



2012 Blog

9 December 2012 - Unremarkable Autumn Is Good News

The fact that this autumn has been unremarkable on the butterfly front (few late broods, sightings now restricted to occasional hibernators) as a result of a return to relatively normal autumnal weather should be welcomed. I hope the benign autumn heralds, for a year or two at least, a return to typical weather patterns during other seasons. Unseasonal extreme weather has wreaked havoc with many species of our butterflies in recent years.

I for one will be more than happy with a fairly cold, but mainly dry winter leading to a spring which arrives on time (and not ridiculously warm or early as has characterised some recent years) to be followed by a decent summer, free from prolonged deluges in June or July.

The other uncertainty which awaits us next year is the development and potential spread of Ash dieback disease. Whilst I don't believe any cases are reported in Hampshire so far (and I guess the disease is relatively dormant during the winter), the spread and severity of Ash dieback is a major concern for our woodlands and the wildlife that depends on them. Whilst effects on butterfly populations are not likely to be rapid or dramatic in the short term (very few butterflies are directly dependent on Ash) the effect on woodland ecosystems could be very severe and take decades to recover.

27 October 2012 - News Of Ash Dieback Not Welcome As Season bows Out

Whilst the first few weeks of autumn have witnessed a bumper crop of Red Admirals, hopes of other late season highlights such third brood Wall Brown, have not borne fruit, due to the overall lateness of the season. So it would seem, as the first taste of frosty mornings and chilly daytime temperatures arrive, the butterfly season is now about to bow out (more or less) until next spring.

On a different topical note, I notice that the local branch website has opened a new page for species conservation, with the first article on the Brown Hairstreak, quite coincidentally following a similar theme to the updated introduction I have recently created for the species pages. On a less welcome note, news of the outbreak of Ash dieback disease in East Anglia has come to prominence this week. Apart from the potentially devastating effect on our native woodlands, if this outbreak is not controlled and spreads, it would represent a further setback to the Brown Hairstreak - Ash is its favourite tree in which to perch and feed (from aphid honeydew).

29 September 2012 - Squirrel Had Right Idea Turning His back!

Little did I know when I took this photo in March of a Red Squirrel's "backside" on the Isle of Wight, that it would provide an ironic "tribute" to the 2012 butterfly season!



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In many ways I am pleased to be turning my back on the season, which has overall been the poorest I have experienced in recent years, yet just like the squirrel's amazing tail, this butterfly season has not been without a few highlights. I will not go into verbose detail here, but instead post a few additional photos to an end of season bonus gallery, accessible via the photo archive. Each photo has a short caption continuing the light-hearted theme.

The 2012 season, for many of our butterflies, is of course now over or all but over. Late summer Vanessids will continue to be seen on reasonable days, typically enjoying the fruit harvest, and there are late broods of Whites, Small Copper and Speckled Wood for the avid observer to see, perhaps to be joined by a few Wall Brown (if lucky) in the next couple of weeks. Occasional Clouded Yellow sightings are also being reported in locations along the south coast in preparation for an attempt by some to seek warmer climes across the channel.

For me, the period of the year to perform some website housekeeping has arrived (gallery updates, site feature updates, species pages updates) partly in an attempt to reflect the evolving populations of our butterflies - and disappointingly, it seems to be one of continued decline at a number of sites. I will notify significant updates on the What's New page and will aim to maintain occasional blog entries on my reflections or topical points (e.g. once or twice a month) during the quiet period.

14 September 2012 - Late Summer Broods Enjoying The Mellow Fruitfulness

It's the middle of September and the butterfly species which seem to characterise this time of year are enjoying the fruits of the season. A walk around an area of Gosport this afternoon where brambles abound was providing a feast for them - Red Admirals and Commas in particular, with many fresh individuals. They were complemented by a new crop of Whites too - of the Large and Small varieties. They were more intent on seeking mates or joining the aforementioned species feeding from the remaining blooms of buddleia.

Whilst technically we are in autumn, summer has not quite relinquished its tenure yet. The sighting earlier in the month of a second brood Duke Of Burgundy at Noar Hill is an event which normally occurs in mid-August (and in fact has now happened in 3 out of the last 5 seasons). It also bears testimony to the season still being a couple of weeks later than normal - so in season terms it could be argued we are only at the end of August now!

That may be slightly wishful thinking however, since other factors such as the shortening length of the days and falling temperatures may accelerate the inevitable progress towards autumn as we normally know it - as well as those ripe fruits and rustic foliage, there will also be morning mists, cold nights, wind, rain, wasps and daddy longlegs!

3 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery - Red Admiral, Comma and Small White.



7 September 2012 - Ths Strange Season Still Has Some (Positive) Twists!

I was delighted to learn from the branch website that Adonis Blue had made a belated appearance this year at Old Winchester Hill - so delighted that I decided to take a look myself this afternoon. It was feared that the species

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had (once again) become extinct there, following no sightings in 2011 and none during the 2012 spring flight period.

This news was surprise enough, but my exploration of the prehistoric fort and in particular two of the Adonis' old haunts led to another surprise. Adonis has not only reappeared on the south field (considered its main location) but also on the car park slope. I recorded 4 males at the bottom of the south field and a further three towards the bottom of the car park slope, after the path turns south.

One possible factor in the recent lack of sightings is that Old Winchester Hill is a late site, with flight periods typically a week or two behind some other sites - this applies also to Silver-spotted Skipper and Dark Green Fritillary. There are other explanations of course, but I have no information to suggest any artificial intervention!

The other recent positive twist is the decent late summer brood of Small Tortoiseshell. Like many people, I have started to see them more frequently, in gardens and on downland - indeed I saw three today and last week when returning to Selborne from the common, there were several pristine Small Tortoiseshells feeding voraciously on a large buddleia in the garden of the Selborne Arms.

I think the demise of the Small Tortoiseshell over recent years is not well understood (although it is heavily parasitized) and I suspect its resurgence is also a mystery, but let's hope that it does represent the start of a sustained period of recovery.

3 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery - 2 Adonis Blue and 1 Silver-spotted Skipper of which 6 were seen today at OWH.

1 September 2012 - Late Summer Visit To Selborne Common

Having visited Selborne Common a couple of years ago in search of Brown Hairstreak (without success!), I returned yesterday hoping for better luck. Selborne Common is managed by the National Trust and is close to Noar Hill (another Brown Hairstreak site, although sightings there have been declining in recent years).

The National Trust has produced a downloadable leaflet called 'Selborne Common and The Lythe Butterfly Walk', which I used as a guide. The areas mentioned on Selborne Common for Brown Hairstreak certainly look very suitable, particularly the so-called 'blackthorn jungle'. There is also good habitat for other residents such White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary, particularly on the eastern side of the common.

I had hoped for a more definitive outcome from my visit, which started well, with two probable Brown Hairstreak sightings in flight at separate locations, and occurring soon after completing the climb up the zig-zag path from Selborne. However, as sometimes happens with this species, it was a case of early promise being unfulfilled, with no further sightings to report, despite searches of nectar sources (hemp agrimony, bramble) and blackthorn (for egg laying females).

I am certainly planning return visits next year to the Common, both for summer woodland species and Brown Hairstreak. Roll on next summer!

Photos of Peacock and Red Admiral (which were enjoying the Hemp Agrimony!) posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

26 August 2012 - A Season On Which To Ponder

As the 2012 butterfly season begins (belatedly) to wane, it will no doubt leave us with plenty to ponder in its wake.

Maybe it's still a little early to be pondering too deeply, but there are a few points concerning two late summer species which I mention now. These relate to Brown Hairstreak and Silver-spotted Skipper. From a Hampshire perspective, neither of these species can be said to be thriving,

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Most Brown Hairstreak sightings have been confined to the far north west of the county, around Shipton Bellinger, with just one record I am aware of from Noar Hill so far. In the case of the latter, whilst the population of Silver-spotted Skipper at Broughton Down seems to be holding up, sightings at 3 other sites (Stockbridge Down, Oxenbourne Down and Old Winchester Hill) have typically been in single figures and a number of observers have failed to find it. In addition, emergence at Old Winchester Hill has been very late, which is the probable consequence of the poor spring/early summer weather and the degrading habitat to support this species.

Thankfully we are not in danger of losing either of these butterflies from the county, at least in the short/medium term, due to at least one good site in each case (Shipton Bellinger and Broughton Down respectively). However, there is a danger that they could be lost from some sites in the not distant future, where populations seem to be struggling.

21 August 2012 - Adonis Blank At Broughton But Success In Wilts

On my way to Shipton Bellinger yesterday, I called in at Broughton Down in the hope of finding a few summer brood Adonis Blues, which have emerged on their main downland sites (outside Hants). The disappointment of not finding any was well compensated by my escapade at Shipton Bellinger soon afterwards, however I had not given up on Adonis, and in late afternoon I made the short hop down the A30 to Figsbury Ring (in Wilts).

No problem finding Adonis here and without the distraction of any other blues on the wing. During my short visit ~15 Adonis were recorded in a small section of the ramparts, including a mating pair. I suspect that Adonis will be seen at Broughton Down soon, but are just slightly later in emerging due to its essentially north facing aspect.

2 photos of Adonis Blue (incl mating pair) posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



20 August 2012 - Lazy Days Of Summer For Bellinger Brownies!

Having recently returned from a butterfly-free short break, I was keen to see how the Brown Hairstreak season was developing, including the prognosis for seeing females or egg laying behaviour. Key sites such as Shipton Bellinger can get quite busy on fine weekends, so I opted to wait until today to visit - the last day of my break - in the hope off adding a female to my sighting of males there, some 10 days ago.

Arriving late morning to be welcomed by a rain shower was not a good start, and a first reconnoitre of all the usual locations was unproductive. A spot of lunch was therefore called for to allow time for the sun to dry things off and hopefully spur the hairstreaks into activity. It seemed to work! A male nectaring on bramble in the boundary hedgerow was first up. He was in surprisingly good condition - perhaps even better than the males I had seen 10 days ago, and a further indication of the lateness of the season.

Little did I know the best was yet to come. I had already checked without success, the large clump of bushes close to the gap in the boundary hedge where I have seen 'Brownies' on previous occasions, but after photographing the male, another look was called for. I could hardly believe my luck - a beautiful female Brown Hairstreak had now taken up residence and was perched on a leaf!

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She stayed for at least half an hour, using several postures - closed wings, half open wings, fully open wings - the latter being her favourite pose when the sun disappeared, even manoeuvring on one occasion with fully open wings to take nectar from a nearby bramble flower!

Having gathered some photos I was becoming greedy and made a further search of the boundary hedge for more hairstreaks, but I guess I had already had my fair share of luck. On returning to the location of the female, about 20 minutes later, she had moved a metre or so further into the bushes and was now out of reasonable photographic range. It may be still too early for egg laying, bearing in mind a female was watched yesterday in similar docile mood. They are simply making the most of a relaxing time before the real business begins. Anyway, it was time for me to head off on a high!

4 photos of Brown Hairstreak posted to Recent Photos Gallery (including 1 of the male).



15 August 2012 - Change Of Plan Needed In The North Country

I took the opportunity of a short visit yesterday to Northern England to check out some boyhood haunts in the Tyne Valley. A trip down memory lane if you like, with the aim of enhancing the memory of this difficult butterfly season!

My initial target was Wall Brown, which is much more common in Northern England than the south. I should have known however, it was not going to be easy, since second brood Wall Brown have not so far been reported on the local branch website (they normally start emerging in early August).

Having visited a couple of known Wall Brown sites, including one where there is a strong colony, without success, I decided radical action was needed, and I switched attention to another member of the Brown family - the Scotch Argus. If the season was working against me in respect of Wall Brown, it could work in my favour for Scotch Argus, whose season would normally be well on the wane by now.

The downside was of course the 90 minute journey, either to Cumbria or into the Scottish Borders. I opted for the latter, having read that the species may actually be significantly under-recorded and having previously researched a couple of new locations close to the source of the River Tweed.

I only had time to visit one of these - the Badlieu Quarry, not far from Moffat. There had been a heavy shower in the area just before I arrived, so I was relieved to locate the colony with ease in the damp grassland below the disused quarry face (~20 seen). I even witnessed the brief courtship and mating. There was no standing on ceremony here - a few seconds of close contact fluttering and then down to business - they were coupled! Most of the Scotch Argus seen were males, some quite faded.

Apart from the paired female, the only other female which provided a photo opportunity was partly obscured, low down amongst the grass stems. 4 photos of Scotch Argus posted to Recent Photos Gallery, including mating pair.



11 August 2012 - Silver-Spotted Skipper Numbers Holding Up At Broughton Down

Hampshire is not blessed with an abundance of suitable habitat for short-turf loving species such as Adonis Blue and Silver-spotted Skipper. There is very limited suitable habitat for the former in the county and, in respect of the latter, populations at previous strongholds such as Old Winchester Hill, Stockbridge Down and Beacon Hill (Warnford) seem to have fallen significantly in recent years. This is probably due to damp/wet weather during the growing season, boosting grass growth, and lack of grazing to keep the sward short. Thankfully Broughton Down is maintaining a decent population of Silver-spotted Skippers and it remains one of few Hampshire sites where Adonis Blue can still be found.

On my way to Shipton Bellinger yesterday, I called into Broughton Down and recorded a dozen Silver-spotted Skippers on the main down and the western extension. Hopefully they will be joined by the small population of Adonis Blues in the next week or so.

2 photos of Silver-spotted Skipper posted to recent photos gallery and also one of a fresh Brown Argus (taken at Shipton Bellinger).



10 August 2012 - Right Place, Right Time For Brown Hairstreak (And Wall Brown!)

Brown Hairstreak spotters were gathering at Shipton Bellinger this morning hoping to see the elusive species. Most were not disappointed, taking benefit from two or three pairs of eyes being better than one, and as always, a case of being in the right place at the right time. The focus of low level activity seemed to be the blackthorn rich hedgerow and scrub close the county boundary, although a number were also spotted high in Ash trees along the track heading west from the village.

As for me, my count was 4 males, three at low level, the low level ones all showing signs of fading. They were feeding on creeping thistle and bramble, with a momentary coming together of 2 males on the same thistle head (luckily photographed). How often does that happen with Brown Hairstreak!

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After lunch it was time to move on to look for another of Hampshire's difficult species - the Wall Brown. Anyone would think I'm a glutton for punishment since Shipton Bellinger to Keyhaven is also a rather tortuous and lengthy journey! It was however rewarded by 6 Wall Brown seen along the 'Ancient Highway', heading west from the end of Lower Pennington Lane. Most were males, however there was at least one female which was photographed.

So, it turned out to be a very productive late summer day in glorious weather. 5 photos of Brown Hairstreak and Wall posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



6 August 2012 - Small Blues (And A Small Copper) Enjoying A Taste Of Summer

The Small Blue spring flight period was about as good as June's weather (dismal!) so it was heartening to find a few of their summer brood out again on Portsdown Hill today, close to the Paulsgrove Quarry. In fact I saw more there today (around six, including at least one female.) than on any of my visits during the spring period. I don't usually see Small Copper here, but a very fresh one was also in the same area. Unfortunately it darted off at great speed over the 'rampart' around the site before I could photograph it.

So, two photos of Small Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery, including the female below.



3 August 2012 - Chalkhills Win Gold For Numbers

As Great Britain's medals tally mounts up, there was no doubt which species was leading the way on Old Winchester Hill this afternoon. In the south field, close to the fort, Chalkhill Blues were abundant - hundreds were on the wing, with the lower slopes alive with them, including a significant number of females. So despite a late start for this species, its fortunes do not seem to have been badly affected by the poor spring and early summer weather.

I made a short exploration of a couple of other areas around the fort, keeping an eye out for the odd Dark Green Fritillary or Silver-Spotted Skipper but it would seem that the season here is probably over for the former and not yet started for the latter. I was pleased to see a Small Tortoiseshell (sadly they seem to be having another very poor season) and several Red Admirals, basking or feeding along leafy pathways close to the road.

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As we enter August and the latter part of the butterfly season, let us hope that the British Summer will be reasonably kind this month. I note that Brown Hairstreak has not so far been reported in Hampshire and Painted Lady and Clouded Yellow have been conspicuous by their absence this season, so a late flurry for those species would also be welcome.

Photos of Chalkhill Blue, Small Tortoiseshell and Chalkhill Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



28 July 2012 - Surreal Emperor Moment In The Pastures!

I had a little spare time this morning before the main event of the day (my son's wedding!) so a gentle walk in Whiteley Pastures, providing exercise and fresh air seemed the perfect solution. The outward walk up the main track (no more than 1km) did not produce anything out of the ordinary - a couple of White Admirals and several Silver-washed Fritillaries which was in line with expectations. So I decided to use the return to gather a few photos of common species (you know, browns, whites etc) for the species photo archive.

As I stepped into the track margin where a Ringlet had landed with open wings, the next thing I know is that a male Purple Emperor, in excellent condition and showing full regalia, is flying around me a few feet from the ground! I stood perfectly still hoping it would land. It did think about it but then, in another moment - it was gone - vanished!

I can only think it had been down on the ground just off track, perhaps taking moisture, when I disturbed it in pursuit of - well yes - a Ringlet!

Sadly I did not obtain any photos of the enigma, so it will just remain in my memory as one of those surreal Emperor moments. As a consolation, a White Admiral, posed for an underside photo, which is posted to the Recent Photos Gallery.

26 July 2012 - Heatwave Provides Much Needed Boost for Summer Butterflies

I have visited a number of local sites, both woodland and downland, during the last week of fine weather and have been pleasantly surprised by the number of butterflies on the wing. The hot weather seems to be having a number of beneficial effects.

In woodlands, there was significant concern that populations of key species such as Silver-washed Fritillary, White Admiral and even Purple Emperor had been decimated by 3 months of wet weather. Thankfully that does not appear to be the case. Sightings of Purple Emperor in particular, have increased dramatically at its main sites in Central Southern England and South Midlands, as adults have emerged almost 'en masse' during the fine weather (if such a term can ever be used for PE!). On downland, a visit to the lower slopes of Portsdown Hill yesterday saw the down positively thronging with Chalkhill Blues, Marbled Whites and Meadow Browns. I also noticed plentiful Kidney Vetch, so hopefully there will be a decent showing of second brood Small Blue there soon.

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In addition, the full UK list of resident butterflies has now been reported, with Brown Hairstreak (Dorset), Silver-spotted Skipper (Oxon and Sussex) and Scotch Argus (Cumbria) arriving on the scene in the last few days. So it would appear that the heat-wave has also accelerated the season to the point that it is now only slightly behind normal, with species enjoying a rapid, rather than gradual build up in numbers.

We cannot yet know what the long term consequences of the prolonged wet period will be on our spring and early summer species, however for the main crop of summer butterflies, the recent fine weather has come to the rescue just in time. Photos of Chalkhill Blue, (male and female, thumbnails below), Common Blue and Gatekeeper taken during the last few days posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



24 July 2012 - Flitting Hairstreaks Enhance Summer Evening Stroll

I never thought I'd be saying this a couple of weeks ago, but today has almost been too hot for butterflying! Thus an early evening butterfly stroll, when the temperature had cooled to mere 23 degrees, seemed the perfect choice. The destination was my local woodland of Whiteley Pastures, where the main track was still enjoying warm sunshine on its east side. A 45 minute circular walk using one of the minor rides to return, produced 8 species, all on the wing of their own accord.

I was particularly pleased to see 7 Purple Hairstreaks flitting in oaks along the main track, but whereas a few years ago they would be seen in much greater numbers, almost along the whole length, only selected trees now seem to be favoured. Patience was also needed to observe candidate trees for a few minutes at a time, awaiting some activity, but this was rewarded on several occasions.

Other sightings included Small Skipper (5), Essex Skipper (1 probable), Gatekeeper (3), Meadow Brown (7), Green-veined White (2), Comma (2) and Red Admiral (1). I guess they too were glad of some respite from today's heat! Nevertheless, by 7.45pm when I departed, activity did seem to be waning. No photos on this occasion.

22 July 2012 - His Majesty Drops In On Observation Tower For Breakfast!

The slow build-up of the Purple Emperor season and, at last some fine weather, provided another opportunity for me to search for the enigma of the butterfly world. When you visit key sites in Alice Holt Forest on a fine Sunday morning in the middle of Emperor season, you know you won't be alone, but the opportunity to meet people with similar interests and the additional pairs of eyes to spot these elusive creatures paid dividends today.

A pre-emptive early reconnaissance along the main track in the Straits Inclosure produced no sightings, however on the return several observers were gathered at the first observation tower, as a fresh male Emperor had tucked himself under the overhanging roof to feed on - would you believe - a tie-wrap!. Another one did a couple of sorties around the tower before returning into the trees. This set the pattern for a good part of the morning with two males making flights around the observation tower area, the one having a partiality for the observation tower itself, feeding also on the upper echelons of its wooden structure.

I then departed for the southern part of Abbotts Wood Inclosure where two further males were seen close together in tall oaks (not at an assembly point) before making their separate ways in search of females.

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A brief return to Straits Inclosure in late morning saw the action now shared between both observation towers, with another male perched in oak close to the second tower, having previously shown a similar partiality for its timbers. A few minutes later and it set off over the tower in a southerly direction.

Whilst the general view is that Purple Emperor numbers are well down on normal, a spell of fine weather may yet turn in a reasonable season for this majestic species, which should now extend well into August. 3 photos of Purple Emperor posted to Recent Photos Gallery, all from distance.



20 July 2012 - Grayling Make Belated Appearance On Browndown

Following an unsuccessful visit last week to Browndown South for Grayling, a return visit late this afternoon turned in a better result. It was a close thing however, with glowering cloud over much of the area and just a few chinks of blue sky, butterflies were scarce. On arrival at the usual shingly Grayling area, in front of the huge brick wall of the firing range, the first couple of jinking browns that flew up were my old friends - Meadow Browns.

As the possibility of a second unsuccessful search loomed, thankfully the third brown to fly up was indeed my quarry - a fresh male Grayling which settled again on the shingle. Seconds later another flew upand that was basically it.

A further fifteen minutes or so of searching produced just two more Meadow Browns and a Small Heath. Still, I can't complain - I did not get wet (just!), I enjoyed a pleasant walk with great views across the Solent and saw my target species - a couple of Graylings noted for the record!

One photo of Grayling sat on shingle is much the same as another, so just the one posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



15 July 2012 - A Usable Day At Last To Enjoy East Hampshire's Contrasts

After what seems like a string of butterfly outings which have struggled to deliver, it was refreshing this afternoon to experience a more typical one - and meet a few other butterfly enthusiasts not seen for a while (well that's one

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feature of the Purple Emperor season!). The return to something like old times no doubt had something to do with today's interlude from the rain, and whilst there were prolonged cloudy spells, the afternoon was certainly a usable one.

In the Straits Inclosure of Alice Holt Forest, numbers of White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary were certainly greater than I had been expecting - around 8 White Admirals and 18 Silver-washed Fritillaries including a few females. Even during the cloudy spells, some activity continued - the frenetic activity characteristic of the first days of the flight season now matched by the need to restore energy levels - mainly by feeding on bramble flowers. I did not see His (or Her) Majesty this afternoon although a male at high level had been seen earlier in the day, and I am not one for spending hours looking up at the tree tops in the hope that one will take wing.

As a perfect complement and contrast to Alice's woodland rides, just 2 miles away on Broxhead Common, Silver-studded Blues were flitting amongst the heather. Whilst not at all difficult to find, numbers seemed well down on normal (I have known the common teaming with them). Some are now fading but there were also some fresh males. I was reminded also of the dangers of heathland as the unmistakable zig-zag patterning of a young adder slid under heather as I followed one of the blues. I was much more careful where I was trodding after that!

4 photos (White Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary and Silver-studded Blue) posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



14 July 2012 - Season Still Blighted By The Weather But Some Good News

During this prolonged period of unsettled weather, I have spent longer than I would normally do reading what's going on both locally and further afield, via butterfly related websites and blogs. Whilst the poor weather and its detrimental effect on the summer season is a strong theme, there are one or two bright spots (well metaphorically speaking at least!). It's becoming clear that the Purple Emperor season has started very slowly and not only in Hampshire, with relatively few sightings so far. Whilst there still time for this to improve, it's probably too late now for any recovery in the Black Hairstreak season in the Midlands, where again sightings have been well down on normal.

Further north, I note that there was something of an explosion of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries at a site in County Durham, with scores of them on the wing. This sometimes happens during a prolonged unsettled period, with butterflies being ready to emerge for days whilst awaiting a suitable weather window - and of course they like it damp! Grayling are out in very good numbers on Arnside Knott in Cumbria - yet I am not aware they have been reported in southern England, which seems odd. I took a walk around Browndown South near Gosport yesterday afternoon, which is often an early site for Grayling and found none, albeit in far from great conditions. Also nearer home, the first Chalkhill Blue of the Hampshire season has been reported from Magdalen Hill Down - very late by recent standards, but at least some positive news.

I close this posting with a photo of a courting pair of Marbled Whites, also taken yesterday near Gosport. The female (on the right) was "all of a flutter", so at least some butterflies are enjoying themselves! Photo also posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



8 July 2012 - Butterflies Flying Again After Recent Deluge But Numbers Below Par

After the seemingly incessant rain of the past days, I went for a gentle stroll in the New Forest this afternoon, as the threat of heavy showers seemed to be receding. I chose Pondhead near Lyndhurst, which has a circular route around the inclosure - perfect for a short walk. It was all very wet underfoot of course, but nevertheless enjoyable to experience the special New Forest environment again - its sights, sounds and even smells, under the powerful, but so far all too scarce rays of the July sun.

On the butterfly front I saw most species I would expect to find, including Silver-washed Fritillary and White Admiral, as well as common woodland dwellers such as Ringlet. I note also there are good numbers of fresh Red Admirals around at present - offspring from overwintering adults or this year's migrants.

However, butterfly numbers for early July (equivalent to late June this year) were well down on normal, with just two White Admirals and 6 Silver-washed Fritillaries seen. Thankfully, I did manage to obtain a couple of highly-cropped photos of one of the White Admirals as it perched in hazel.

I am rapidly recalibrating my expectations for this season as a result of the weather and its effect on our butterfly populations, and guess I am not the only one! Two highly cropped photos of White Admiral posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



6 July 2012 - First Emperors Spotted In Hampshire But Season Still On A Go Slow

In my butterfly diary I had planned to take some time off in early July, on the basis (weather permitting of course) that it is normally around the optimum time for summer woodland species, including of course Purple Emperor. Instead it has coincided with another very unsettled week and the woodland butterfly season, far from approaching peak is still barely past tick-over. At least I have managed to do some jobs around the house planned for later in the year!

However, there is some good news on the butterfly front - the first Purple Emperors were spotted in Hampshire yesterday, at two different locations in Alice Holt Forest, so if the weather does calm down a little over the next

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week, it should be a good time to see them, although I will have few, if any opportunities. The week has not been a total wash-out either - when the sun came out yesterday afternoon in South Hants, I visited my local woodland (Whiteley Pastures/Botley Wood) again. Silver-washed Fritillary numbers are building slowly (~10 seen) but White Admirals were scarce - just 3 with no photo opportunities. It provided a chance then, to record on camera some of the other species which have appeared in the last week or so - Ringlet and Small Skipper, as well as a boldly marked female Comma.

4 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery including the female Comma below.



2 July 2012 - Can You ID This Butterfly?

So the weather is still doing its best to turn this summer into a joke (and not a very funny one at that!) however yesterday morning, parts of the SE Hampshire coastal fringe were basking in sunshine (albeit with a cool blustery wind). A short outing for me confirmed that one of our scarcer species had made its 2012 entrance at a local coastal site.

Can you tell what it is from the thumbnail below? You can just about make out the wing tails and it is perched about 15ft above ground in an elm tree, which is the real giveaway! When the wind dropped there were several flurries of flight activity high in the elm, and I would estimate that at least 3 individuals were present, but never offering a reasonable photo opportunity. Being an above-ground dweller in all its life stages, I am hopeful that this enigmatic little butterfly (White-letter Hairstreak) will have a reasonable, albeit late, flight season.



29 June 2012 - This Summer Season Is The Latest For At Least A Decade!

This year produced some very early emergences due to a dry winter and early spring, but in my mind at least, this year's summer season is the latest for at least a decade. It is virtually the end of June and the flight periods of summer woodland species such as Silver-washed Fritillary and White Admiral have hardly got going in Hampshire. In the Midlands, Black Hairstreak was not reported until 17 June, almost a week later than in any of the previous 10 years, and the first Purple Emperor report has just been received today from Surrey - another ten year record.

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However, a season is better late than never, and I did manage another walk in Whiteley Pastures this afternoon, during a surprisingly sunny but windy weather window. In the "shady glade beyond the ridge" as I call it, I counted 6 fresh Silver-washed Fritillaries during a period of about half an hour. Despite plentiful bramble blossom and thistles, they were much more interested in flying more or less incessantly - I did snatch a quick photo as one rested briefly on foliage. Two White Admirals glided down from the heights, but again continued their journeys after dismissing any temptations to land.

In view of the lateness and wetness of the summer so far, it is very difficult to predict what will happen now, but the weather will no doubt have a big hand in the development of flight periods and populations of summer species. We'll just have to wait and see!

2 photos of Silver-washed Fritillary and Comma posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



25 June 2012 - Pitt Down Welcomes Back The Dark Greens

I noted that the odd Dark Green Fritillary has now been reported from Hampshire, so I managed a late afternoon call at one of my two favourite sites for the species - Pitt Down, just west of Winchester (the other being Martin Down). I made straight for the eastern extremity, close to the Spindle Trees car park where there is scrub and thistles, and sure enough several fresh Dark Green Fritillaries were on the wing there, charging around at great speed when not nectaring on the thistles. As conditions became cooler and less sunny, I noticed that, whilst some made off up into the trees for cover, one or two on more open ground would just set down on low foliage to rest.

Although I did not see cattle grazing on Pitt Down today, I had noted this last year and presume as a consequence, a wire fence has been erected separating the down from the car parks, with access via wooden gates.

2 photos of Dark Green Fritillary posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



22 June 2012 - The Pastures Will Look Even Better When Thronging With Woodland Butterflies!

Over the past weeks a few choice adjectives have been conveyed to me about this year's butterfly season (or rather the effect of the weather on it). If I said I could not repeat some of them here, I think you'll know what I mean! It's not all doom and gloom though, but just means we have to wait longer than usual for the summer crop of butterflies and trust that the weather will reach a settled spell at some point soon.

Late this afternoon, after the wind had just started to abate and the sun poked its way through the scurrying clouds, I walked the main track in Whiteley Pastures. The vegetation is all very lush (well it would be of course!), there seems plenty of nectar, such as thistles and brambles and the verges are well decked with other flowers, including many orchids. Although some mega-lengths of stacked timber slightly spoil the habitat, all in all the woodland looks ready to provide a good welcome for Silver-washed Fritillary and White Admirals soon....and hopefully Purple Emperor too.

Butterflies today were at premium however - there were a few hardy Speckled Woods about and I was grateful to a Large Skipper which was game for a spot of sun-bathing (yes, sun-bathing!) on a bramble leaf. So it is a time of anticipation, despite the weather - I just hope we are not kept waiting too much longer!

Photo of Large Skipper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



16 June 2012 - Summer Will Keep Us Waiting

The flight periods of spring butterflies may be fading into the past, however the continuing unsettled weather, in combination with an already belated season will mean the delayed emergence of summer species such as White Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary, Purple Hairstreak and Purple Emperor, at least when compared to recent seasons. It is likely now that early July rather than late June will be the time when (hopefully), several of the summer flight periods really get going in Hampshire.

Further afield there are some exceptions - in the north of England and Scotland for example, the season is not that far behind normal and one species which has really bucked the trend is the Large Blue, which has emerged in Somerset more or less on cue. We should recall however that this butterfly's unusual life cycle means that much of its immature stages are spent underground (in ants' nests) and hence somewhat insulated from the weather.

9 June 2012 - Weather Playing Havoc With Woodland Marsh Frits

In most years I try to visit a damp meadow located in a Wiltshire woodland, which supports a colony of Marsh Fritillary. My first visit of the season, a couple of weeks ago and in good weather, was unsuccessful, however I put this down to the flight period of Marsh Fritillary at this site being significantly delayed, due to the wet April.

I visited again this afternoon, and despite showers in the vicinity, the weather was decent with sunshine. So imagine my consternation when a first circuit of the site again produced not a single Marsh Fritillary!

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Widening the search area to the north did eventually produce two Marsh Fritillaries in varying degrees of fading (best one below), with several Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries also seen. Based on today's experience, I have concerns about the ability of this woodland site to support Marsh Fritillaries in the long term, especially if the 2012 weather patterns (ranging from one extreme to the other with extended periods of rain) are an ongoing consequence of climate change and one which is damaging the fragile damp meadow habitat for the species.

Photo of Marsh Fritillary posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



4 June 2012 - Glanvilles Over The Border

I may have just returned from Scotland, but the title for this blog refers to a different border - the one with Surrey! I have been aware for some time of the presence of an unofficial introduction site for Glanville Fritillary in Surrey. The colony has survived for a decade or so now - and indeed by most accounts is doing well, so I decided to pay a late afternoon visit there today, when the weather was showing signs of brightening.

Having passed through areas of sunshine on the way, the site was cloudy, cool and damp on arrival and I feared an unsuccessful visit. However, having located the likely area of meadow, with plentiful plantain and some composite flowers for nectar, I still hoped to be in with a chance. Nothing seemed to be flying, but after a few minutes and completely out of the blue, I spotted the unmistakable underside of a Glanville Fritillary roosting on plantain - amazing!

The next minutes produced no others, either roosting or flying, but thinning cloud eventually allowed some weak sunshine - and moments later a different Glanville had taken wing! It was a fresh male in pristine condition.

I could only be certain of seeing two individuals (the roosting one showed no interest in flight) so there may have been others and it would seem the flight period here is in its early days anyway.

I am not publishing the precise location of the site on the web, since the site is fragile and I am not sure about public access rights, although there were other people in the area and there is a network of clearly used paths. However, there are references on the web, including Wikipedia (and there's always my contact form).

4 photos of Glanville Fritillary posted to Recent Photos Gallery, including my first sight of the roosting Glanville.



2 June 2012 - Second Time Lucky For Chequered Skipper!

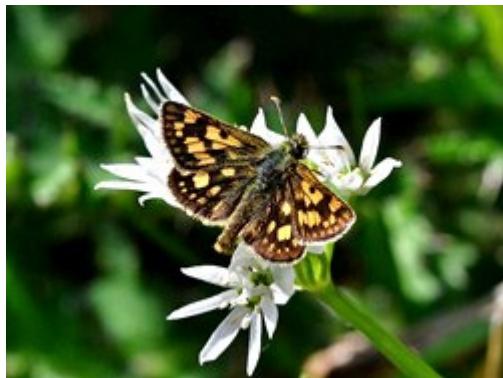
A year ago at this time, I was bemoaning the Scottish weather which had completely thwarted my first attempt to see Chequered Skipper. Thankfully there were no such problems yesterday for a return visit, and I succeeded at both Glasdrum and the less well known site of Glen Loy.

That's not to say I was beginning to question the weather forecast at breakfast time, when the view out of the window in central Scotland was drizzle and low cloud, but a drive north to Glen Loy in the Highland region had the sun shining by late morning and with it my first ever sighting of a Chequered Skipper. A walk along the riverbank in this remote glen produced just 3 individuals (all showing signs of wear), as well as a fresh Small Pearl bordered Fritillary.

As the cloud evaporated and the good weather progressed south, I decided to follow it to my main destination of Glasdrum National Nature Reserve. The hotspot for skippers here is the wayleave under the power lines (although they are found in other glades and along the trails). Far more conspicuous here were the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries and it was tempting to follow them as they searched for nectar. Every now and then however a, Chequered Skipper would be disturbed and go zipping off, to perch on vegetation or to feed.

In all I saw around 10 Chequered Skippers, 15 Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries , 2 Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, as well a common species such as Small Heath and Orange Tip. It was certainly a privilege to be in such a beautiful location with a backdrop of loch and mountains in such glorious weather!

5 photos of Chequered Skipper and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary posted to Recent Photos Gallery. Visit Photo Diary produced and may be accessed via Videos and Photo Diaries page.



28 May 2012 - Current Season About 3 Weeks Behind 2011!

Whilst I am aware that, following a very early start to the 2012 butterfly season in March, several weeks of cool, unsettled weather during April and early May have set the season back somewhat. Even I however, was surprised by how much it seems to have been set back compared to 2011.

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A comparison of the flight periods of some of our key spring species between this year and last year, using observations from my field visits, indicate that the 2012 season in Hampshire is presently about 3 weeks behind 2011. This is based on my estimation of how advanced flight periods are, rather than first sightings which are very variable anyway. 2011 was a very early season compared to normal, of course, however this was sustained during the spring period, which has not been the case for 2012.

So what, one may ask? Well, even if the present good weather continues which will reduce the gap, it is almost inconceivable that the 2012 season will catch up fully before the main summer butterfly flight periods commence in a few weeks' time. So for those planning butterfly visits based on last year's calendar, the risk of missing that target species by going too early is very real!

26 May 2012 - Wiltshire Iron Age Fort Now The Domain Of Adonis

Butterfly sites close to the west Hants border (including Bentley Wood) are typically a 70 mile round trip for me, so it's useful to try to visit a couple of sites to justify the mileage. That's not always possible of course, but yesterday I managed a small additional foray over the border into Wiltshire to visit an iron-age hill-fort whose ramparts are colonised by a good variety of downland butterflies, including Adonis Blue - a species which is scarce in Hampshire.

Figsbury Ring is managed by the National Trust and is located just off the A30, east of Salisbury. There is a public car park at the end of a track which is signed from the A30. A circuit of the outer ramparts produced several dozen Adonis Blues, which was the most numerous species, but also Common Blue, Grizzled Skipper, Dingy Skipper and Brown Argus. There are plenty of wild flowers for nectar and patches of bare chalk which the Adonis Blues were incessantly flitting around, but rarely landing.

The outer ramparts are quite exposed and the blustery wind was making life somewhat difficult for the butterflies, with open wing poses out of the question. I did manage a photo of a male Adonis doing its wing rubbing behaviour, which I believe is a defence mechanism against predators.

2 photos of Adonis Blue and 1 of Brown Argus posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



25 May 2012 - Small Pearls Join Their Cousins In The Eastern Clearing

In the heat of the mid-afternoon sun, I was exploring the Eastern Clearing in Bentley Wood. The visitors' logbook indicated that Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries were on the wing, but it was their larger cousins, the Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, which were hogging the limelight initially. With practice they are reasonably easy to distinguish in flight, the Pearls having lighter underside colouring and now in slightly fading condition.

Step forward the first Small Pearl - darker and pristine and of course slightly smaller. Finding my first one in flight was one thing, following it around for ten minutes waiting for it to settle was another! Eventually I did manage a few underside photos during its brief stops to feed on bugle - and saw a further two Small Pearls, compared to around 10 of their larger cousins. At one point a Dingy Skipper flew up to chase one of the Fritillaries - I have only seen Dingy Skipper in the clearing once or twice before.

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

I then visited a sort of downland site, not far from Bentley Wood, but I'll make a separate posting about that during the weekend. 2 photos of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



24 May 2012 - Noar Hill Dukes Making Hay!

The opportunity of a late afternoon outing presented itself today, and with limited time available, Noar Hill was the perfect solution. It was SWELTERING - and I never thought I'd be saying that a couple of weeks ago! The Dukes were taking full advantage of the turnaround in the weather, and just half an hour on the site produced 12 of them, including 2 females.

I was pleased to see that they have dispersed somewhat from their core area (the chalk pits in the centre of the reserve) whilst still being present in one's or two's at most of their favourite haunts. In fact one Duke greeted me before I had even entered the reserve by the north-western entrance and another was among the bramble bushes just inside.

Normally by late May, the Duke season would be on the wane (especially at Noar Hill which is an early site), however the presence of some fresh males as well as a few with signs of wear means they should be around well into June. Great news!

Also conspicuous on the site were Orange Tip and Common Blue, but oddly I did not see any Dingy Skippers on this late afternoon visit.

Two Duke photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

22 May 2012 - Small Blues Make Belated Appearance On Portsdown

Although Small Blue were reported about a week ago from Portsdown Hill, short visits I made in the last two weeks were unproductive, with the weather probably being a factor. However, the long awaited sunshine and warmth has at last proved a turning point and I saw 3 fresh males at the foot of the Paulsgrove quarry face during a lunchtime visit today.

Whilst kidney vetch as the larval foodplant is present, it is far from abundant, and I will not be surprised if the butterflies do not have a great season there. It is of note that Small Blue were reported on the Isle of Wight in late March and yet it has taken well into May for the species to appear in South Hants. Another odd fact in this strangest of seasons!

2 photos of Small Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



19 May 2012 - Season Becoming A Real Struggle - And Not Only For The Butterflies!

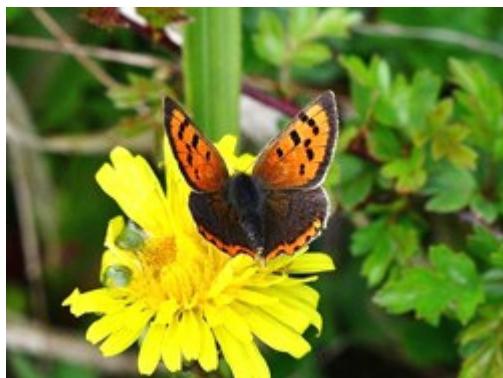
Finding opportunities to pursue the outdoor part of my hobby (visiting butterfly sites) seems to be more difficult this year than in any previous one, mainly due to the prolonged spell of poor weather. Nevertheless a short window of opportunity this afternoon saw me on Oxenbourne Down, a site close to Butser Hill which I had not visited for some years, and then usually in August (for Silver-Spotted Skippers). Since my last visit, an area on the top of the down has been cleared of trees and is being colonised by butterflies, particularly Small Heath but also Dingy and Grizzled Skippers.

My main intention today however, was to walk along the valley floor. For the most part common species such as Orange Tip, Brimstone, Green-veined White, Small Heath and Small Copper were seen in varying numbers (just 2 Small Coppers). As I approached the head of the valley, passing what I can only assume is a Second World War bomb crater, one of the steep slopes looked particularly inviting, with a good mixture of scrub, wild flowers (including cowslips) and bounded on 3 sides by bushes. A small dark brown butterfly was disturbed and went scooting off up the slope. My intuition told me this was a Duke Of Burgundy (which are found on Oxenbourne), however a more methodical exploration of the area - at my slower pace - produced only more Dingy Skippers and Small Heaths.

A particularly large area of thick cloud rendered the *Lepidoptera* invisible again shortly afterwards and it was time to head back. On my way back towards the A3, the sun returned and a Grizzled Skipper (somewhat worn) greeted me near the exit gate.

Finally, I noted a comment on another butterfly website, which indicates an unusually wide spread in the maturity in captive bred butterfly larvae this year. If this is replicated in the wild, it is likely that, whilst flight periods may start at around normal time, there will be a tendency for numbers to build only very slowly, perhaps not reaching a well-defined peak before beginning to wane again. Basically flight periods may be characterised by a low density of butterflies lasting over a longer than normal period. I think we are already seeing this happening.

4 photos posted to Recent Photos gallery (Dingy Skipper, Grizzled Skipper, Small Copper, Small Heath).



12 May 2012 - My Search For The Gloucestershire Duke

My acquaintance with the county of Gloucestershire goes back a long time from holiday visits to the Cotswolds as a teenager, to having relations there in more recent years. However, I had never really taken the time to explore its butterfly sites - and it has some good ones, particularly in the Forest of Dean and around the Cotswolds. I had planned to visit some of the Cotswold sites yesterday to look for spring butterflies.

Rodborough Common, which is set above the Stroud Valley, is managed by the National Trust and is one of the Gloucestershire's best butterfly sites, with around 30 species. These include the Duke of Burgundy and Adonis Blue, the latter having returned after around 40 years absence. The target of my visit yesterday was Duke Of Burgundy (it's too early for Adonis) and the Swellshill Bank area of the common is regarded as one of the best places.

The main part of the bank is covered in cowslips (just what the Duke ordered!) however, after an hour of searching the main part of the bank in admittedly fairly cloudy and cool conditions, I had seen around 10 Dingy Skippers and a couple of Green Hairstreaks (as well as common species) but the Duke was notable by his absence.

Some lateral thinking was needed! I had noticed a separate part of the bank across a small ravine, where the terrain looked more 'dukesque', with tussocky clumps of grass. Two minutes in there and I had my first Gloucestershire Duke! This was very fresh male - perhaps just emerged that morning.

I had planned to visit other sites in the Stroud Valley area, but with the morning cloud and cool temperatures being a little stubborn, and realising that the season there was probably somewhat behind Hampshire, I decided to head back south for the afternoon.

2 photos of the Gloucestershire Duke (Duke of Burgundy) posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



11 May 2012 - Unfinished Bentley Pearls Business Now Sorted!

At last we are seeing a semblance of some decent weather, albeit probably short lived. It nevertheless provided an opportunity this afternoon to return to Bentley Wood and the nearby Blackmoor Copse - hopefully see a few more Pearl-bordered Fritillaries.

I made a whistle stop tour of 3 different locations. First up, it was Blackmoor Copse, where several Pearls (including a female with abdomen full of eggs) were basking and feeding amongst an area of bluebells and bugle close to the path.

A patch of thick cloud subdued their activity and it was time to move on, this time to the Hawksgrove area of Bentley Wood (more or less just over the road from Blackmoor!). 3 more Pearls were seen amongst last year's dead leaf litter, but none were found in the large clearing, which is extremely wet!

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The final call of the afternoon was in the Eastern Clearing (also very wet!) and its peripheral areas - another 5 Pearls seen, mainly feeding on bugle.

So the Pearl-bordered season at last going forward, but looking back at my records for last year, it is clear that their flight period is at least two weeks behind 2011, resulting from the cool, wet April.

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



7 May 2012 - Bentley Provides Glimpse Of A Hampshire Pearl!

After the poor weather for most of this bank holiday weekend, the skies eventually brightened during early afternoon today, and I headed to Bentley Wood. It was mid-afternoon by the time I parked and cloud was already building again with the prospect of showers. So not wasting any time to take a look in the visitor's book, I made a quick circuit of the eastern clearing - and saw only an Orange Tip and a Peacock!

As expected it was very wet underfoot, which will be delaying the emergence of spring butterflies such as Pearl-bordered Fritillary. However undaunted, exploration of adjoining areas did produce a sighting of a fresh male - unfortunately in my haste I disturbed it feeding on bugle and it took off across difficult ground and was lost.

On returning to the car park, I noticed the first record of PBF was on 27 April (from the Wiltshire section), with further regular sightings (up to 7) at unspecified locations. My Pearl-bordered sightings for the day were not over either, since I spotted another during a late afternoon walk in Blackmoor Copse, which is a Wiltshire Wildlife Trust Reserve with coppiced areas close to Bentley Wood. Unfortunately this PBF was in a fenced off area!

So my visit confirmed Pearl-bordered Fritillaries are on the wing in Hampshire (and Wiltshire), however numbers are only building slowly and at present they are still quite scarce. It was not my day with the camera, with limited opportunities, however I did manage a decent photo of the Orange Tip (posted to Recent Photos gallery).

4 May 2012 - Season Virtually On Hold Until Spring Returns!

The warm, dry spell of weather enjoyed in late March is now but a distant memory. Little did we know at the time that it would be the forerunner to weeks of generally cool, cloudy and unsettled weather lasting throughout April and into May. That spell of warm weather saw the emergence of Small Blues on the Isle of Wight (yes, in March!), yet as far as I'm aware, Pearl-bordered Fritillaries have still not been reported from Hampshire despite being seen in Sussex more than two weeks ago - such is the unpredictability caused by our weather and seasons.

The butterfly season in Hampshire will typically see around a dozen species reaching the peak of their flight periods during May- it's a very important month and hopefully that will still happen. This should include some species which first appeared several weeks ago, such as Duke Of Burgundy, Grizzled Skipper and Green Hairstreak, but whose progress has been seriously constrained by the weather. If the conditions do improve soon,

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with greater amounts of sunshine and improved temperatures, we may well see a rapid increase in numbers, as this suspended season bursts into life again.

Unfortunately, it does not look like the long awaited improvement will be starting this bank holiday weekend!

30 April 2012 - Lone Dingy Searching For Soul Mate On Chalton Down

There aren't too many butterfly sites amenable to a brief lunchtime visit, but today I added Chalton Down in East Hampshire to that list. Dingy Skipper were reported there recently and having missed out on them at both Butser Hill and Noar Hill, it offered the opportunity for a productive lunchtime.

There weren't too many butterflies about on the down - several very conspicuous male Brimstones, their yellow theme complemented on the open upper slopes by a lovely display of cowslips. The down perhaps does not have the mosaic of habitats of the best downland sites, but its lower slopes, where there is some shelter from bushes, did deliver my target species - a single fresh Dingy Skipper flitting around in a secluded corner and basking on vegetation. Hopefully it will find its soul mate soon!

2 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



27 April 2012 - Waterlogged Forest Not Yet Ready For Spring Pearls

Five years ago to the day (27 April 2007) I visited Pignal/Parkhill Inclosures in the New Forest and delighted in the number of Pearl-bordered Fritillaries on the wing (at least 15 seen). Admittedly, as I recall, it was a warm and sunny spring day in a very early season.

The contrast between that visit and my visit to the same location today could hardly be more marked. By mid-afternoon it was brightening up, however once away from the gravel tracks, many areas of the forest are seriously muddy or waterlogged with the recent rain - furthermore no Pearl-bordered Fritillaries seemed to be about. The large area of regeneration in Parkhill where the species breeds, is gradually becoming more forest-like as each season passes, although I suspect it will support a colony for some years to come.

Pearl-bordered Fritillaries have already been reported from Sussex and I suspect a few have managed to emerge in Hampshire. However, it would appear that the cool, wet April has applied a sharp correction to the progress of this year's butterfly season - and perhaps it is now close to normal or only slightly ahead.

20 April 2012 - Respite Between The Showers Sees The Dukes Flying

We are having to get used to a monotonous pattern of weather characterised by cool temperatures and afternoon downpours, with a sprinkling of sunshine in between - a pattern which seems set to last into next week. I had intended to visit Noar Hill this afternoon, hoping to see Duke Of Burgundy, but it was clear as I headed north from the coast, that the downpours were well and truly entrenched over the Selborne area. A change of plan was in order as I doubled back to visit Butser Hill instead, which was also under a heavy shower, but some blue sky following in its wake.

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As I headed down the now muddy track from the north to Rake Bottom, the rain had stopped and it was brightening up - even some sunshine! A Grizzled Skipper greeted me as I entered the valley proper - a good start I thought, but will any Dukes be flying?

I did not have to wait long for the answer - walking close to bramble scrub a few minutes further on, a fresh male Duke flew up, settling again on a bramble stem. It was great to renew my acquaintance with this little spring butterfly after almost a year!

A walk close to the valley bottom produced 3 more Grizzled Skippers, but I had to wait until the return leg for my next Duke (about 100 yards from the first sighting) as the next dark clouds rolled in. It was clear another downpour was on the way (this time with hail!) putting an end to my afternoon outing.

Between the showers there was only about half an hour of bright, dry weather, showing that butterflies can make use of very short weather windows.

Two photos of Duke Of Burgundy posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



18 April 2012 - Season Inching Forward As November Weather Returns

This season's butterflies deserve a prize for being so resourceful in managing to make progress in the most meagre rations of tolerable weather (wind, rain and cold, more like November if you ask me!).

Duke of Burgundy, albeit in very low numbers, have appeared at a couple of Hampshire sites (Noar Hill and Butser Hill). On the Isle of Wight, Wall Brown have put in an appearance and over in West Sussex, a Pearl-bordered Fritillary has been spotted in Rewell Wood.

As for me - well I'm just hoping for a break in the weather that coincides with some time off!

13 April - April Showers Put The Damper On Season Progress

Following a bright morning, I made a short visit to Noar Hill this afternoon, fully expecting, in this early year, to be leaving with a few photos of Duke of Burgundy which are already reported from Gloucestershire. It is clear that during the autumn/winter much clearance work has been done on the reserve, with new areas opened up. On the butterfly front however, it was surprisingly quiet - a few Orange Tips, Whites, Brimstones, Peacocks and Commas were my lot, although a Dingy Skipper had been seen by others.

Despite this butterfly season getting off to a rip-roaring start in late March, it would seem the period of cool, showery weather since then has put the damper on its galloping progress. Actually, and between you and me I'm not sorry!

Postscript: Duke of Burgundy have just started to emerge at Noar Hill - 2 reported to branch website on 13 April!

10 April 2012 - Lone Green Hairstreak On Duty Between The Forts

I feared my lunchtime walk on Portsdown Hill today would be thwarted by the gathering shower clouds (as has happened on numerous previous occasions), but today the sun was still finding the gaps in the clouds to take the edge of the chill wind.

It was certainly bright enough for male Orange Tips to be making their way down butterfly alley (as I call a scrubby pathway with bushes on either side below Forts Southwick and Widley), occasionally stopping to feed, mostly on dandelions. Speckled Woods were also quite numerous along here, with Comma and Brimstone also seen. My real goal however, was a little Green Butterfly which frequents this area. On today's evidence, however, 'frequents' would be somewhat of an exaggerated description.

As the end of my walk was nearing and without success in this respect, I was passing an opening in the bushes, when a small butterfly flew out and landed on grass a few yards in front of me - yes - a Green Hairstreak! It looks very fresh too - the icing on my lunchtime cake had been duly delivered!

3 photos of Green Hairstreak and Orange Tip posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



6 April 2012 - Grizzled Skippers Braving The Chill On Butser Hill

I was out early this Good Friday morning to see what I could find along Rake Bottom, Butser Hill. Despite the morning sunshine, it was decidedly chilly at 10am along the valley, with the frost glistening in any shaded areas (in fact at this time the temperature was ~ 7 deg C). Yet, a few Grizzled Skippers were already up and about on the scrubby slopes of the valley, basking in the sunnier spots. This was more than could be said for any of the other butterflies (even hibernators) that should be present, since no others were seen.

The recent very chilly week, more representative of normal for early April, but following the late March "heat-wave", will mean that the butterfly season has not really progressed much further and my hope is that there will now be a degree of self-correction towards normal. I think it's fair to say that despite several species having begun their emergence very early, the cold snap means that none of these (thankfully) are yet nearing the peak of their flight periods.

So having been on the point of filing my original timetable of visits in the bin, as being little more than useless, a degree of fine tuning might now suffice!

Photo of Grizzled Skipper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

1 April 2012 - Early Green Hairstreaks At MHD Almost Make An April Fool Of Me!

A visit to Magdalen Hill Down (MHD) on 1st April would often only produce hibernators, but with this season galloping on at pace, emergences of spring butterflies are well underway. A short visit this afternoon to the lower slopes of the original reserve produced 7 Grizzled Skippers, as well as several hibernators (Peacocks and even a Small Tortoiseshell).

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My search in most of the usual haunts for Green Hairstreak however, had drawn a blank. A singleton was reported from MHD on Friday and they have been reported as far north as Northumberland already, so I was not going to be thwarted that easily!

When all else fails, check a large clump of hawthorn half way up the down - even as I approached a Green Hairstreak flashed past me. Here goes I thought, that will be the only one I see, but luckily I spotted another perched on a leaf quite high in the bush. It sat there for several minutes, before it too flew off, but not before I had captured a highly cropped photo. If there is one thing that frustrates me, it's seeing a species on a visit and not capturing photo evidence. April fool avoided - just!

3 photos of Grizzled Skipper and Green Hairstreak posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



29 March 2012 - First Sightings Records Set To Tumble As Season Gets Going

It's not even the end of March and half a dozen spring species are already starting to emerge in Hampshire, with the latest addition being a Green Hairstreak today at Beacon Hill, Warnford. My estimate is that the season is at least one week earlier than the record breaking Spring of 2007 and it wouldn't even surprise me if a Duke were to be seen before April arrives! Who would have guessed we'd be having a heat-wave at the end of March - crazy!

My season is just about up and running too, although limited to local forays so far. Nevertheless, a lunchtime walk on Portsdown Hill today produced Brimstones, Small Whites, Commas, Peacocks and, best of all, several freshly emerged male Orange Tips, one of which sat down just long enough for a heavily cropped photo.

However, as you know every silver lining has a cloud, and the consequence of prolonged warm spring weather will be the butterfly season burns out quickly. Anyway, let's not worry about that now!

Photo of Orange Tip posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



23 March 2012 - Commas And Red Squirrels On The Island

It might seem a little perverse to kick off my 2012 butterfly outings by heading out of Hampshire to see a mammal. However, I have had on my agenda for a while a trip to the Isle of Wight in search of Red Squirrels, having not seen them in the wild before. Furthermore, they are much easier to find before the trees gain their foliage.

The Solent was like a millpond for the crossing, and less than 2 hours after leaving home I was in Borthwood Copse, a fragment of ancient woodland on the Island, with hardly a cloud in the sky for company.

I did of course mix my squirrel searching with butterflies, the main species in evidence being Commas - ten seen, mainly basking on the woodland floor, along with two Peacocks.

The Red Squirrels did not disappoint either, at least a dozen seen, mainly on the western side of the wood, and even a hotspot where two or three were foraging among the dead leaves, soon to shin up the tall trees on my approach. Their most surprising characteristic for me was their vocals - quite a repertoire of different chirps and cackles!

So, the IoW provided a very enjoyable start to my 'butterfly' season - and judging by the spring flowers, this season could be even earlier than 2007! It's hardly a surprise that an Orange Tip has already been reported from Hampshire.

Photos of Red Squirrel and Comma posted to recent photos gallery.



3 March 2012 - Another Early Spring Beckons

It has been a mild and relatively dry winter once again in Southern England which means spring is arriving early once again, and seeing spring flowers such as daffodils in bloom already provides confirmation, if any were needed. We can expect that the emergence of several spring butterflies, such as Orange Tip, Grizzled Skipper, Holly Blue and Green Hairstreak to commence in about a month's time, perhaps with first sightings later in March in some cases. In the meantime, reports of hibernators such as Red Admiral, Comma, Peacock and Brimstone are tending to increase as a further sign of spring's arrival, and a walk in open woodland, downland or even in the local park on a sunny morning will likely result in some sightings.

4 February 2012 - Perfect Time To Plan For The 2012 Season

It might be below freezing outside with snow on the way, but early February is a good time to be planning for the new season - after all spring is only a few weeks away, with several signs of it already. For me, as the years roll on, it is even more important to maintain some diversity in the butterfly sites I visit. So as well as visiting some of our best known sites in Hampshire, my intention is to explore a few less well known ones too - and a few further afield as well. I'd like to do more of that but with time constraints limiting my butterfly outings to typically one per week, I can at least encourage others to do the same and reduce visitor pressure on some of our main butterfly sites and nature reserves.

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

Casting one's eyes over a map of Hampshire, there are good opportunities to visit different locations in the New Forest such as the inclosures for woodland species, heathland for Silver-studded Blue and Grayling. Similar opportunities exist in NE Hampshire with several heathland areas and Alice Holt Forest. Just over the border in Surrey there is an unofficially introduced colony of Glanville Fritillary. I'm not an advocate of such practices, but it's there and has been for quite a few years.

In central and eastern Hants too, a large swathe of land is now part of the South Downs National Park, with good butterfly country dotted along the South Downs Way from the border with West Sussex almost into Winchester, including a number of known colonies of Duke Of Burgundy, Grizzled Skipper, Green Hairstreak, Silver-spotted Skipper and Chalkhill Blue, as well as habitat where they could be found.

14 January 2012 - First Hampshire Butterflies Of 2012 Include A Real Beauty!

We are two weeks into the New Year and the first butterflies have been recorded in Hampshire. Given the predominantly mild weather so far, it's not surprising that quite a few Red Admirals have already been seen, but one lucky Hampshire resident found a real beauty in a Lee-on-the-Solent garden - a Camberwell Beauty to be precise! Whilst one would like to think it was a genuine migrant from last summer (and this is the probable explanation), the possibility of a reared and released specimen cannot be ruled out.

I can't say I am actually relishing the prospect of another mild winter - climate change is not only confusing to the flora and fauna, but makes it very difficult to predict butterfly flight periods. The last two very mild winters (2007 and 2011) were followed by very poor summers, so I'm hoping that the very recent change to frosty mornings will herald a return to normality for while!