades ago, in terms of the relative wealth of butterflies in our gardens and countryside. I will continue my reflections on the theme of realistic expectations in my next post.

22 September 2016 - Final Outing Of Season Produces Wall In West Sussex

Rather than just let the season fizzle out with a whimper, for my final outing yesterday afternoon, I hopped over the border to Mill Hill, a site in West Sussex which I had never previously visited. My mode of transport was changed too, taking advantage of the site being close to Shoreham-by-Sea. A 20 minute walk from Shoreham station found me entering the southern access gate to Mill Hill Local Nature Reserve on the South Downs.

The main target of the visit was 3rd brood Wall Brown, which are, to say the least as scarce in Hampshire as the proverbial blue moon, but are out and about at several sites in Sussex. In fact I saw my first one whilst descending the steps to the lower part of the reserve - a male engaging in its common behaviour of flitting along the path in front of me. I had a total of 5 Wall sightings during almost two hours exploring the site, including a female which did pose briefly, in almost perfect camouflage, for a closed wing photo. The Wall sightings were mainly at either end of the steep slope and all seemed to be in good or very good condition.

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Other species seen on the down included Clouded Yellow (around 10 seen but rarely stopping), Adonis Blue (several faded males, but still able to put on a display), Common Blue (mainly females), Meadow Brown and Peacock. In a more wooded area at the north end of the down, there were many Red Admirals feeding on Old Man's Beard.

It was a nice way to end the season and a return visit during the main summer period is likely! I will continue to make occasional posts to this blog during the Autumn and Winter. 2 photos of Wall and Adonis Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



12 September 2016 - Season Winding Down Despite Prospect Of Mini Heatwave

Whilst I have not been out and about butterflying in the last few days, I have been following reports on other websites. Butterfly counts for most species on a single visit are typically dwindling into the low single digits, with the exception of Meadow Brown (more than 100 seen at Old Winchester Hill recently), Red Admirals, Speckled Wood and the Whites, where counts at least into double figures are still occurring regularly. Despite the forthcoming mini heatwave, the sighting patterns will gradually dwindle as species already close to the end of their flight periods finally bring the curtain down on this year. On the iconic species front, a few female Brown Hairstreaks will be continuing their egg-laying runs, but you will now need to be extremely lucky at Noar Hill or Shipton Bellinger to witness it. If you need a change, don't forget Brown Hairstreaks can also be found (occasionally!) on Selborne Common.

Concerning those species which have adults emerging during September or early October (eg Small Copper, Comma, Small Tortoiseshell, Wall, Whites and even Holly Blue) the omens do not look favourable for a good showing. Firstly, it has been a poor year generally, and secondly, despite a warm midsummer period, the year has not been warm enough overall to generate much in the way of third broods. This year I am not even aware of any second brood Dingy Skippers in either Hampshire or Sussex, which also occur in very warm years.

Finally, now that the butterfly season is drawing to a close, I have started my annual 'freshen up' of the website. The photo archive has already been updated, to add additional photos, mainly from this year. Whilst sorting through some older photos, I spotted something I had not noticed before on a photo taken at Stephen's Castle Down in 2014 - a Green Hairstreak egg-laying! I had not noticed previously probably because it is using dogwood, which is a foodplant I had not associated with this species. In fact they use quite a variety of foodplants, including dogwood. To avoid creating a misleading first impression of Green Hairstreaks in September (!), I place a link to the photo here, rather than showing as a thumbnail.

30 August 2016 - Old Winchester Hill Becoming Late Season Mecca For Clouded Yellow

I revisited Old Winchester Hill this afternoon on another very warm day, for one of my final outings of the season. This time I only visited the car park slope and, all things considered in this generally poor season, I was reasonably pleased with the outcome. Adonis Blues continue to emerge with a few fresh males showing off - unfortunately their showing off was confined to flight, since none of those which settled for any length of time were displaying their open-wing finery at rest. In all 10 males were seen. The species I had failed to find last week on this slope - Silver-spotted Skipper did make a fleeting appearance with just one seen.

The real story today, however, has to be the Clouded Yellows. Old Winchester Hill seems to be somewhat of a mecca for them this year, with 8 seen in the hour or so I was there, but other observers saw many more during a longer period, including a mating pair.

My attempts to gather a few Clouded Yellow photos resulted in one of those fluke open wing shots. A male briefly opened his wings whilst feeding on Ragwort as another Clouded Yellow fluttered around. From his posture, his thoughts were not confined to just an afternoon nectar snack! 2 photos of Clouded Yellow posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



26 August 2014 - Summer Broods Fizzling Out Early As Hot Weather Continues

If I needed reminding that this year's butterfly season is fading fast, my walk around the eastern end of Stockbridge Down in this afternoon's blazing heat provided it. I'm certainly not complaining about the weather - absolutely glorious with just a few wispy clouds in the sky. On the butterfly front however, it is clear that the summer season is going to be a short one, with many specimens already prematurely faded. The spell of warm, mainly dry weather, in combination with generally reduced populations this year, means that the summer flight period for some species will barely make September.

The butterfly count was disappointing, even for late August in this part of Stockbridge Down, perhaps illustrated by the count of Chalkhill Blues - just six. The area was, unusually, almost completely devoid of Nymphalids, and I did not see any Silver-spotted Skippers. The highlights were a few each of Common Blue, Small Heath and pleasingly, Brown Argus, although some were barely recognisable. I guess we have to be thankful that Meadow Browns and Whites were at least visible most of the time! Of course, this is a large site and there may be pockets of habitat where there were greater numbers and variety of butterflies - perhaps even a few Silver-spotted Skippers.

In compensation for the early burn-out of the main summer butterfly crop, and if the warm weather continues for a few more weeks, any third broods in late September/early October could be strengthened, with more individuals reaching maturity and emerging. No photos posted this time.

22 August 2016 - Adonis, Silver Spots And Clouded Yellow At OWH But All Is Not Well

This afternoon, I explored both the car park slope and the south field next to the fort, at Old Winchester Hill. I had not seen any reports of Adonis Blue nor Silver-spotted Skipper from this site so far this year, having failed myself to find spring brood Adonis in early June. So it was a relief to confirm both species were present today.

At the bottom of the car park slope, around 6 male Adonis Blues were seen, however no Silver-spotted Skippers were found in this area. At the south field the fortunes were reversed - no Adonis were seen at all here and the search for Silver-spotted Skippers initially drew a blank. However, in an area where the turf is slightly shorter, 3 of these skippers were eventually located in good to fair condition.

Whilst there were Chalkhills (tens) and Common Blues (a few) at both sites, as well as common species such as Meadow Brown and Gatekeeper, butterfly numbers overall were disappointing and dramatically lower than would

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have been usual a decade ago at this site. Furthermore, it is clear that both Adonis Blue and Silver-spotted Skipper are facing a challenge for survival here, the short cropped turf, which they need to thrive, being seemingly confined to history at this site.

At least I can end on a high in being able to report 4 Clouded Yellows, which were also observed on the car park slope, although I only managed one snatched photo. All the Clouded Yellow action happened in the space of a few minutes, until there was just one, then none. 4 photos of Adonis Blue, Silver-spotted Skipper and Clouded Yellow posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



15 August 2016 - Early Bird Visit To Noar Hill Produces Brown Hairstreak Sightings

Whilst both my visits to Shipton Bellinger this year for Brown Hairstreak were successful, I have also been following reports from Noar Hill, which seems to be enjoying somewhat of resurgence this year in terms of sightings. So for my final visit of this season targeted to this species, Noar Hill was the destination. The species tends to become less active in high temperatures and hot sunshine, so 9am saw me watching for activity around the large Beech tree about half way along the track leading to the eastern entrance gate. Several males were already active making occasional fitful flights around the boughs, searching for females, although none in camera range.

On the reserve itself, with the vegetation still dew laden, the most obvious butterfly activity was from Nymphallids - Peacocks and Red Admirals taking benefit from the abundant Hemp Agrimony, together with the odd fading Silver-washed Fritillary. It was refreshing also to find a couple of fresh Painted Ladies joining the colourful display - a species more conspicuous by its absence this year.

Back at the Beech tree at mid-morning, as I prepared to depart, Brown Hairstreak flights were now fewer. Notable however, one was a female, the sun's rays highlighting her richer colouration as she flew jerkily from the tree, over the track, and into the reserve, perhaps to begin the day's egg-laying session amongst the blackthorn.

No photos of Brown Hairstreak, but one of Painted Lady posted to Recent photos Gallery.



10 August 2016 - Bountiful August For Some Species But Underlying Concerns For Others

As our summer broods of butterflies reach their peak, one could be forgiven for thinking that all seems well on the Lepidoptera front. One can hardly miss the profusion of Red Admirals, which can be found almost anywhere where there is nectar on offer - gardens, downland, hedgerows to waste ground - and counts can be in dozens.

Species such as Peacock, Gatekeeper, Meadow Brown, Brimstone and the Whites also seem quite numerous, as they should be at this time of year. As for the specialists, Grayling and Brown Hairstreak are examples of species which are doing OK this season. Concerning the former, a cycle ride yesterday produced 15 Grayling on Holmsley Ridge in the New Forest - a new site for me, and regarding the latter, there seems to be more sightings from Noar Hill this year than usual, which is pleasing. These include the less obvious location of a large Beech tree on the approach up to the entrance gate, which is a welcome variant from Ash trees acting as the usual host here.

As I indicated in an earlier post, I am not going to dwell at the moment on the species which do not seem to be enjoying a great season or summer - in fact in some cases it ranges from poor to terrible! Suffice to say that these look to include Chalkhill Blue (very low numbers at some sites), Small Copper, Brown Argus, Common Blue and probably Silver-spotted Skipper, although there may still be time for redemption in the next couple of weeks.

If I ran a butterfly of the month (which I don't!), it would have to be the Red Admiral this month, so a couple of photos of this handsome butterfly have been posted to Recent Photos Gallery, along with Peacock and Grayling, all taken recently.



6 August 2016 - Chalkhills Crash At Broughton

I called in at Broughton Down on Friday afternoon after my Brown Hairstreak exploits at Shipton Bellinger. My main target there was Silver-spotted Skipper and I fully expected that to be the main theme of this posting.

However, the lack of Chalkhill Blues, for which this is normally a decent site, was without doubt the main story. The count of Chalkhills during a quick but full circuit of Broughton Down, including upper and lower slopes was just TWO males in warm, still conditions, albeit mainly cloudy. This is even more surprising given that Chalkhills seem to having a reasonable season at sites such as Oxenbourne Down and Stockbridge Down.

Superficially, the down looks in fairly typical early August condition and better suited to the longer sward species, such as Chalkhill Blue. So the reasons for the Chalkhill crash are not obvious at first sight, and other factors may be at play (e.g. shortage of foodplant, parasitic or other predation...). Butterfly numbers seemed generally low for other common grassland species, but at least not accompanied by alarm bells. Even the Silver-spotted Skipper count was tolerable at 12 - they were mainly on the upper slopes.

3 photos of Silver-spotted Skipper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

5 August 2016 - Pristine Female Brown Hairstreak Drops In On Nettles

My morning exploration of the Shipton Bellinger 'roughs' started slowly, with my first circuit producing no sightings of Brown Hairstreak under mainly cloudy conditions. I was beginning to think it was going to be one of those days, with even the weather forecast of dry with sunny spells seeming somewhat optimistic, as a shower threatened.

At around 10.30 my fortunes dramatically improved as an immaculate female, probably freshly emerged this morning, had settled low to the ground on nettles, close to the track heading west from the village. As the sun's rays poked through the clouds for a brief sunny period, she slowly began to open her wings. A minute later, after manoeuvring around on the nettle leaf, she took off and was gone.

Male Brown Hairstreak activity was observed in several of the Ash trees in vicinity and 3 more males were busy feeding on bramble in one section of the county boundary hedge. Another observer had previously seen a female nectaring on old man's beard in the same area. 4 photos of Brown Hairstreak posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



3 August 2016 - Still Trying To Figure Out Keyhaven's Wall Colony

A visit to the Lymington-Keyhaven NR this afternoon, in search of summer brood Wall butterflies, produced just two males. Still, over the years, I can recall quite a few failed visits, so I shouldn't complain! It was very windy along the sea-wall from Keyhaven towards the Pennington Marshes. Both males were seen in well separated sections of the path below and inland from the sea-wall, close to the lagoon edges, where they could shelter from the wind, nectar, bask on the track or take nutrients from cowpats!

I try to visit the Wall colony here at least once per year (either spring or summer brood) despite the fact it is at the other end of the Solent for me. I have to admit however, I am still baffled by it, in terms of the unusual nature of this site for the species, the location of their breeding areas within it and why their population is so erratic (almost a sure sign of trouble ahead).

Let's be honest, if I didn't know better, an area of salt marsh and lagoons would not be the first place that comes to mind for Wall butterflies! However, it is the only place in Hampshire that can boast a population which is at least in double figures (I only explored a tiny area today) and probably scores in good years. I recall a few years ago when Wall butterflies would even be encountered in Keyhaven's main car park! 3 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



30 July 2016 - Brown Hairstreak Gamble Pays Off

I took somewhat of a gamble by making the 100 mile round trip to Shipton Bellinger this afternoon, in the hope of finding Brown Hairstreak, but a combination of other commitments and an unsettled weather outlook meant it could be my last opportunity for a while. Thankfully the gamble paid off with a search of the boundary hedge yielding two males, feeding contentedly on bramble flowers, despite very limited sunshine.

It was almost a case of two for the price of one since just two yards separated them, yet neither moved more than a few inches during the half hour I was observing. It was just a pity that thick undergrowth and the lack of a step ladder prevented closer access! The Wild Parsnip bordering the hedgerow seems taller than ever this year and care is needed, since it can cause skin blisters.

On the way back I made a brief stop at Broughton Down, this time approaching from the north (Broughton Down Farm) exploring an area where there are many ditches, chalk scrapes and abundant nectar sources. Unfortunately by this time it was overcast, however two female Dark Green Fritillaries were on egg-laying runs. There were also many common butterflies on the wing and a return to this area in better weather is now on my to-do list.

4 photos of Brown Hairstreak posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



28 July 2016 - Silver-spotted Skipper Takes Wing At Oxenbourne

I returned to Oxenbourne Down this morning, just over one week since I reported on the good showing of Chalkhills there. Today they have been joined by the odd Silver-spotted Skipper. Having searched the area of the down where the turf is shortest (and favoured by the aforementioned skippers), I had caught a couple of brief glimpses of my quarry whizzing around, but could not be a hundred per cent sure. Thankfully one did settle very briefly for a confirmation photo (at a distance) before whizzing off again. I cannot even be sure that my total of 3 sightings were not all of the same insect.

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Not only is the Silver-spotted Skipper colony here very small and isolated, but the suitable habitat is being squeezed by the continued ingress of scrub, which I fear will not be curtailed by rabbit grazing alone, and further active management is needed.

Anyway, enough of my whinges for the moment - on a slightly brighter note, there are confirmed sightings of Brown Hairstreak from both Dorset and Sussex. It is highly likely that this final Hampshire species to emerge is already expecting its cover to be blown at Noar Hill and Shipton Bellinger by keen observers!

One photo of Silver-spotted Skipper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



21 July 2016 - Second Brood Small Blues Out And About Enjoying The Portsdown Sun

I commented yesterday that one of the species to be looking for soon would be Small Blue. If there were any lingering doubts that this season is still lagging behind, those doubts were well a truly dispelled by a late morning visit to the lower slopes of Portsdown Hill, below the western end of Paulsgrove Quarry. Not only are Small Blues on the wing again for their summer brood, but among the fresh ones were several individuals which are already fading, or have wing damage, suggesting they have been around for a few days.

I counted 10 Small Blues in the nectar rich environment along the lower slopes, including two females. This is a good count for the second brood, which is normally modest, however the habitat here looks not far short of a Small Blue paradise. There is abundant kidney vetch all along this section of hill, as well as a choice of nectar and patches of bare chalk which the species also likes.

Our smallest species was not alone in enjoying the sunshine - Marbled Whites, Meadow Browns, Gatekeepers, Small Skippers and the odd Chalkhill Blue were also having a ball.

3 photos of Small Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



20 July 2016 - Midsummer Heatwave Triggers Significant Emergence Of Chalkhills and Gatekeepers

A lunchtime visit to the lower slopes of Oxenbourne Down was notable for the gathering pace of Chalkhill Blue and Gatekeeper numbers - almost all fresh. In the small area at the foot of the down, there were at least a dozen Chalkhill Blues - all males - including one which was just crawling up a grass stem, and seemed to be filling its wings after emergence. Gatekeepers too were very conspicuous amongst the bramble and other scrub, the males being a very rich reddish brown, and mostly only a day or two old.

So summer has at last arrived, although the fine weather may only be short-lived. We are moving into the time of year when downland sites come into their own once again, following the brief flirtation with the large woodland species, now passing their peak.

Let us hope the season still has plenty to offer as summer broods of downland species emerge, including Common Blue, Brown Argus, Small/Essex Skippers and Small Blue, complemented by colourful Nymphalids such as Red Admiral (already doing well!), Small Tortoiseshell, Comma and Peacock. We maybe can expect a small second showing of Dingy Skipper (and who knows perhaps even Duke Of Burgundy) as the season has recovered from its late start. Other species to look for will be Wall Brown (Lymington - Keyhaven area) Silver-spotted Skipper (various downland sites), Clouded Yellow (anywhere!) and later, Brown Hairstreak (Shipton Bellinger and Noar Hill).

3 Photos of Chalkhill Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



16 July 2016 - Difficult Season For Many Species But Let's First Enjoy What Remains Of It

It is clear that 2016 has turned out to be a difficult (even very difficult) season for many butterfly species in Hampshire, a point most recently brought into focus by the low numbers of several key species (such as White Admiral, Dark Green Fritillary and dare I say, Purple Emperor). In effect this is but a microcosm of the bigger picture encompassing most (if not quite all) of the butterfly species found in the county.

It is more appropriate to reflect further on this at the end of the season - for the moment I am content to try to enjoy what still remains of it. Chalkhill Blues are now emerging at sites in Hampshire, and a Silver-spotted Skipper was recently seen on Silchester Common, leaving only Brown Hairstreak to emerge, along with several second broods. For me, the start of the Chalkhill Blue flight period provides a significant marker, representing the start of the latter part of the season, in that its flight period is very long and will see us essentially through to the end of the 2016 season.

On a diversionary note, I visited Havant Thicket yesterday, not for summer butterflies but for glow worms! The 1 hour walk in the evening, with other members of the family was quite enchanting in the twilight, with 13 glow worms seen (all glowing females) in the rich verges or undergrowth, accompanied by the rather mystical churring of nightjars - almost constantly heard but never seen. Photo of glowing abdomen of glow worm shown below (click here for full size image).



13 July 2016 - Weather Continues To Challenge During Pinnacle Of Season

I always think that this time of year is the pinnacle of the butterfly season, when our woodlands are in their best summer livery, adorned by iconic butterfly species. The unsettled weather, during the middle of the flight periods of species such as White Admiral and Purple Emperor, will almost certainly have consequences - as if there are not enough challenges with climate change and loss of habitat. From the various blogs, it still amazes me how resilient many butterfly species are (not to mention observers!), making use of brief interludes of acceptable conditions sandwiched between torrential downpours!

For myself, I have not ventured far since my success one week ago, with a male Purple Emperor on the ground in my local woodland, Whiteley Pastures. Indeed, I have made several more visits there to see if the initial success could be repeated. Sadly my loyalty was not repaid, at least as far as Purple Emperor is concerned, although one, probable female, was pointed out to me in the canopy on Saturday morning.

My possible final visit of this mini-series was this morning, and whilst the woodland looked resplendent during an all too rare period of bright sunshine, the butterfly turnout was rather disappointing, compared with what would be usual a few years ago. In particular, the pattern of typically just one White Admiral sighting per visit continued, and Silver-washed Fritillary numbers are also somewhat disappointing (10 seen), although their season is still building. Common species such as Meadow Brown, Small Skipper and Ringlet are still, well er....common, but again significantly reduced from the norms of a few years ago.

4 photos of Silver-washed Fritillary, White Admiral, Marbled White and Gatekeeper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



8 July 2016 - Grayling Kick-Off On Browndown

My previous visit to Browndown South was focussed on the Purple Hairstreak colony in the stunted oaks close to the shingle mounds, but a late afternoon visit today, in essentially overcast conditions, was aimed at the Grayling colony close to the firing range wall. My visit was successful, but qualified by just recording one male Grayling towards the north of the site.

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I did however take the opportunity to check some of the stunted oaks for Purple Hairstreak, within the Grayling area itself (several hundred yards east of where I normally see them). Indeed they are present, with hairstreaks jerkily flying around and settling when the branches were tapped on two of these stunted oaks.

2 photos of Grayling posted to Recent Photos Gallery and one of a rather splendid female Silver-washed Fritillary basking on bracken, taken yesterday in Whiteley Pastures.



6 July 2016 - Whiteley Emperor Takes A Liking To My Shoe!

My rather unspectacular late morning walk in Whiteley Pastures was soon to be turned on its head, as I started my return down the main track from Ridge Copse. As I approached what looked to be a black and white butterfly basking down on the track (thinking at this stage it was a White Admiral), it soon became clear it was actually a male Purple Emperor - in pristine condition!

As I approached, the emperor took off, and I prayed it would not just fly up into the trees (it wouldn't be the first time!), but thankfully my luck was in today and I spent the next fifteen minutes in its company. Having circled me at low level a few times, providing great views of the iridescent sheen, it landed on my shoe and began feeding! It even tolerated a few gentle changes in stance as I tried to obtain some pics, which is not easy when you cannot move independently from the subject! I even had to get down one knee, keeping the occupied foot firmly planted on the ground, as I tried to obtain a better angle.

Having sampled a few different podiatric locations, the emperor flew a little way down the track to eventually settle close to the grass verge, with wings pressed flat to the ground and feeding from the track. The odd flick of the wings, as I manoeuvred around it, was interpreted as "that's close enough", even though it had been on my shoe previously. I departed with the Emperor still on the track to return to civilisation and the Whiteley Business Park.

Several Silver-washed Fritillaries and one White Admiral were also seen, as well as common woodland species, but today's visit belonged to the Emperor! 6 photos of Purple Emperor posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



3 July 2016 - Looking Down On Browdown's Purple Hairstreaks!

Visiting Browdown South these days has the added constraint of having to check access times, but at least they are published online now (via Lee Residents website). This afternoon's visit was certainly worthwhile, with the site arguably the best in the county for photographing Purple Hairstreaks.

I focused on an area of stunted oak (6-8ft tall) and scrub oak to the west of the brick face of the firing range (grid ref recorded on trekking GPS as SZ5775099120), I recorded around 20 Purple Hairstreaks, apportioned approximately equally between the sexes. The males are showing some signs of fading, but many of the females are pristine. There were typically 1-3 individuals in several of the small trees (a light tap sends them flying!) with odd ones amongst the scrub oak (knee height!).

Amazing experience to be observing and photographing these high flyers below eye level! A quick check of the Grayling area just to the east did not produce any sightings. 4 photos of Purple Hairstreak posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



2 July 2016 - Silver-washed Dashing Around Whilst An Admiral Drops In At Whiteley

I made my first visit of the season to Whiteley Pastures this morning, my local woodland. A stroll along the main track, before the shower clouds closed in, produced 6 Silver-washed Fritillaries. They were all fresh males and very active, occasionally stopping to feed on the abundant bramble flowers bordering the track. In the shadier area beyond the ridge, a single White Admiral paused from its high level flight along the boughs, to pose briefly on bracken for a heavy cropped photo. Other species seen were Large Skipper, Ringlet, Meadow Brown and Brimstone.

Whiteley Pastures is not the best site for Purple Emperor, but I am hopeful they will make an appearance here in a week or so.

3 photos (Silver-washed Fritillary, White Admiral and Large Skipper) posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



28 June 2016 - Main Woodland Butterfly Season Kicking Off

First things first - sightings of Purple Emperor have been recorded in neighbouring counties of Sussex and Surrey on Monday, so we can expect the first sightings in Hampshire perhaps as early as this weekend (and on cue for early July as expected). Those other two woodland icons, the White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary are already reported from Alice Holt Forest. So the main summer flight activity and what might be considered the pinnacle of the butterfly season is fast approaching.

Following my visit to Pitt Down yesterday, I called in at Beaulieu Heath in the New Forest - the heath is still quite wet after the rains of the last week, with some areas of standing water. Nevertheless a few Silver-studded blues were flitting around. It is clearly still very early in their season on these damp New Forest heaths.

3 photos of Silver-studded Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



27 June 2016 - Perfect Timing For Dark Green Visit To Pitt Down

During the past years, I recall several visits to Pitt Down (part of Farley Mount Country Park) in search of Dark Green Fritillaries which have ended in varying levels of disappointment. Thankfully today was not one of those days and even the weather of broken cloud was perfect. Fifteen minutes after arriving (in early afternoon) at the eastern section of Pitt Down, I had seen 6 Dark Green Fritillaries and got close to most of them for photos as they fed voraciously on thistles. The 'haul' included a stunning female and all specimens were quite fresh, except for one slightly faded male.

The species is best observed a few days into the start of the flight period when these powerful fliers have burnt off some of the excess energy and are prepared to feed (instead of just giving you the run-around!).

I did not have time to count numbers of other species, however Brimstone, Marbled White, Large Skipper and Meadow Brown were also present. 4 photos of Dark Green Fritillary posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



23 June 2016 - Small Pearls Bonanza In Co Durham Plantation

The other main target species for my northern roots trip was to acquaint myself with a couple of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary sites. I have previously seen the species in small numbers in Wark Forest in Northumberland and along the Waskerley Way - one of the so called A68 colonies on the edge of the Pennines in County Durham. Following some research, I set out to visit a different site in Northumberland, namely Debdon Plantation near Rothbury, where decent numbers of Small Pearls had been recorded last year.

This was my early morning stop on Tuesday in cool mainly cloudy conditions - but I had not reckoned on a Forestry Commission notice at the main entrance indicating the plantation was currently closed to the public, due to weather damage. Small Pearls are recorded also along the edge of the plantation by the road, but my luck was out there also. It is possible the Small Pearls have not yet emerged at this very damp location, with most of the marsh thistles on which they feed still in tight bud. So the good memories from this stop will be restricted to the beautiful Northumberland landscape around Rothbury.

Thankfully my fortunes from then on would take a great leap forward. Next stop was over the county border into Durham and the Black Plantation near Lanchester. This plantation is managed by the Woodland Trust. Following extensive work on the habitat by Durham Wildlife Trust, Woodland Trust, Butterfly Conservation and the Lanchester Wildlife Group, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries have been introduced into the plantation from small nearby sites and are colonising the wayleave area under the power lines.

My estimate is that there were around 40 Small Pearls on the wing in the wayleave, all very active during good spells of sunshine. They were mostly males, ranging from faded to quite fresh but also a few females in good or very good condition. Indeed, Small Pearls were rarely out of sight, with sometimes two or even three on the same marsh thistle cluster. I would go as far as to say I have never seen such a concentration of this species. This is a great outcome (so far) for the conservation efforts, largely done by volunteers.

I was later able also to visit another site for Small Pearls, this time a damp moorland flush close to Burn Hill which is not open access (I was invited as a guest). The clouds had returned for the moment, but we did see several roosting Small Pearls.

5 photos of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



22 June 2016 - In Search Of Artaxerxes and Salmacis

At the beginning of this week, I made a short visit back to my northern roots, basing myself in Northumberland, with the intention of visiting a couple of sites where the Northern Brown Argus (*Aricia artaxerxes*) can be found. The Northern Brown Argus is further subdivided into two subspecies, *salmacis* (found in N England and possibly N Wales) and *artaxerxes* (yes same as species name) found only in Scotland.

Northumberland is quite convenient as a base, since it's just a short hop north into the Scottish Borders where subspecies *artaxerxes* can be found along the beautiful coast just to the north of Berwick-upon-Tweed, and a short hop south into County Durham, where some of the largest colonies of subspecies *salmacis* are located.

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Visually the two subspecies are distinguished by a prominent white spot on the upper forewing of the Scottish form, which is replaced by a small black spot or smaller/fainter white spot in the Northern English form.

First up it was the flowery coastal hillside (perhaps I should call it a 'brae') of Partanhall, immediately north of the picturesque village of Burnmouth. The hillside is very steep but thankfully most of the Northern Brown Argus were located close to its foot. Another observer indicated that they had only started to emerge a few days ago, due to a prolonged spell of poor weather. Around 6 Northern Brown Argus were seen, mainly feeding on Valerian. Most were males but one female was seen (with more pronounced border of red spots on the upper wing surfaces).

Yesterday, back in England, I visited Bishop Middleham Quarry, a former magnesian limestone quarry with a rich flora now managed by the Durham Wildlife Trust - it has one of the largest colonies of *salmacis*. I had no difficulty finding the Northern Brown Argus here - the rich grassy verge on the left after entering the reserve though the main gate are where most of them can be found. Many were quite fresh with at least 20 seen, including several females.

A subsequent post will concentrate on sites in the North of England which I also visited for Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (40 seen at one site!). 6 photos of Northern Brown Argus (*ssp artaxerxes* and *salmacis*) posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



18 June 2016 - Unsettled Spell Holds Back Summer Emergence

The current unsettled spell is likely to hold back the emergence of our summer season butterflies. By mid-June it is not unusual for species such as Dark Green Fritillary, White-letter Hairstreak and even White Admiral to be reported in Hampshire, however the already delayed season is being compounded by the current unsettled spell.

It may now be the latter part of June before we see these species in the county. The season is however, still progressing. Silver-studded Blue are now emerging at more sites, including Broxhead Common and numbers of Large Skipper, Marbled White and Meadow Brown are building in the county.

As for that other iconic summer species, the Purple Emperor, monitoring of early life stages suggests that His (and Her) Majesty will not be seen on the wing in the county before early July.

I am intending to spend a couple of days in the north of England very soon and, weather permitting, that could involve visiting a couple of butterfly sites, which I look forward to reporting.

9 June 2016 - Old Winchester Hill Resplendent In Summer Colours (But Quiet For Butterflies!)

This is generally the quiet period of the summer for Hampshire's butterflies - a point made clear during a late morning walk today in the south field of Old Winchester Hill and around the perimeter of the fort. In the south field, significant clearance work has been undertaken on the lower slopes and the habitat looks much improved, with abundant wild flowers (from horseshoe vetch to orchids) now in bloom. Hopefully the former bodes well for a good Chalkhill season - and before that, Adonis Blue, which are still to emerge here - it's always a late site for them.

Only a few butterfly species were seen, including Common Blue, Small Heath, Brimstone, Small White and a late Grizzled Skipper. Despite the relative lack of butterflies, the walk around the hill fort was exhilarating and the views spectacular, both to the distance and of the pristine downland slopes closeby.

In Hampshire, this is a time to say goodbye to a few of our spring species (and may already be too late for some), but it is also a good time to make some visits further afield. Several of the UK species which are not found in the county are either on the wing right now or about to begin their flight periods. These include Swallowtail, Black Hairstreak, Large Blue, Heath Fritillary, Chequered Skipper, Large Blue, Large Heath, Lulworth Skipper, Mountain Ringlet, Northern Brown Argus and Glanville Fritillary - the latter sadly no longer a Hampshire species, but on the wing just a short hop away on the IoW. I intend to visit the North of England later this month, but for the moment I will enjoy the slight lull in the season.

5 June 2016 - Challenging Season No More Evident Than In Bentley Wood

The problems facing some of our scarcest local species was brought into sharp focus during my visit to Bentley Wood this afternoon. I do not normally struggle in the Eastern Clearing to find my target species, especially not on a glorious day like today. However, there were very few butterflies active in and around the clearing. After around 40 minutes there I had counted 6 Pearl-bordered Fritillaries (disappointing considering the late season) and just one Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (very disappointing considering they should be peaking around now), and a few Brimstones. The clearing is in need of some urgent maintenance, with bracken rampant in too many areas, crowding out the low level flora.

With such a low butterfly count in the clearing, I made the 25 minute walk to Barnridge Copse (on the Wiltshire side) and the only place I know where you can see Marsh Fritillaries, Pearls and Small Pearls on the same site, if you get your timing right. I joined another observer and we both failed to find any Marsh Fritillaries. I had seen them last week in a nearby woodland location - see blog entry of 28 May - and they have been recorded this season both in the Eastern Clearing and at Martin Down.

It would be hard to believe that the Marsh Fritillary has not yet emerged at this site and it is more likely that there has been only a small emergence here, with the butterflies now dispersed. There were two or three Pearl-bordered Fritillaries (now fading), one Small-Pearl-bordered Fritillary and several Grizzled Skippers, still hanging on to provide some compensation.

3 photos of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (from the Eastern Clearing) posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



3 June 2016 - Summer Arrives As Poor Weather Puts Damper On The Season

The first day of June is the meteorological start of the summer, but this year it arrived with a whimper, as rain and cool temperatures put a temporary damper on the season. Early June normally heralds a lull in the butterfly season in Hampshire, as the spring butterflies tail off and we await the summer butterflies.

It's a bit different this year, with the delayed season extending the spring period well into June. There is still much egg-laying activity going on (Dukes, Orange Tips, Green Hairstreaks etc) which will probably continue until the

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middle of the month. Late spring butterflies, such as Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Marsh Fritillary are still in the early or middle part of their flight seasons and I guess we can expect to wait at least a week longer than normal for the main summer butterflies to start emerging. I include here Dark Green Fritillary, White Admiral and Purple Emperor. Silver-studded blue are sometimes recorded in late May at their earliest sites (eg Bramshott Common), but we should not have to wait too much longer for them.

So, there is still plenty going on in the first half of June, assuming the weather improves soon and still much to look forward to in this unusual season.

28 May 2016 - Late Season Continues As Woodland Marsh Frits Take Wing

Following in my footsteps of last season, I returned this afternoon to the Marsh Fritillary colony in Hound Wood just over the county boundary in Wiltshire. I have to admit that I expected to see more than 2 Marsh Fritillaries on a site where Devil's Bit Scabious is so abundant, but 2 fresh males it was.

The site looks in great condition and the reason for the low numbers is simple - the season is still running significantly late, perhaps especially so for woodland colonies and species. There were several Pearl-bordered Fritillaries (slightly fading), around 10 Duke Of Burgundy, and dozens of Grizzled Skippers, which is another indication of the late season. Grizzled's would normally be basically over by now.

2 photos of Marsh Fritillary posted to Recent Photos Gallery (no complementary full size photo of Duke below posted to gallery).



26 May 2016 - Summery Feel To Portsdown

It is about a month since I explored the lower slopes of central Portsdown Hill, but how things have moved on! The improved weather and higher temperatures have had a dramatic effect. It means it looks like summer there now (well at least early summer), with the vegetation having put on a foot or so of growth and the air laden with the scent of summer flowers.

As well as a decent showing of Orange Tips and other whites, there were several Holly Blues flitting around the shrub margins, and I was pleased to see that Small Blues are dispersing from their main breeding sites. I saw two in area where there is little Kidney Vetch. My short visit only produced a couple of photos, one of a female Holly Blue one of a male Small Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



20 May 2016 - Mating Dukes and Green Hairstreaks Provide Oxenbourne Highlights

An early afternoon visit to Oxenbourne Down, using the high level route to its far extremity, confirmed a decent early spring season there. Most of the best butterfly action was at the far end where the scrub opens up from the narrow path and where there are patches of gorse (perhaps too much!). I had already seen four Duke Of Burgundy, ranging from quite fresh to a faded male, when a pair were seen chasing each other - presumably the male doing the chasing! They landed in a gorse bush, and after the briefest few seconds of courtship, fluttering round each other, it was down to business! Once coupled, they manoeuvred into a more comfortable back-to-back stance.

The other highlight was seeing five Green Hairstreaks, mainly around the gorse bushes, hitting my only previous sighting of a singleton here for six - the sixth (albeit rather worn) was disturbed on bramble close to the path on the way back, close to the entrance gate near the A3 - the first I have ever seen in this area. Other species recorded were Grizzled Skipper, Dingy Skipper, Brimstone, Orange Tip, Small Heath, Peacock and Green-veined White, although none in profusion.

Four photos of the mating Dukes and Green Hairstreak posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



16 May 2016 - Small Blue Recovering On Portsdown Hill

A lunchtime walk along the lower slope of Portsdown Hill, below the Paulsgrove Quarry face produced 10 Small Blues (mostly males) - a significant improvement on last year. The scrub in this area is gradually returning after being cut back severely a couple of years ago, with good patches of kidney vetch for Small Blue egg laying. There were also several Common Blues in the same area, my first of the season.

Following the prolonged cold spell, this season is now finding its feet again as the weather switches from typical late winter fayre to early summer in a matter of a couple of weeks!

Three photos of Small Blue and one of Common Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



15 May 2016 - Mixed Fortunes For Some Species During This Delayed Season

The middle of May would normally represent the peak of the flight period for some of our early spring species, such as Duke Of Burgundy and Dingy Skipper. In this delayed season, this is probably only true for the earliest sites. Whilst some species, such as the two just mentioned seem to be doing OK, some species seem to be significantly down on numbers this year, such as Green Hairstreak and Orange Tip. Furthermore, at a couple of, what I would call marginal sites I have visited recently, butterfly numbers seem substantially lower than normal, with some expected species completely absent.

It's probably too early to be drawing conclusions when the season, in reality, is not even a month old, but this does seem to be developing into a strange one, and not only because of the delayed start.

To end on a positive note, I post photo to Recent Photos Gallery of a fresh Duke of Burgundy, which was one of three Dukes seen on West Butser during a short Friday lunchtime visit.

13 May 2016 - Mating Pearls in New Copse!

If time is short, New Copse Inclosure in the New Forest is one of the most convenient places in Hampshire to see Pearl-bordered Fritillaries. There aren't large numbers there of course (well there aren't large numbers anywhere!), but from parking at the gate to its eastern entrance, it's just a two minute walk to Pearl territory along the verges of the gravel track and in a small clearing to the left.

The weather was perfect for them this afternoon - calm, warm and bright with some sunshine. About a dozen Pearls were seen, seeking out the flowers of bugle or searching for a mate, weaving their low intricate flight. A lucky couple had not only succeeded in finding each other but were busy consummating their relationship, perched on a grass stem. Bothersome males would occasionally try to interrupt, but the mating couple did their best to rebuff the intruders, with a few wing flaps and by repositioning their stance.

5 photos of Pearl-bordered Fritillary posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



7 May 2016 - Late Morning Stroll On Stephen's Castle Down

As the cloud moved north to leave a sunny, warm day, I took a late morning stroll on Stephen's Castle Down, north of Bishop's Waltham. It was plain sailing once I had discovered the way around the felled bushes blocking the path near the lay-by. The down looks resplendent in its spring coat of lush green leaves and spring flowers, and the views north and east are stunning. On the down there is a decent showing of both Grizzled and Dingy Skippers (easily double figures of each) as well as common species. There are a few Dukes and Green Hairstreaks normally showing too but I did not see any during my short visit, and it may still be too early on this east facing site.

No new photos today, but I post two further Duke Of Burgundy photos to the Recent Photos Gallery, taken at Noar Hill on Thursday, including a very fresh female, just finishing expanding her wings after emergence.

6 May 2016 - Season Gathering Momentum After Being Stopped In Its Tracks

Yesterday afternoon I visited Noar Hill followed up by walk along Rake Bottom are of Butser Hill. As the weather improves after the cold spell which almost stopped it in its tracks, the season is at last gathering momentum.

At Noar Hill Duke Of Burgundy numbers are building, with individuals seen sporadically down the central spine of the reserve, including 3 males in the far chalk pit and a freshly emerged female in the first pit close to the western gate. In all, 7 Dukes were seen. There are good numbers of Dingy Skippers too, again well distributed - 10 counted. The diminutive Green Hairstreak was also in evidence with a couple of them darting around a Juniper bush in the central pit area. Typically by now the Duke season at Noar Hill would be within a few days of reaching its peak, but that is still at least couple of weeks away.

Along Rake Bottom, the veil of cloud and cooling temperatures perhaps did not help my chances of Duke of Burgundy nor Green Hairstreak, which are just beginning to emerge there (but none seen during my walk). However, there were plenty of Grizzled and Dingy Skippers - more than 20 in each case. On the way out, a surprise sighting was a Small Heath, possibly the first seen in Hampshire this season.

8 photos of Duke Of Burgundy, Dingy Skipper, Grizzled Skipper and Small Heath posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



30 April 2016 - Next Wave Of Dukes At Noar Hill?

I paid a mid-morning visit to Noar Hill. Despite a good deal of sunshine warming the vegetation and evaporating the overnight dew, the air was still cold (~10 degrees C), which I think is the explanation for very few butterflies to be found. I only managed an Orange Tip and a Peacock, but one or two other observers had slightly more success, with a freshly emerged Duke Of Burgundy seen in the central pit area and a Green Hairstreak flitting around yew bushes.

The prolonged spell of cold weather may mean that the initial, small wave of spring butterfly emergences more than two weeks ago, has become a false dawn, with some of those individuals now likely to have perished. We

now await a next wave of emergences, as the weather begins a slow transition to slightly milder and more settled conditions. Perhaps the fresh Duke seen at Noar Hill this morning represents the beginning of the next wave?

29 April 2016 - Most Challenging Start To A Season I Can Recall!

The end of April would typically be a time when one could choose to visit any of several sites to see early spring butterflies on the wing, such as Dukes, Grizzled and Dingy Skippers and Green Hairstreaks. We would normally now be looking forward to the next phase of spring, with Pearl-bordered Fritillaries just around the corner and Orange Tips reaching their peak.

The reality, in terms of the proportion of individual early spring butterflies to have emerged, is that the season is still in its infancy, with most sites not yet having started. The main reason is of course the prolonged spell of cold weather, with temperatures barely making double figures. I cannot recall a spring like it!

Nevertheless I was determined to get out this afternoon, and did manage a walk along Rake Bottom (Butser Hill), finding several Grizzled Skippers. Other reports indicate Dingy Skippers are starting to emerge there and the first Green Hairstreak has also been recorded. My visit unfortunately was curtailed, as a heavy shower rolled in, accompanied by the cold wind whipping up along the valley floor.

Looking at the forecast for the next week, there are signs of a slight improvement, and although there may not be a good supply of sunshine on offer, temperatures are set to climb at least into the low teens, which might just be enough to start this beleaguered season rolling. Photo of Grizzled Skipper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



23 April 2016 - North Winds Could Put Season On Ice Until Early May

This will not be the first spring season which struggles to get going as winter tries to barge back in on the act, and nor will it be the last - it's not unusual. A late morning visit to West Butser made me think I should have brought gloves and a scarf! If it had not been for a single Brimstone seen in the Butser Hill car park, my butterfly count would have been zero.

The northerly airflow looks like being around for several days, with temperatures barely reaching double figures. This means that very few butterflies will emerge, and the season may not get going again until early May. Well let's hope the delay is worth it!

19 April 2016 - Spring Butterflies Building On Portsdown, Including Orange Tip

Following the mild winter, spring seems to be taking its time getting going. However, a late afternoon walk along the green bridleways on the lower slopes of Portsdown Hill, showed that butterflies are at last taking wing in increasing numbers. As the clouds gradually dispersed, there were Brimstones, Small Whites, Speckled Woods, Peacocks, Orange Tips and Commas, all enjoying the sunshine.

I was pleased in particular, to see around 6 male Orange Tips, bearing in mind sightings have been quite scarce since the first UK record back on 26 March. They were indulging in their usual early season behaviour, patrolling

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the verges, seeking out anything that might resemble a female. Resting time was at a premium, although one paused briefly to nectar on bluebell.

The weather is still in typical April mode, and progress of the butterfly season is likely to continue in stop/start mode, as some cold days and rain or showers are probable.

4 photos of Orange Tip, Speckled Wood, Peacock and Small White posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



17 April 2016 - Quiet In Rake Bottom But Grizzled Eventually Shows Up

A mid-afternoon outing to explore Rake Bottom in the Butser complex, looking for early fliers, proved to be quite challenging. Firstly, my fitness levels leave lot to be desired after the winter, secondly, it was mostly cloudy and cool by the time I got there after an earlier appointment, and thirdly, it is still very early in the flight season, even for the first of the season's emerging species.

After waiting for what seemed like an age in the valley floor for the sun to re-emerge, I was grateful that a solitary female Grizzled Skipper showed up a few yards in front of me - although I never managed to get very close to it.

So my season is underway and I am grateful for that - give this place two or three weeks and some decent weather, and it will be buzzing with Grizzled, Dingies, Green Hairstreaks and Dukes. Well let's hope so!

Photo of Grizzled Skipper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



13 April 2016 - Two Fine Days Kick Start The Season, Including The Duke

It has taken two generally fine days, following a cool unsettled spell to finally kick the new season into action. First sightings in the county of Duke of Burgundy, Grizzled Skipper and Green Hairstreak are all reported today. A mating pair of Duke of Burgundy was seen in the central pits area of Noar Hill, whilst singletons of Grizzled

Skipper and Green Hairstreak (unconfirmed) are reported from Magdalen Hill Down. Sightings of Orange Tip and other whites are also becoming more regular in the county, albeit often as singletons.

Sadly, after a couple of lovely spring days, it looks like we are back to some serious April showers or longer spells of rain for a while!

2 April 2016 - Cold March Nights Peg Back Early Spring Momentum

Following the warmest winter in England for decades, beckoning a very early spring, March has seen a return to more typical weather and temperatures. Indeed, a high proportion of very cold nights and a wintry feel to many mornings has actually pegged the spring back a little.

Nevertheless, the butterfly season is starting to gather momentum, with sightings of Small Whites now occurring quite regularly in Hampshire. Surely they will be joined in the next few days by first sightings other members of the white family including Large, Green-veined and that herald of spring, the Orange Tip.

Comparing the early sightings of this year in the South Of England with recent years, this season is just slightly behind 2014, so I won't be surprised if the first Duke, Grizzled Skipper and Green Hairstreak have been seen in the county by the end of the second week in April. As we all know, first sightings are always a bit of a lottery!

11 March 2016 - Earlier Brown Hairstreak Egg Hunt Makes It Easier For Me!

A short visit to Noar Hill this afternoon for Brown Hairstreak eggs was quite productive. However this was primarily due to the job being made much easier, as a result of an earlier egg hunt leaving red tags on some of the egg laden blackthorn bushes. Egg laden usually means one egg in the case!

I could not actually find eggs on all the marked bushes but to compensate I did find two eggs without this assistance. In the triangle I counted 8 marked bushes, and although this area has been seriously cleared of much of the scrub during winter, the exercise did make me ponder on the chance of witnessing Brown Hairstreak ovipositing at this location.

Let's say there are actually about 30 eggs in the triangle, bearing in mind not all have been found. These would perhaps be laid during a period of about one month, between mid-August and mid-September. Since a female on an egg-laying run will lay several eggs during a period of a few minutes, then it follows egg-laying activity would occur on only a few days. I think you get my drift!

3 photos of Brown Hairstreak eggs posted to Recent Photos Gallery (note these gallery photos will probably be removed once the butterfly season gets going).



27 February 2016 - Monarch Migration Begins Amid Good News On Population Increase

The start of the UK butterfly season is still a few weeks away, so it is perhaps a good time to reflect on one of nature's greatest spectacles and indeed mysteries. The Monarch butterflies which have overwintered in the high altitude Oyamel Fir Forests of Mexico, are arousing to mate and begin their northward journey to the US and Canada. The return leg - a distance of up to 2500 miles - will be made in the autumn by butterflies 3 generations later and represents the only round trip migration of any butterfly on this scale. How the Monarchs navigate to return to the same few acres of forest that their great grandparents departed a year or so earlier, is still largely a mystery to science.

The good news this year is that the acreage used for hibernation in their Mexican wintering grounds has increased three-fold from last winter to 10 acres (with an estimated population of 150 million individuals) and up from 1.33 acres in 2013 - a record low.

Alejandro del Mazo, head of Mexico's office for protected areas, credited the recovery to the great results of the joint actions taken by the Mexican, US and Canadian governments to reverse the decline. The decline is thought to be due to a combination of illegal logging (in Mexico) and reduction of habitat (including milkweed foodplant) in the USA and Canada as a result of pesticides.

31 January 2016 - 600 Flower Species Bloom On New Year's Day!

A survey by the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) concluded that on 1 January, no fewer than 612 plant species (including shrubs) were actually flowering. In a normal cold winter, botanists would expect no more than 20 to 30 types of wild plants to be in flower in the British Isles at the year's end - species such as daisy, dandelion and gorse. This is an unprecedented event which has left plant scientists astonished.

The majority of instances are considered to be later blooms of summer flowering species such as horseshoe vetch, whilst others, such as hawthorn, are species which are in flower up to 5 months earlier than normal.

It is stated that, just like December's astounding weather regime of record rainfall and warmth, the mass out-of-time flowering is suggestive of a substantial climatic shift and what might be expected with climate change.

This phenomenon is not at all confined to Britain either - for example Death Valley in the USA is also putting on an unseasonal display of colour, as many flowers bloom in the unusually mild January conditions.

I think we are in for an interesting butterfly season (but not necessarily a good one) as climate change plays havoc with what we consider as 'normal'.

10 January 2016 - First Speckled Wood Of 2016 Reported Already

It will hardly come as a surprise that, with winter temperatures so far more typical of autumn, the first non-hibernator of 2016 is already on the wing - a Speckled Wood reported from Hertfordshire on 4 January. In recent times the sight of a Speckled Wood in January is not at all unusual, in fact during the last decade, the first UK sighting of this butterfly has more often than not occurred in January and occurred as early as New Year's day in 2013.

Whilst mild winter temperatures are probably welcomed by most people (except perhaps when they are accompanied by the very high rainfall we have experienced), mild, wet winters seem to play havoc with butterfly populations, by not killing off as many parasites and increasing the risk of overwintering larvae/pupae rotting. I too am actually looking forward to a few days of more conventional colder, drier winter weather, as is forecast!