



2019 Butterfly Blog

11 November 2019 - Study Shows Single Brooded Habitat Specialists Vulnerable To Climate Change

A recent study led by the University of York and reported on Butterfly Conservation's national website, has shed further light on why some butterfly species are vulnerable to climate change whilst others are benefitting. Many British butterflies (and moths) have been responding to warmer temperatures by emerging earlier in the year, and for the first time scientists have identified why this is creating winners and losers.

The study found that emerging earlier in the year may be a benefit to species which have multiple, rapid breeding cycles per year and are flexible about their habitat (such as the Speckled Wood), by allowing them more time to bulk up in numbers before winter and expand their range towards the north. However, single generation species that are habitat specialists (like the High Brown Fritillary and Silver-studded Blue) are most vulnerable to climate change because they cannot take advantage from the extra breeding time and emerging earlier may throw them 'out of sync' with their restricted diet of food resources.

It may also explain the inaccuracy in the earlier prediction that butterflies, being warmth loving, would in general tend to expand their range as global temperatures rise. This hasn't materialised as widely or as quickly as expected.

15 October 2019 - Latest State Of Nature Report Shows Species Declines Continue Unabated

The latest State Of Nature Report (published by the National Biodiversity Network) shows that the UK's wildlife continues to decline. The findings indicate that, since rigorous scientific monitoring began in the 1970s, there has been a 13% decline in average abundance of wildlife species and the declines continue unabated. In summary, 41% of UK species studied have declined, 26% have increased and 33% shown little change since 1970. More specifically, numbers of butterflies are down by 17% and moths down by 25%. The numbers of butterfly and moth species that require more specialised habitats have declined by more than three quarters.

My anecdotal findings for the 2019 Hampshire Butterfly season indicate a very mixed season for our butterflies, but probably tending towards the negative side overall, and certainly not inconsistent with the the general downward trend. A few species seemed to enjoy decent seasons, including the Duke of Burgundy which continues to consolidate its presence at a few new sites (e.g. West Wood, Stephen's Castle Down), whilst remaining stable at its main sites. Several of the blues enjoyed decent seasons too, including Small Blue, Adonis and Common varieties as did the Small Heath, Grizzled and Dingy Skipper. It is pleasing to see that new White-letter Hairstreak colonies continue to be discovered across the county, some on single trees, showing that this little butterfly more than matches its secretive habits with its dispersal capability.

At the other end of the spectrum, species which had difficult seasons include the Small Tortoiseshell and the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary. The presence of the latter is now threatened in Hampshire with only a single small colony remaining (Bentley Wood Eastern Clearing). In the case of the Small Tortoiseshell, the number of sightings seem to be vying with some of our rarest species, which is a great shame for this once common butterfly. Some midsummer and late summer species also fared poorly, such as the White Admiral, Purple Emperor and Brown Hairstreak, with numbers well below par in all cases. Some of this season's problems may stem from the near drought conditions which developed during the 2018 summer, as foodplants dried out prematurely or rather shortened their vegetative cycles, as a defence against drought.



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

The mixed picture also extends to migrants, with Painted Lady and Red Admiral doing well (and Long-tailed Blue in neighbouring Sussex!) but the success did not extend to the Clouded Yellow, which has been rather scarce this year. I suspect, once data is available, we will find that other species have fared rather poorly with a few others doing quite well, and an indifferent picture for the rest.

30 September 2019 - Long-tailed Blue Influxes To UK Becoming More Regular

2019 will go down as another Long-tailed Blue influx year along with 2013 and 2015. These continental migrants have so far been reported from along the south coast from Cornwall right through to the Isle of Wight, Kent and Suffolk, (although oddly Hampshire has not fared so well it seems!), with a few reports from inland counties too.

Their UK born offspring are also now being reported, particularly from Sussex, which has enjoyed the largest overall number of sightings. Indeed the UK is on track to record more than 100 Long-tailed Blues this season as more offspring emerge, the larvae having gorged themselves on broad-leaved everlasting pea plants and other legumes, often in the gardens of unsuspecting south coast residents!

We have now experienced 3 significant Long-tailed Blue influxes during the last 7 years. The previous one to 2013 was way back in 1990 and the most likely reason for the increasing frequency is climate change. However, we are not expecting the Long-tailed Blue to be reassessed as a UK resident species any time soon, since it does not normally survive our winters - a statement which also applies to most of Europe except for Mediterranean areas. Nevertheless this little butterfly, which is one of the most-widely distributed Lycaenids in the world, has an amazing capability for migration, and we are likely to see continental arrivals even more frequently in future, with their UK offspring taking wing in late summer and autumn.

21 September 2019 - No Joy With 3rd Brood Wall In NW Hants, But Habitat Looks Good

Third brood Wall numbers have been building in Sussex for a couple of weeks now, so on Thursday afternoon (yes I know, whist my website was down!) I visited an area in NW Hants to try my luck there. I saw several second brood Wall at nearby Shipton Bellinger during a visit for Brown Hairstreak 6 weeks ago, and they are recorded there in very low numbers in some years. It is therefore likely that Wall are breeding in this area, close to the border with Wiltshire and not far from Salisbury Plain, where there are a number of known colonies.

The candidate area visited is just to the east of Shipton Bellinger, close to Perham Down. More precisely I explored the areas around and between the Shipton and Bedlam Plantations, which comprise a mixture of downland, arable land, scrub and woodland and are just inside Hampshire. Like the Shipton Bellinger Roughs, a mile or so to the west, this area is also on MoD land, and public notices warn that there could be unexploded ordnance and any strange objects should not be touched!

Before heading to the aforementioned target area (no pun intended!), I made a brief stop at Shipton Bellinger to see if any Walls (2nd or 3rd brood) were present where I had seen them on my previous visit, but without success. Moving on to the target area, the similarity with the Shipton Bellinger habitat was striking, with areas of thick scrub with cleared access strips, deep mixed hedgerows sometimes backed by coppices, and copious chalky tracks. Blackthorn was generally plentiful amongst other shrubs, and although I didn't see any Brown Hairstreak, I would, as the saying goes, 'eat my hat', if they are not present here!

Sadly, I did not find any Walls either, despite the habitat also looking very suitable. The habitat bears some resemblance to Lancing Ring in Sussex, which is a known good site for Wall. A few butterflies were seen during my visit, with Small Heath and Small White the most numerous, complemented by



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

the occasional Meadow Brown and a few fresh Red Admirals. So, although my visit was not able to shed any further light on the existence of a breeding colony of Wall in NW Hampshire, it was nevertheless, an enjoyable late season outing to a different location and in beautiful weather.

15 September 2019 - Our Declining Butterflies - My View Is That Climate Change Is The Main Cause

I will conclude this series of mini-articles on the decline of our butterflies in this final instalment. So let me first recap on a few of the key findings so far:

- The decline of our butterflies (and insects in general) is rapid and global
- There is no clear consensus amongst the experts on the main reasons for the decline but factors cited include habitat destruction, including intensive agriculture, the extensive use of pesticides and fertilisers, pollution in its various forms, urbanization and, climate change.
- Human activities are at the root cause, one way or another.

Since the decline in insects is global and even includes the Arctic, I am going to postulate that a major factor behind the problem is also global in its reach. Several of the possible factors indicated above do not satisfy this criteria. Human population density in the Arctic is very low compared to more temperate areas, so it is much less likely that locally generated pollution, habitat loss due to intensive agriculture, deforestation or urbanisation are main factors in the losses here. Elsewhere, what might be a major issue for one area (e.g. intensive agriculture) may not be such a problem in another, where for example deforestation or urbanisation might be the issues. As a result, we could expect the effects of habitat loss or pollution in different areas of the world to have different local consequences on butterfly and insect numbers. Yet the declines seem widespread across a spectrum of species and habitats, and do not exhibit such characteristics.

There is only one factor which is consistent with the truly global nature and rapid speed of the declines, and that is **climate change**. For me it is the main cause of the decline in our butterflies. It is undermining the dynamic balance of the earth's ecosystems by increasing global temperatures and changing our weather patterns at a rate which is incompatible with normal evolutionary adaptations, causing for example, a mismatch between the availability of foodplants and butterfly life cycles. There is even evidence that as the environment warms, plants are evolving their chemical make-up, with higher levels of toxins for example, to the detriment of life-forms which feed on them.

The loss of butterflies and insects in general, is of course just one of the far-reaching and negative consequences of climate change. It threatens the biodiversity and the health of the natural world in general, and eventually that includes human life too. The actions to tackle climate change and the environmental crisis it is bringing, must be coordinated internationally and involve governments making the right decisions and acting upon them. Nevertheless, we can all contribute in our own ways, taking benefit from the cumulative effect of many small actions, by for example using less energy, evolving to greener modes of travel, reducing non-recyclable waste and adopting a more plant based diet.

Finally, although I am convinced that climate change is the main reason for the decline in our butterflies, that does not mean that the other factors mentioned above (habitat loss, pollution etc) are insignificant. Indeed, they are very real issues and are also contributing to the loss of biodiversity and the environmental crisis. Whilst climate change is much about the way we live our lives and the unsustainable demands we are placing on the resources of our planet, tackling these other issues is more about adopting a responsible approach to the management of the landscape immediately around us. This means carefully looking after our countryside, including agricultural land, heaths and woodland, keeping in check urban expansion and reducing pollution, to ensure we leave room for a rich natural world for both ourselves and future generations to enjoy.



10 September 2019 - Our Declining Butterflies - Human Activities Are At The Root Cause

Having read a number of articles on the subject of butterfly decline and insect loss in general, it is apparent that there is no clear consensus amongst the experts on the main reasons. Factors cited include habitat destruction, including intensive agriculture, the extensive use of pesticides and fertilisers, pollution in its various forms, urbanization and climate change. The latter encompasses factors such as the burning of fossil fuels, large scale deforestation and livestock farming. Based on this list, the first conclusion we can confidently draw is that human activities, one way or another, are at the root cause. However, before attempting to be more precise, I set down below a couple of observations from my own experiences, mainly in UK and Hampshire during the last 20 years or so.

Firstly, there is no doubt for me that resident butterfly numbers have declined dramatically, even during this modest timescale. These include both habitat specialists (such as Pearl-bordered Fritillary), and also butterflies of the wider countryside (such as Wall and Small Tortoiseshell), some species being affected very seriously whilst a few to a lesser extent (such as Meadow Brown). Yet, it is not so obvious that the character of the landscape (including woodlands, downland, arable land, heaths and even urban areas), has actually changed that much during the same time period, at least to the naked eye. There are of course some changes, resulting from the ever present expansion of towns and cities to accommodate our increasing population, and no doubt some evolution in farming and forestry practices, but nothing to match the rapid decline in our butterflies in the relatively short period of a couple of decades.

The second observation concerns the frequency and severity of extreme weather and climate related events. It has become quite typical now to experience such events almost every year. Examples include prolonged hot, dry periods during summer leading to drought conditions, unseasonal storms with high winds and torrential rain, or very mild and short winters. One could argue that such phenomena happened before as well - I recall the scorching summer of 1976 when I was living in the West Midlands. There were two months of hot, dry weather in mid-summer, followed by torrential rain and thunderstorms in September. There was also the so called "hurricane" of 1987, which caused much structural damage and even uprooted whole swathes of trees in some woodlands. Whilst many butterflies (and other insects) will suffer as a result of such extremes, given a reasonable respite of few years they can and will recover. What is different now is the frequency of more extreme events, which then wreak further havoc on already depleted populations.

In the next and final article in this series, I will try reach my own conclusions on the reasons for the dramatic decline in our butterflies.

5 September 2019 - Our Declining Butterflies - Insect Decline Is Global And Rapid

The report published by Butterfly Conservation and its partners on "The State of the UK's Butterflies 2015" presented new long-term analyses using data sets gathered since 1976. One of the important findings presented was that 76% (i.e. about three-quarters) of the UK's resident and regular migrant butterfly species have declined in either abundance or occurrence (or both) over the past four decades.

Many other studies on insects or subgroups of insects around the world, (albeit mainly focussed on Europe and North America, which are the best studied areas), have produced broadly consistent findings. Some examples include:

- A study published in October 2017 found that flying insects in 63 protected areas in Germany had declined by 75 percent in just 25 years.
- In a study published in July 2019, a group of researchers analysed data sets that track butterfly abundance, taken from 21 years of volunteer surveys in Ohio, USA. They found an average



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

population decline of 2 percent per year, which means that over the course of the study, Ohio lost more than a third of its butterfly population. However the populations of some species are stable and some are increasing.

- In 2019, a study by Statistics Netherlands and the Vlinderstichting (Dutch Butterfly Conservation) of butterfly numbers in the Netherlands from 1890 to 2017 reported an estimated decline of 84 percent.
- A 2014 review by Rodolfo Dirzo and others in Science noted: "Of all insects with IUCN-documented population trends (203 insect species in five orders), 33% are declining, with strong variation among orders." Insect pollinators, "needed for 75% of all the world's food crops", appear to be "strongly declining globally in both abundance and diversity"
- Other studies show that, whilst the majority of insects are in retreat with some facing extinction, a much smaller number of species (including a few butterflies) are likely to be able to adapt to the changing situation, increasing their populations and range. These also include rapid breeding pest insects, which will pose an increased threat to crops, for instance.
- A further review published early this year in the journal Biological Conservation, analysed the results of 75 different studies covering a range of insect groups from around the globe. It revealed that over 40% of all insects are declining, and a third are endangered.

We need to remember that insects play an absolutely crucial role in sustaining the Earth's ecosystems. They aerate and fertilize living soil; they breakdown organic debris and waste that other life forms produce, disposing of everything from leaf litter to dung. Moreover, insects are the original recyclers, digesting organic material from dead wood to corpses and play a critical role in the pollination of hundreds of thousands of plants, including many crops. They also reside at the base of the food chain, feeding birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish - and, by extension, us.

1 September 2019 - Our Declining Butterflies - The Arctic Provides Some Clues?

During the next two or three weeks, I will post several mini-articles in the form of blog entries on why our butterflies (and indeed insects in general) are in decline. These represent my personal reflections on this subject, gathered both from my experiences over the last few years and from reading various scientifically based articles in the press and journals.

The first article I highlight was published in the journal Nature Climate Change and is based on a project at the Aarhus University's Department of Bioscience. The project monitored six plant species and two families of insects around the Zackenberg research station in north eastern Greenland, during the period 1996-2009.

The researchers observed that the populations of flies and midges declined over the 14-year period and were particularly scarce following a very short flowering period the previous year. Indeed, there appeared to be a correlation between the duration of the flowering season one year and the insect population the following year. The main reason for this phenomenon is believed to be the rise in temperature in the region, which has increased on average by 2.5 degrees since the start of the project, causing the flowering cycle of plants to be completed more quickly.

In the Arctic, the timing between insects and plants is crucial because the flowering occurs during a brief period. During the warmest years the flowers are in bloom for a shorter time and in a more synchronous way, leaving the insects with less time to obtain the nourishment they need to survive as a species.

I would go further and postulate that the timing between insects (including butterflies) and plants can also be crucial in general, and may partly explain why, in very low rainfall summers (such as 2018), some species suffered during the following year due to foodplants drying out prematurely before the larvae had matured. I will draw further findings from this Arctic research in a subsequent mini-article.



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

26 August 2019 - Clouded Yellow Sighting On Portsdown To Round Off Season

As another scorching day beckoned, I was out mid-morning to explore a particularly flowery area of Portsdown Hill, just below Fort Southwick. This area has some good, though now rather distant memories for me, as the first location in Hampshire I encountered both Wall Brown and Clouded Yellow. Whilst I knew, barring almost a miracle, I had no chance of the former today, there could be a slim chance of the latter.

The most conspicuous species was by far the Small White - always several in sight at any one time - flying, feeding on the abundant nectar sources or tussling with each other. There were probably almost as many Meadow Browns, but much less conspicuous due to their brown and often fading colouring. A few other species were also there, in much lower numbers - Common Blue, Chalkhill Blue, Brown Argus, Speckled Wood, Brimstone, Painted Lady and Peacock, many now past their best.

I am also pleased to say that there is at least one Clouded Yellow on Portsdown Hill! It was seen as I was almost ready to leave and delayed my departure by 15 minutes or so, in the hope it might return and stop for a photo - but no joy. During the first encounter, it was on a mission and never even looked like stopping! I usually find I need two or three Clouded Yellows to have a decent chance of photos, and there have been few sightings in Hampshire so far - in fact this was my first one of the year.

I have no specific plans for further outings this season (but you never know!), however, I will continue to make occasional blog entries with my reflections on the season and thoughts for the future. 3 Photos of Small White, Brown Argus and Speckled Wood posted to Latest Photos.

22 August 2019 - Lucky Break At Noar Produces Sedate Female Brown Hairstreak

I write this blog entry somewhat sheepishly, having indicated last week that I would not be visiting Noar Hill again this season. However, following a successful visit to Old Winchester Hill yesterday afternoon, I had some time in hand. Noar Hill is relatively close and a detour for a short stop there turned out to be one of my better decisions!

I focussed initially on the south side of the reserve, where most of the (depressingly few) Brown Hairstreak sightings have occurred this season, but to no avail. As I headed across the site towards the triangle, a group of people were standing close to a bank of Hemp Agrimony, with clearly something of significant interest in their midst.

A female Brown Hairstreak, in very good condition, was feeding contentedly, and had been there for a considerable time. Indeed it was the only one seen by one observer during several hours at the site. After sampling a number of flower heads, each taking a few minutes, it, or rather 'she', disappeared behind the bank.

I was in no doubt that a huge slice of good fortune had accompanied me on this visit! 4 photos of Brown Hairstreak posted to Latest Photos.



21 August 2019 - Adonis And Silver Spots Going Steady At Old Winchester Hill

I usually make a visit to Old Winchester Hill for second brood Adonis Blue one of my final outings of the season, and suspect this will be the case again this year. Having experienced a somewhat difficult recent history at this site, the Adonis Blue population seems to be reasonably stable on both the south field of the fort (currently having the larger population) and also the car park slope, which I visited this afternoon. Around 10 male Adonis, mostly quite fresh, were seen on the bottom section of the slope, amongst some Chalkhill and Common Blues (the Adonis being easy to spot!).

I was also pleased to see a few Silver-spotted Skippers in the same area, and in much better condition than I was expecting, probably as a result of their later than average emergence at this site. Several years ago these golden brown skippers could be reliably encountered basking on the grassy path down the slope (which has very short sward) and it was good to find a couple of them resuming this habit today, before making off into the roped off area, when approached.

So all in all, this was an encouraging outcome in respect of these two key species, and we probably need to thank English Nature for their effective management of the site for these two short-sward loving butterflies, including the grazing regime which is currently being implemented. If there was a slight negative, no Clouded Yellows were seen. However a chat with the warden on leaving suggested, so far at least, there are very few of them around. 5 photos of Adonis Blue and Silver-spotted Skipper posted to Latest Photos.



20 August 2019 - Time To Look Out For Migrant Species, Including Rare Ones

The Painted Lady is a migrant species which is enjoying a very good summer in the UK. The UK descendants of migrant arrivals from N Africa are now gracing many flower rich habitats, including our downlands, woodlands and gardens. Whilst the Painted Lady is almost ubiquitous at present, there



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

are a few other migrant species which are also being recorded from southern counties this month, ranging from uncommon to very rare.

The Clouded Yellow is a migrant species familiar to many observers. With a little luck, you might see one or two at several downland/scrub sites, such as Magdalen Hill Down, Old Winchester Hill and Noar Hill. Some of the adult butterflies may soon be tending to head towards the south coast, with a view to a return migration.

Even more scarce, there have been several sightings of Long-tailed Blue in Sussex since 5 August. In addition, several newly laid eggs have been found, mainly in gardens close to the Sussex coast, on one of their favourite larval foodplants, the everlasting pea (which could produce offspring in Autumn). It is possible that a few Long-tailed Blues have arrived further west along the coast in Hampshire, so well worth checking your everlasting peas and other members of the pea family for eggs, if you live near the coast. There are some recent photos of ova on the Sussex Branch website sightings page.

Finally, also from Sussex, there have been isolated sightings of Queen of Spain Fritillary and Camberwell Beauty, for those really up for a challenge! Thus, despite the overall butterfly season being on the wane, as autumn beckons, there is still plenty to look out for, in addition to our normal summer residents.

15 August 2019 - Final Noar Hill Visit Of Season Produces Mixed Results

A respite today from the unsettled weather persuaded me to make my final attempt for Brown Hairstreak of the season at Noar Hill. At least one female had been photographed there on Tuesday feeding on Hemp Agrimony, but my search around midday, mainly focussing on the southern half of the reserve, produced no close encounters. However, I am pleased to say that I did have my first sightings of the species at Noar Hill this season - they are still active in the large Beech Tree opposite the swing gate entrance on the northern access path. After a long wait (10 minutes), a drop in the wind resulted in two individuals flying around the upper echelons, one clearly larger than the other and hence probably female. Both settled on top of leaves out of direct view.

Elsewhere on the reserve, other notable sightings were a fresh Small Tortoiseshell (the number I have seen this season can be counted on one hand, following a poor showing last year!) and a male Chalkhill Blue, which is a species not normally associated with Noar Hill, but one which could take root there. The number of Painted Ladies now seems to be reducing, although they were being encountered sporadically during my visit.

My experience today unfortunately adds weight to my previous comment, implying that this seems to be a poor season for Brown Hairstreak in Hampshire. Two photos of Small Tortoiseshell and Chalkhill Blue posted to Latest Photos.





Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

13 August 19 - Worst Year For Brownie Sightings I Can Recall, As Noar Delivers Another Dud!

I am relieved I managed a couple of Brown Hairstreak sightings and photos last week at Shipton Bellinger, having drawn a blank for the species at Noar Hill this year. My late morning visit today, in mainly sunny conditions, was unsuccessful on this front, despite visiting most of the locations I have seen the species in earlier years. Butterfly numbers overall seemed even lower than my previous visit, just over a week ago, with few Nymphalids and only Meadow Browns and Gatekeepers in any reasonable numbers. On the face of it, this seems completely at odds with the condition of the reserve, which is an absolute riot of colour. The ground is covered in wild flowers, despite some blooms now 'going over', as late summer casts its lengthening shadows.

One aspect where the reserve is suffering, perhaps more acutely than other locations, is the prevalence of Ash Dieback. Some of the trees are now looking very sorry for themselves, whilst others are in the first throws of infection, and thankfully some still seem healthy. This could of course be a factor in the lack of Brown Hairstreak sightings, but as I indicated in an earlier blog, I doubt if it is the main factor.

Whilst Noar Hill at present seems to exemplify this year's lack of profusion in several summer species, other sites (and particularly woodland ones) have shown similar trends, if not quite as marked.

For the record, species seen (in modest numbers) were Brimstone, Painted Lady, Common Blue, Small White, Green-veined White, Speckled Wood and Small Heath, in addition to plenty of now fading Meadow Browns and Gatekeepers. Three photos of Brimstone, Painted lady and Ash Dieback posted to Latest Photos.



8 August 2019 - Brown Hairstreak Having One To Forget, But Wall On The Up In NW Hants!

It is not often that one sees two of Hampshire's scarcest butterflies at the same location, but it is possible at Shipton Bellinger at the moment.

Having said that, Brown Hairstreak are proving to be hard work this season, and it's not only me that thinks so - other observers at Hampshire's sites are struggling with them too! Nevertheless, if visits are judged purely in terms of success or failure (rather than level of difficulty in finding one's quarry), then my late morning visit to Shipton Bellinger was a success, with two male Brown Hairstreaks (neither fresh) seen near the top of the parallel track and feeding on bramble. Oddly, I drew a complete blank for the species along the county boundary hedge, which is usually fairly reliable.

That same hedge did however, produce one of 4 Wall butterflies seen during my visit, the other 3 being towards the village end of the parallel track. I have never seen more than one Wall on any



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

previous visit to Shipton Bellinger, and it adds weight to the case that they are breeding in the area, which can only be good news.

Returning to the subject of Brown Hairstreak, it is not clear why there seems to be so few of them showing this season, bearing in mind anecdotal indications are that there was a decent egg-lay last year. It is likely that the prevalence of Ash die-back, a tree which is favoured by the species, is not helping, but this is surely not the only or even the main reason for the poor showing so far. I will return to the ups and downs of this season in a later blog. 7 photos of Brown Hairstreak, Wall and one of this season's winners, the Painted Lady, posted to Latest Photos.



5 August 2019 - Below Par Nymphalid Numbers And No-Show Brown Hairstreak At Noar Hill

I spent just over an hour at Noar Hill during early afternoon, after the rain had cleared. Whilst my main target was Brown Hairstreak (none seen), I could not help noticing that, despite the reserve looking splendid with abundant flowers, butterfly numbers were generally subdued during what should be, a bumper time of year.

This was especially so for the Nymphalids, with the exception of Painted Lady. Yes, I saw a few fresh Red Admirals, Peacocks and a couple of fresh Commas, however I can't help thinking that a decade ago, numbers of all these species would at least have been in double figures, if not in scores. They are all partial to the flowers of Hemp Agrimony, which is abundant at this site, yet many of the agrimony stands were devoid of butterflies.

I indicated that the one exception was Painted Lady - they are undoubtedly having a prosperous summer, with around 12 seen during my short visit, ranging from pale salmon pink to a very reddish pink, the latter being unusually small specimens. I did expect to come away with a few photos of them, but my pre-occupation with the main target species and restless nature of the fresh Nymphalids in the warm sunshine, conspired to thwart that intention.

So finally we come to that enigmatic little butterfly, the Brown Hairstreak. Having had limited success last week at Shipton Bellinger (3 seen at distance or in flight), I had hoped for better luck this afternoon - in vain, as it turned out. However, I note that only a handful of sightings have so far been reported from Hampshire, Sussex and Upper Thames areas, with a number of other postings citing no-shows for the species. Incidentally, an abraded male 'brownie' was photographed at Noar Hill last week, so we know they are on the wing there, as well as at Shipton Bellinger. Is it possible that another of our woodland dwelling species (a rather loose terminology in the case of Brown Hairstreak!) is going to have a difficult season, drawing a parallel with the Purple Emperor? The jury is still out on that one, but we'll know in a couple of weeks!



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

2 August 2019 - Brownie Activity At Low Level In The Shipton Roughs But Male Wall Makes Cameo Appearance

It is more than a week since I made my first visit to the Shipton Bellinger 'Roughs' with no sign of Brown Hairstreak activity to report then. Two hours spent there today, from late morning, has moved the situation on from zero to a low level of visible activity. In fact, had I been more careful when walking close to blackthorn hedge back towards the village, I might even have had a photo to show!

In summary, I saw at a distance 3 male Brown Hairstreaks during a couple of circumnavigations encompassing the boundary hedge and the track heading west from the village. Two were high in the Ash Tree at the end of that track and the other, seen initially in flight in front of me (possibly disturbed) landed high and partially obscured in blackthorn. ID's in all cases were confirmed using binoculars. During my final exploration of the boundary hedge before leaving, others reported two male Brown Hairstreaks had zipped along the hedge, landing briefly but very skittish.

It seems that the Brown Hairstreak season, despite an early year generally, is still in its early stages, and for the moment the males are not needing to feed low down. Hopefully the situation will progress during the next week as females start to emerge and mating takes place

One other notable sighting during my visit was a male Wall Brown, and the first one I have seen in Hampshire for several years. It made a brief appearance close to the track from the village, before disappearing over the hedge and into a field. Apparently several Wall's have been reported during that last few days, adding weight to the view that they are breeding in the area. No photos today unfortunately - I'll view it as unfinished business for next time!

29 July 2019 - The Wait For Hampshire's Silver Spots Is Over!

Having received news at the weekend that Silver-spotted Skippers are emerging 'in good numbers' at Broughton Down, I made a short visit to my local site at Oxenbourne Down this morning. I was greeted by scores of Chalkhill Blues (mostly males), in the open areas and along the track margins. They were accompanied by almost as many Gatekeepers, clearly preferring the bushier areas. A search of the usual Silver-spot area produced no sightings of the target species, however an exploration further up the grassy track produced my first Silver-spotted Skipper of the season, which would prove to be the only one seen today. It was initially settling amongst the short grass on the track, but later took nectar from the abundant wild flowers along the margins (and indeed covering the site).

As I indicated in an earlier blog, there is now little suitable habitat at Oxenbourne for short sward loving species like the Silver-spotted Skipper, although other species are thriving, so it will be interesting to see how large an emergence occurs here this year. As on my previous visit, a Dark Green Fritillary put in an appearance (a female) and a Small Copper, as well as common species.

You may recall that I previously commented that the rickety gate providing access to Oxenbourne Down had been tied closed with rope. I contacted the QE Country Park and was advised that this was necessary as a temporary measure, due to some lost sheep in Wascoombe Bottom, with a risk that they could escape from the site on to the busy A3. Thankfully the sheep have now been found and moved to a safer location within the park. Oxenbourne Down is open to the public - this morning I simply lifted the loop of rope to allow the gate to be opened sufficiently to gain entry, before closing behind me and securing again with the rope.

4 photos of Silver-spotted Skipper and Dark Green Fritillary posted to Latest Photos.



27 July 2019 - Many More White-letter Hairstreak Sites Added To Last Year's List

A very dedicated observer has discovered an additional 17 White-letter Hairstreak sites within Hampshire during the last year - the list can be found on the news page of the local BC branch website (20 July 2019 entry). These sites are supplementary to the 20 new sites published last year, making a total of 37 so far. All these sites are, of course, locations of elm trees (from groups of elms down to single trees) where the adult butterfly has been seen.

There are a further 3 locations, which are not confirmed through adult butterfly sightings, but where White-letter larvae or pupa have been recorded on elm. In June, I did actually visit one of last year's additional sites, which is located on the edge of housing not far from my home and, sure enough, White-letters were flitting around at the top of a tall elm.

What is remarkable, is that most of these locations are sounremarkable, and even commonplace! They include roadside elms in small towns and beside rural roads, elms in school grounds and even elms close to busy city centres like Portsmouth, where these little butterflies are conducting their lives in the midst of the hustle and bustle of city life!

It also confirms what many observers suspect, that the White-letter Hairstreak is much more widespread than formal records show, at least in Hampshire (and probably in many other southern counties). However, we must remember that some of these colonies are very small, and in the case of single trees, the total population may be just a dozen or so adult butterflies.

I note that a couple of the newly discovered locations are butterfly sites listed under the butterfly sites pages of this website, and I will add specific references when I next update these pages. For the moment, I simply list these below:

- Farley Mount Country Park (Crab Wood): Wych Elm at grid ref SU43622957. (Note: larvae also found on single Wych Elm on Pitt Down, at grid ref SU41612929)
- Old Winchester Hill: Elms at grid ref SU64182137

24 July 2019 - Mad Dogs And Englishmen, But No Silver Spots Or Brownies!

My outing today was perhaps born out of unrealistic optimism (well either that or mad dogs and Englishmen, as the saying goes!) with my initial destination being St Catherine's Hill, near Winchester. This is one of just a handful of locations in Hampshire where the Silver-spotted Skipper flies, albeit in small numbers. I had been fortunate enough last year to locate their 'focus' on the lower southern slopes of the fort, and whilst this would be very early in their flight season by normal standards, they were already on the wing in Hampshire at this time last year.



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

Well, I was out of luck with Silver Spots there today, but could not help to stop for a few minutes at a large buddleia bush close to the path at the bottom of the hill. Here many fresh Peacocks were engaging in a feeding frenzy in the mid-morning heat. Despite the lack of Silver-spotted Skippers, there were of course plenty of downland and common butterflies on the wing, including Chalkhill Blue, Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper as well as a few Small Heath, Red Admiral and Comma.

At the time of setting out, I was undecided whether to include an additional destination, either to make a final visit of the season to a woodland site (maybe with a slim possibility of Purple Emperor) or try for an early Brown Hairstreak. I had noticed that Shipton Bellinger is just half an hour's drive from St Catherine's Hill, halving the journey time from home, and the prospect of an early Brownie in the end proved too alluring. They have already been reported from Sussex and Upper Thames areas.

Perhaps surprisingly, I was not the only one exploring the so called Shipton Bellinger roughs in the hope of finding Brown Hairstreak, but of the two or three others I spoke to as the sweltering midday hour approached, none had seen any hairstreaks. It was the same outcome for myself. I did spend a few minutes viewing some of the master trees (Ash) in the lane from the village, but no hairstreak activity was seen and sadly, one of these trees is seriously succumbing to Ash die back. On the positive side, the site looks generally healthy for a decent hairstreak showing this year, with plenty of high quality blackthorn and nectar on offer, although I know from last year that Brown Hairstreaks tend to stay out of easy view during hot weather.

Two photos of Peacock (at St Catherine's Hill) and Holly Blue (mud puddling at Shipton Bellinger) posted to Latest Photos.

22 July 2019 - Oxenbourne Alive With Butterflies, But No Silver Spots Yet!

A lunchtime visit to Oxenbourne Down produced my first Chalkhill Blues of the year - at least 30 males and a couple of females. For the time being at least, access requires a bit more effort of the climbing variety, since the rickety gate has been tied shut with rope - a matter I will be taking up with Queen Elizabeth CP in which the down is located.

That aside, despite mainly cloudy skies (but balmy temperatures), the Chalkhills were quite skittish, often sensing ones approach from a few yards and taking wing. There was a good accompaniment of Gatekeepers (many fresh) and Meadow Browns, as well as a few Marbled White, Small Heath, Small Skipper and Large White, two patrolling Dark Green Fritillaries and finally 4 Small Coppers, including a courting pair.

The one absentee was Silver-spotted Skipper. Their small area of suitable habitat seems to degrade slightly each year, with young hawthorn and other invasive shrubs being the main problem. There will be Silver-spotted Skippers emerging soon (hopefully within a few days) but with such limited habitat, they may disperse quickly.

5 photos of Chalkhill Blue, Gatekeeper and Small Copper posted to Latest Photos.



18 July 2019 - Enjoyable Re-Acquaintance With New Forest Heathland Species

Having recently experienced the benefits of using a folding bike to explore large woodland areas, it did pretty well again today in and around the New Forest's Beaulieu Heath, in less than ideal butterfly conditions (mainly cloudy).

I made several stops heading west from the model flying area of Beaulieu Heath using the pentagonal route, as well as a stop at Hawkhill Inclosure and another just north of Beaulieu Road station, the latter following a short car journey. Like a bad penny (well not really!), one species kept turning up in most places - Grayling! They were present in small numbers at several locations, typically where the heather is more sparse with bare ground, some freshly emerged. Silver-studded Blues were also present in slightly higher numbers, however their season is now on the wane, with females outnumbering males in some areas.

In the area around Beaulieu Road station, there are wide expanses of uninterrupted heathery heath with little in the way of bushes or trees to provide shelter from wind. Nevertheless both species were present again, the Blues again being the more numerous. This type of terrain can be found in dozens of other locations in the New Forest, so it would be interesting to know if these two species are almost ubiquitous in such areas.

The pleasant diversion into Hawkhill's mixed woodland produced several dashing Dark Green Fritillaries, feeding on tall thistles in an area close to Worts Gutter (currently a slightly damp ditch), as well as a fresh Small Copper and a mating pair of Gatekeepers. I was expecting the Dark Greens to be seriously fading by now, but one or two of the all-male cast were in very good condition.

Many other common species were seen on my tour, including Ringlet, Meadow Brown, Small Heath, Peacock (new generation), Large Skipper, Small Skipper and Speckled Wood. 8 photos of Grayling, Silver-studded Blue, Dark Green Fritillary and Small Copper posted to Latest Photos.





16 July 2016 - Botany Bay Visit For Wood White And Emperor Delivers 50% Success

We will soon be entering the late summer phase of the butterfly season in Hampshire, which includes the Silver-spotted Skipper and Brown Hairstreak flight periods. I also have a bit of catching up on other summer species to do, such as Grayling and Chalkhill Blue, which are already on the wing.

Nevertheless, I reckoned I could afford myself the luxury of crossing the border into Surrey for a chance to re-acquaint myself with the delicate Wood White butterfly, which can be found in several woods near Chiddingfold - including one with the intriguing name of Botany Bay. It's a decent site for Purple Emperor too, and other woodland species..

There were several butterfly observers there, including a well known and decorated member of Sussex Branch (I have a policy of not naming individuals on my website but you know who I mean!). Whilst I was not successful with Wood White, now just starting their second brood, I did manage a male Purple Emperor on the gravel track, probably thanks to bad smelling bait and surrounding damp area, conveniently created before I arrived. The Emperor did a few circuits around the small group of observers, with a couple of us nearly having a trousering, before he settled to feed from the noxious concoction, and joining a Holly Blue which was already there.

On close inspection, and as expected for this stage in the season, he was no longer looking dapper, with wing nicks and abrasions. Males will shortly be confining themselves to the trees, having hopefully mated, although low level forays by females and even groundings should still continue for a while.

Returning to the subject of the Wood White, a total of 3 had been seen by others when I left, and a mating pair was seen on Saturday. Although the Wood White was a no-show for me this morning, this high quality woodland produced many other species, including around 20 Silver-washed Fritillary and 3 White Admirals, one of which posed for a photo.

4 photos of Purple Emperor and White Admiral posted to Latest Photos.



12 July 2019 - Bentley Visit Adds Weight To Likelihood Of Below Par Emperor Season

For my possible final visit this season focussed on the Purple Emperor, Bentley Wood was the chosen destination - surprisingly my first visit there during Emperor time for a few years. Thankfully it was not as busy as I was expecting, and I managed to park easily at 9.30am in warm conditions with broken cloud. Already several observers had their binos trained on the trees around the car park, but no Emperor activity had been seen so far.



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

The visitor book suggested the best day this week was Tuesday, with around 10 seen by one observer, including a few groundings. Other recent entries were generally in the low single digits - in other words, meagre to say the least.

To cut a long story short, my first foray from the car park via the switchback to the edge of Donkey Copse, then making the return to my starting point, produced no sightings. I spoke to several other observers along the way, who reported the same story. Still no activity had been seen in the car park, so a number of us set off along the same route, this time reaching the assembly point in Donkey Copse. Hooray - one female Emperor was spotted perched high in a silver birch, then a couple of males made their presence known by making short, rather nonchalant flights in the same area, landing high in nearby oak trees. The female had also stirred by this time, making a short flight also into oak, however there was no obvious interaction between any of these individuals.

I returned to the car park at around 11.30am to learn that there had been two recent Emperor visitations at head height, one taking a brief interest in a silver car without landing, with neither individual staying in the area. So just five confirmed Emperor sightings by multiple people in two hours, and no groundings.

Speaking to a few other observers and reading various blogs, it is clear that peoples' experiences with the Emperor this year are varying significantly, from reasonable success to failure or near failure. This may partly be due to observation technique and partly due the serendipitous nature of Emperor behaviour. However, the likelihood of a reduced emergence this year and the prolonged and somewhat erratic nature of it seem to be compounding factors. With this in mind, it almost goes without saying that the best chance to see Emperors this season will be at their strongest sites (such as Alice Holt Forest), with sightings at marginal sites being especially low.

Finally, I need to give a mention to other species seen during my visit, which included Silver-washed Fritillary, White Admiral (just one), Gatekeeper, Ringlet, Meadow Brown, Marbled White, Large Skipper, Small Skipper, Comma, Red Admiral, Peacock and Purple Hairstreak.

10 July 2019 - Still Some Head Scratching Over Strange Purple Emperor Season!

Having not been able make any butterfly visits for a few days, I have had to rely on reading the various branch websites to keep up to date with 'goings on', especially on the Purple Emperor front. The first sighting date of 11 June (in my local patch in Botley Wood!) is not inconsistent with a slightly early Emperor season, despite a wet start to June. However, since that first sighting almost a month ago, the butterfly's flight period development at many sites has been very erratic.

Even at the Emperor's strongest UK site at Knepp in Sussex, very few females have so far been seen and males are still emerging. In Hampshire, only one sighting has been reported from the normally reliable Straits Inclosure of Alice Holt Forest, and Bentley Wood kicked off less than a week ago (July 4) which is very late for this site, although numbers now seem to be building. Several other Emperor sites in Hampshire have so far drawn a blank in terms of reported sightings, at a time when the season would be normally approaching its peak.

There are some plausible theories being proposed on the reasons (e.g. relating to the late development of some types of sallow following last year's drought conditions) but even now, it's not really clear where we are in the Emperor's season and how good (or more likely how poor) the season will turn out.

However, it now seems likely that strong sites might still do OK, whilst marginal ones could suffer from very low numbers. In addition, the emergence period is more prolonged and erratic than usual, resulting in the possibility still to find freshly emerged males (but also faded ones). The emergence of females is still in its very early days at present. So hopefully, there is still time and opportunities to find Emperors in good condition this year, but be prepared also for more disappointments than usual.



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

4 Jul 2019 - My First Confirmed Sighting But Hampshire's Emperors Still Very Thin On The Ground !

With the the Purple Emperor season in Hampshire not really showing much sign of picking up, it was tempting to venture further afield (e.g. to Knepp in Sussex, where they seem to be doing pretty well). However, I resisted that temptation this morning and visited West Wood (Farley Mount) where I have seen Emperors for the last two seasons, including a grounding.

Since it is quite a large wood, I took my folding bike in order to be able to cover the ground more quickly. Well, the good news is that I had my first confirmed sighting of a Purple Emperor this season. Having explored a couple of rides not previously visited, my return to the main track which leads from the entrance, produced the encounter. A male Emperor appeared from nowhere heading north along the track, initially at head height, before veering off into the ride margin. Next thing I know, he or rather HIM is heading back along the track directly towards me (maybe it is my lucky day I thought!), but then flew straight past before diving off right and upwards into the trees. And that..... I'm afraid..... was that. The encounter lasted just a few seconds! It was also notable that this individual was really motoring, and makes me think he was newly emerged, spending part of the first morning of adult life honing his flying skills.

As somewhat of a sideshow, I noted that several Marbled Whites are appearing in the grassier rides, and a few fresh Commas are now on the wing. Numbers of Silver-washed Fritillaries have also increased since one week ago.

Due to pre-standing commitments, this will be my last outing for about a week. However, I will be keeping in touch with what's going on and may add to the blog, as well as being able to respond to comments.

2 July 2019 - Ponderous Start To Emperor Season

Concerning the development of this year's Purple Emperor flight period, I have been keeping an eye on local BC branch websites and various blogs, in addition to making a couple of short visits myself to Alice Holt Forest and Whiteley Pastures. At the time of writing, the only location where Emperor numbers seem to be building in a reasonable way, is Knepp Wildland in Sussex (which has the largest Emperor population in UK), and even there progress is slower than usual.

At other sites, including regularly visited sites in and around Hampshire, emergence has either just started (one to a few sightings in the last days) or has not yet started. Morning visits to Whiteley Pastures yesterday and Straits Inclosure today did not produce any sightings, however a subsequent short foray into Abbots Wood produced one possible sighting. This was mainly confined to the shadow of a seriously large butterfly projected on to the gravel track about 30 yards in front of me, as I headed northward, with only the briefest glimpse of the 'culprit', as it disappeared around the back of a large oak.

It may be that Purple Emperor emergence has just been delayed this year because of poor weather in the first half of June, and within a few days we will be wondering what all the fuss was about. There is also the possibility, that for reasons not well understood, the ponderous start to the Emperor season is the herald of a somewhat poor showing for this iconic species. Obviously I am hoping for the former!

Two photos of Silver-washed Fritillary, taken in Abbots Wood today, posted to Latest Photos.

27 June 2019 - Dark Greens Making Good Comeback On Pitt Down

As I recall Dark Green Fritillaries did not have a good season on Pitt Down last year, but I am pleased to say that they are making a significant comeback in 2019. A mid-morning visit, focussing on the western section of the down (opposite Hawthorn car park), produced at least 15 fresh males, mostly flying incessantly over the open down. Having followed one, then another for several minutes without



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

stopping, my frustration was eventually relieved as one paused at a 'nectar station' in the form of a flowering shrub area, to feed on the flowers of white lilac. Gathering a few photos of other individuals then became a whole lot easier!

If the distribution of Dark Green Fritillaries is reasonably consistent over other similar areas, Pitt Down once again has a very good population of this handsome species (i.e.scores). Other conspicuous species included Marbled White, Meadow Brown and the now seemingly ubiquitous, Painted Lady.

A subsequent walk in nearby West Wood produced 4 Silver-washed Fritillaries, several more Painted Ladies and another Dark Green Fritillary, which was either a woodland resident or a wanderer from Pitt Down. No White Admirals or Purple Emperors were seen. 5 photos of Dark Green Fritillary posted to Latest Photos.



26 June 2019 - Summer Woodland Species At Last On The Move

It has been a slightly stuttering start to the summer season for several of our iconic woodland species. Based on recent years, the White Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary and even Purple Emperor seasons would no longer be in their infancy at this time, but very poor weather during the first half of June has held back emergence. In respect of Purple Emperor, there are concerns that the untimely spell of wet weather could result in significant losses at the pupal stage, the species being particularly sensitive to this.

As for White Admiral and Silver -washed Fritillary, I don't think we need have those concerns, since their seasons now seem to be building nicely, despite the stuttering start since the first reports. A late morning exploration along the main track of Whiteley Pastures produced 5 White Admirals and 9 Silver-washed Fritillaries, all very fresh and very active in the warm conditions. Also notable were 6 Painted Ladies, which is an usually high number for a short exploration of this site, but is consistent with other reports from around the county. Indeed this might suggest we are in for a large influx of Painted Ladies this year. I recall reading that mass influxes of this species occur about once per decade. Since the last one was in 2009, another one would be right on cue!

I need to add that nether His, nor Her Majesty were in evidence during my walk, so suspect it is still just too early, with only one Purple Emperor recorded so far in Hampshire. 6 photos of White Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary and Painted Lady posted to latest Photos.



23 June 2019 - Browdown No More Purple Than A Week Ago!

Despite the cloudy, but balmy conditions, I made a return visit to Browdown South this afternoon, one week after my first sighting of Purple Hairstreaks there this season. I had hoped that their numbers would be building and that they would be expanding their occupation into the low level scrub oak.

The answer to both these questions seems to be a resounding NO! Perhaps not surprisingly, they were not flying spontaneously this afternoon. The only ones I could find across several of the stands of medium sized oak, resulted from gently tapping branches, which caused them to go up even higher, usually after several jerky circuits around the canopy.

In all I saw 8 Purple Hairstreaks, with only a few trees occupied and never more than two per tree. Encouragingly however, they seem still to be in good condition, so it is possible there are many more to emerge.

22 June 2019 - White-letters Out In Numbers Following Monday's No-Show

You may recall that I commented on a visit to a couple of White-letter Hairstreak colonies in SE Hants at the beginning of this week - with no sign of activity at one of the sites. The contrast today could not have been more marked, with 4 or 5 male White-letters down feeding in the large area of brambles directly below the elms.

Admittedly most of the time they were doing their best to maintain a generous depth of 'prickles' between them and a camera, or remain obscured by foliage as they crawled around the flower-heads taking nourishment, with occasional short flights between bramble stands. By switching periodically between two different observation points, eventually one or two decent photo opportunities at closer quarters were offered, and gladly taken.

Things seem to have moved on so quickly since the beginning of the week with some of the males already having wing nicks, but still generally in good or very good condition.

I am also pleased to report that I visited Portland Coppice earlier in the day and saw 2 Silver-washed Fritillaries, both on a mission in the warm sunshine and probably 'straight out of their boxes', but no sign yet of White Admiral. 3 photos of White-letter Hairstreak posted to Latest Photos.



20 June 2019 - Visit To Daneway Gets Off To Flying Start With Mating Large Blues

With the Large Blue season now in its third week (despite relatively few reported sightings), it was a case of now or never for a trip to see them this year. My destination was Daneway Banks, a lovely chalk grassland reserve in the Cotswolds, with the aim of seeing and photographing a Large Blue with open wings - a feat which has so far eluded me.

I was having serious second thoughts during the 100 mile journey to Gloucestershire, having seen the weather forecast gradually deteriorate over the last couple of days and now being realised. Thick cloud built up very quickly following the early morning sunshine, with heavy showers threatening by mid-morning.

Thankfully, my objective was achieved - indeed exceeded - within half an hour of arrival, under mainly cloudy skies, but at least no rain. Whilst only 4 Large Blues were seen on this occasion, all at the western end of the reserve, they included a mating pair and individual males, one of which posed nicely with open wings. Other species noted were Common Blue, including several of the excessively blue females which seem to be a characteristic of this season, Meadow Brown, Brown Argus and even a late Dingy Skipper.

As the skies gradually leadened, I suspected that Large Blue sightings would become increasingly difficult, so decided to head back south earlier than expected, calling in at a couple of locations within Farley Mount on the return. Apart from a pleasant lunch looking out over Pitt Down as the showers rolled in, nothing of significance to report from there on the butterfly front! 4 photos of Large Blue posted to Latest Photos.





Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

18 June 2019 - Summer Season Ready At The Starting Blocks

Early June's temperamental weather has not prevented a few early sightings of summer species, although we must wait to see if the untimely and prolonged unsettled spell has any effect on their populations. However, it is likely that the next spell of more settled weather (possibly the latter part of this week) could see a significant emergence of summer species, held back so far by the rains.

Already species such as White Admiral, Dark Green Fritillary, Silver-washed Fritillary, Purple Hairstreak, White-letter Hairstreak and even His Majesty, the Purple Emperor have been reported from one or more southern counties.

Having seen my first Purple Hairstreak of the season at the weekend, yesterday I added White-letter Hairstreak today, with a couple of the butterflies spotted flitting in the crown of a local elm. At another roadside White-letter site in SE Hants, it seems the butterfly is not yet emerging, however several pristine Marbled Whites entertained me in an adjoining small meadow.

Whilst it has been tempting recently to travel further afield, to see species not present in our area, the next few weeks should see us spoilt for choice locally! 2 photos of Marbled White posted to Latest Photos.



16 June 2019 - Browdown Seeing Purple Again - And It's Not The Heather!

The first half of June has seen the normal development of several of our summer butterfly flight periods (following first sightings) almost put on hold, as the lengthy spell of unsettled weather continues. Nevertheless, if any of you have been following the development of the Sussex Black Hairstreak season, you will know that despite the weather, their flight period is progressing, with the butterflies being seen every day and taking advantage of any brief weather windows.

In Hampshire, following my failed visit to find Purple Hairstreaks at Browdown South last weekend, a return visit today at around 6pm in mainly cloudy and breezy conditions, was a qualified success. However, the only oaks which had hairstreaks flying were a few of the medium sized ones (10-15ft tall). In all 8-10 Purple Hairstreaks were found, all keeping well above head height. I suspect most if not all were males, including the one which settled just low enough to photograph.

It is hoped that a gradual build in their numbers during the next couple of weeks should be accompanied by a greater willingness to venture to the smaller trees and scrub oak. 2 photos of Purple Hairstreak posted to Latest Photos.



9 June 19 - It's That Darned June Gap Again!

I had been hoping to outwit the so called June gap (i.e. the sparse period in between the spring and summer seasons) having noted that Purple Hairstreaks had been reported in both Hertfordshire and Sussex. My rationale was that Browdown was probably an early site for them too, being dry coastal heath with plenty of stunted oaks.

So having GPS marked several low oaks which had been occupied in previous years, I set off for an early afternoon visit. Alas the June gap got the better of me again, with no hairstreaks in evidence in any of the low oaks which I gently tapped. In fact, just one butterfly was seen during my walk - a faded Small Copper - so I had to settle for the lovely vistas and unusual coastal heath surroundings instead.

5 June 2019 - Summer Species Begin To Take Wing

As most of our spring species complete their important business of mating and egg-laying (with many now looking tired and faded), it will soon be time for the emergence of our summer butterflies. Indeed some of the less iconic species are already on the wing in Hampshire, such as Meadow Brown and Large Skipper, both of which I saw during a short stroll in Whiteley Pastures this morning. Outside Hampshire, there have been first sightings of White Admiral (Sussex), Dark Green Fritillary (Devon), Purple Hairstreak (Herts) and Silver-studded Blue (Cornwall). By the end of June, and in many cases well before, I expect all these species to be on the wing in Hampshire and to have been joined by the likes of White-letter Hairstreak, Silver-washed Fritillary and even Purple Emperor.

It is worth noting that if this unsettled and coolish weather continues well into the month, the summer season may progress more slowly than we have been used to, with flight periods being extended over a longer period, but with reduced peak numbers. Photo of very fresh Large Skipper posted to Latest Photos.



1 June 2019 - Heath Frits Doing Well In Their Duchy Of Cornwall Home

Yesterday I was delighted, during a short break in the the West Country, to be able to see one of our rarest butterfly species, the Heath Fritillary, which seems to be thriving at its only Cornish home. Greenscombe Wood, in the beautiful Tamar Valley is owned and managed by the Duchy of Cornwall and consists of mixed heath and woodland (mainly coniferous), with some open glades and meadows. The wood is flanked by tributaries of the River Tamar, with steep vegetated slopes on either side.

The main access point is from the hamlet of Lucket. After an initially gentle walk along a minor road, one bears right up a fairly steep track towards the crown of the wood. My ascent was in cloudy and fairly humid conditions, but the sun was starting to make inroads and once near the summit, Heath Fritillaries began to appear along the heathland tracks, many looking quite pristine with their rich brown upperside colouring. Most, if not all were males, emergence having just started during the last few days. It was notable that Common Cow Wheat, the larval foodplant of the species, was present amongst the vegetation.

I have not witnessed this dainty little fritillary very often, so watching their varied behaviour was enlightening. Occasional very rapid chases between males or fearless forays down steep slopes might not have been expected of a generally sedentary species. At other times however, behaviour reverted to type with short flights followed by feeding, basking with open wings or resting on low vegetation. The heathery tracks and margins approaching the summit, as well as the rough, lightly vegetated slopes around the ruins of the hill fort, seemed to be favoured spots. Further on there were some open meadows (again with Common Cow Wheat growing), with a few more Heath Fritillaries seen there.

I traversed the same areas several times during my visit making it difficult to judge numbers, but I would be confident with a count of 15 - 20 different individuals seen. 6 photos of Heath Fritillary posted to Latest Photos.

Tip: Greenscombe Wood is just over 3 miles form Gunnislake Station on the Tamar Valley Line (which I used). For those who love walking, this is viable. A good compromise is maybe to walk there, but pre-book a taxi back to the station from Lucket car park.



26 May 2019 - May Is The Month For The Small Fritillaries

Now that many of the early spring butterflies are on the wane (and we have a brief respite before the next wave of emergences), it is worth reminding ourselves that May is the time for the UK's five small fritillaries - a very attractive subset of our species, with their characteristic upper surface chequerboard markings, but very distinctive individual patterning on their undersides.

Whilst Hampshire is bestowed with three of these species (Peal-bordered, Small Pearl-bordered and Marsh in varying abundance) you only need to travel across the Solent to the south of the Isle of Wight for the Glanville Fritillary. Finally, a visit to see the once endangered Heath Fritillary provides the option of relatively easily accessible woodland sites in Kent or Essex, or beautiful hill country locations in SW England (with sites in Somerset, Devon and Cornwall).

Whilst the Pearl-bordered Fritillary, being the first small fritillary to emerge, is now well into the second half of its flight period (at least in southern England), all the other species are either in the middle of their flight periods or in the first days.

(Footnote: It is fairly common knowledge that there are a couple of surviving Glanville colonies on the mainland, resulting from unofficial releases many years ago. These are at Hutchinson's Bank (Croydon) and also at Wrecclesham Quarry, just over the Hampshire border in Surrey. Note that Wrecclesham Quarry is not accessible to the public, but Glanvilles are still recorded each year around its eastern perimeter).

23 May 19 - Bumper Adonis Crop On Old Winchester's South Field

I do try to make a few visits to some of Hampshire less well known butterfly sites during a season, but my initial stop this morning at St Catherine's Hill, for spring brood Adonis, was unsuccessful. This was despite overcoming attempts to thwart me by road closures in the area and the temporary reduction in the car park capacity, due to construction work! Seriously though, I know that the Adonis population on St Catherine's is small and the spring brood there are especially elusive.

I was already aware that Adonis were on the wing at Old Winchester Hill, which became my next and final stop. My disappointment at St Catherine's was soon forgotten on finding the south field (below the fort) metaphorically awash with Adonis Blues - more than I have ever seen there and the most common species on the lower slopes.

The reason was soon clear - the sward is nice and short (well done English Nature on grazing scheme management) and the abundant horseshoe vetch. At least 20 Adonis Blues were on the wing, distributed across the width of the slope, most quite fresh males but including at least 2 females. Two males (found in both cases by other passing males) were still resting on grass stems drying out their wings and reluctant to fly, illustrating how vulnerable they are to trampling at this critical post



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

emergence stage. Other species seen on the slope included Common Blue and Small Heath. 5 photos (incl Common Blue taken at St Catherine's Hill) posted to Latest Photos.



21 May 19 - Bentley's Small Pearls Reward Those With Plentiful Patience

I was hoping that this afternoon's sunshine would bring out a few Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries in Bentley Wood's Eastern Clearing. Well it did, and it brought out the visitors too, those with plenty of patience being rewarded.

I spent an hour in the clearing in mainly sunny conditions, but was glad of some fair weather cloud to calm the fritillaries down. Having said that, there wasn't an abundance of any species - around eight Pearl-bordered Frits, some now rather faded, but a few reasonably fresh. I also managed a Grizzled Skipper and a Duke, as well as a few Brimstones and Peacocks. The first Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries were recorded at the weekend, according to the visitors book, but it took me more than forty minutes to find my first one (and I was not the only one looking) but then, as with buses, two sightings in quick succession.

The first was near near the western end of the clearing. It landed briefly to feed on bugle to confirm ID, before flying up to tangle with a passing Pearl-bordered Fritillary, before being lost from view. Minutes later there was a shout from further into the clearing, and sure enough, what appeared to be a mint fresh, Small Pearl was resting on a grass stem. It made a couple of rather weak, short flights, perhaps indicative of being recently emerged, and hence probably not the very active individual seen a few minutes earlier.

Small Pearls are in the first days of their flight period in Bentley Wood, but bearing in mind the population there is modest, I would recommend allowing plenty of time if you want to come away with a few photos and more than the odd sighting. 5 photos of Pearl and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries posted to Latest Photos.





Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

19 May 19 - Duke Quietly Implementing Its Survival Strategy!

It was not very many years ago that there was really serious concern about the decline in the Duke Of Burgundy, that enigmatic little butterfly which is the sole representative of its family, not only in UK but in Europe. Whilst Hampshire may not be representative of its current UK status, if you visit many locations in an east-west swathe of chalk based landscape across the middle of the county, you can come across it, albeit in small numbers.

I myself have seen the species at no fewer than 7 places during the last month, encompassing both downland sites (where the larvae feed on cowslip) to woodland clearings where primrose is the foodplant. These include sites where the butterfly occurs in significant numbers, such as Noar Hill and Butser Hill and other downland sites where populations are small, such as Stockbridge Down and Stephen's Castle Down. They also include woodland sites, again with small populations such as West Wood, Bentley Wood and a woodland clearing 'over the road' from Stockbridge Down. Further examples of where the butterfly can be seen in Hampshire's middle swathe, include Old Winchester Hill, several private sites in the Meon Valley, Beacon Hill (Warnford) and Deacon Hill near Winchester. As far as I am aware, the Duke's presence at all of these places has occurred naturally, including via natural dispersion from nearby sites.

It is as if the species is quietly masterminding its long term survival by ensuring its presence at a wide range of locations, using two main habitat types. Whilst a romantic thought on the face of it, we must remember that species have survived for thousands, indeed millions of years, by tactics such as this, aided by evolutionary process such as natural selection and nowadays with a helping hand from conservation. Nevertheless, with challenges from climate change, pressure on land use and resources, pollution etc, we cannot say all is now fine and dandy for the Duke, but it is certainly showing that with a bit of help, the Duke will do its best to ensure its own future.

16 May 2019 - Perfection In Miniature And Territorial Battles On Portsdown Hill

The butterfly season is now progressing quickly from the early spring species, as two of the 'blues' (namely small and common) take wing in good numbers. Indeed, a walk on Portsdown Hill this morning produced an excellent turnout not only of these two species, but others as well. On the lower slopes below the Paulsgrove quarry, Small Blues were flitting around the path and scrubby vegetation. Despite the fact I see them every year, watching these perfectly formed, but tiny butterflies in action, always fascinates me! At least 20 were present including a couple of females, mingling occasionally with Common Blues.

Just to the east of the quarry on the central section of the hill, there were a few more Small Blues, but here they were outnumbered by Common Blues. The highlight of this area however, was one section of mixed hedgerow with hawthorn fronted by plentiful dogwood, where several Green Hairstreaks were engaged in territorial battles - up to 3 at a time. They even tackled other blues (Common and Holly) which dared to encroach. After several minutes, the individuals took a break to perch on foliage (and a few pics) but had resumed their squabble half an hour later, as I passed the same spot on my return! Other species seen included Orange Tip (only 2), Brimstone, Speckled Wood, Holly Blue and Green-veined White.

6 photos of Small Blue, Green Hairstreak, Orange Tip and Common Blue posted to Latest Photos.



14 May 2019 - Bentley's Spring Luxuriance Adorned By Fritillaries

I slightly delayed my first visit to Bentley Wood this year, having already seen Pearl-bordered Fritillaries elsewhere. However its magnetic draw could not be resisted any longer, being endowed with more butterfly species than any other woodland I know, including Marsh Fritillary. I did start my visit in the Hampshire part (Eastern clearing), where, at about 10.30am under continuous sunshine, the Pearl-bordered Fritillaries were active but not yet in top gear. I estimate there were around 8 of them in the clearing, including a couple of females and a fairly worn male. This suggests their season here is close to peaking. A nice bonus was a Duke Of Burgundy and a Grizzled Skipper, but no Small Pearls were showing and none were recorded so far in the visitors book. Whilst there is sometimes the odd Marsh Fritillary in the clearing (and one was seen on 10th), they were not showing during my visit, so a move to another part of the wood was called for.

A few minutes drive took me to the Livery Gate on the west side of the wood (in Wiltshire) and from there it's only a 10 minute walk to Barnridge Meadow. The small Marsh Fritillary colony there has teetered on the brink during some difficult seasons, but there were least 3 males on the wing today, all quite fresh. They were accompanied by a few Pearls, now in top gear with the temperature a couple of notches up from earlier. In today's fast moving world, it is certainly a place to lose oneself, amongst the lush spring vegetation and only nature around - not even another person present in this part of the wood.

On the way home, I called in at Stockbridge Down - not the main down, but the small clearing opposite the eastern car park. Here a single Pearl-bordered Fritillary was whizzing around, never stopping. However two small butterflies, engaged in a brief aerial duel caught my attention. One was a fresh Brown Argus, the other a Duke Of Burgundy, now showing some wear and tear. Nevertheless a fitting end to a very productive couple of hours.

6 photos of Marsh Fritillary, Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Brown Argus and Duke of Burgundy posted to Latest Photos.



11 May 2019 - More Pearls Today In West Wood With A Duke Bonus!

I resisted the temptation to visit the west of the county this afternoon, where there are multiple fritillary species on the wing (that can wait a few days) and instead made a return visit to West Wood (Farley Mount). As the spring butterfly season nears its peak, making multiple return visits to a particular site, separated by a few days, is an indulgence I don't often experience. However today was an exception, as I made my third visit in less than two weeks to the regeneration area in the middle of the wood, allowing a sort of mini-assessment of the flight period development of 3 uncommon species found there.

I recorded six Grizzled Skippers on 29 April, but none during either of my subsequent visits, including today, although odd ones have been seen by other observers. This suggests that the adults spend only a very brief period in the regeneration area - but hopefully enough time to mate and lay eggs. My first visit probably coincided with the main emergence. If any of those individuals are still surviving, it seems likely they quickly dispersed well away from their emergence location.

Today Pearl-bordered Fritillary sightings increased from just two on 4 May to five today - at least four of them were different individuals and all were male. Conditions ranged from recently emerged to moderately faded with some wing nicks. The Pearl flight period may now be approaching peak - hopefully some females are present too or will emerge very soon.

Finally we come to the Duke of Burgundy. It would appear that the Duke colony here is very small, so I think I am happy just to have recorded my first ever sighting of him (and it was a him) at this site today! 2 photos of Pearl-bordered Fritillary posted to Latest Photos.





Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

6 May 19 - Unfinished Business At Stephen's Castle Down

It's my impression that this spring has been unusually disruptive to the early part of the butterfly season. Following a warm spell in late March/early April which enabled species to start emerging, the season has since stuttered along, as a result of periods of very cool weather. The main emergence of spring species is thus extending over a longer period than usual (which is probably not a good thing) with fading specimens intermingled with very fresh ones and generally low butterfly density.

A lunchtime return to Stephen's Castle Down was partly as a result of unfinished business a couple of weeks ago, with no Dukes or Grizzled seen, and partly not wishing to travel too far when the weather flip-flops from cold but sunny early mornings, to not quite so cold, but cloudy or showery afternoons!

To cut a long story short, I did manage to complete my unfinished business there, despite sunshine being at a premium, with 3 Duke of Burgundy (all quite fresh), 8 Dingy Skippers in various conditions and 2 Grizzled Skippers recorded, although I could not repeat my success with Green Hairstreak. I was pleased to note that whilst all 3 species were seen in or close to the shallow valley opposite the farm, another good area (where 1 Duke and most of the Dingies were seen) is the scrubby downland slope about 150m north from it. Other species seen in low numbers were Orange Tip, Brimstone, Speckled Wood and a very faded Holly Blue. 2 photos of Duke and Dingy posted to Latest Photos.



4 May 2019 - Chance Visit To West Wood Pays Pearl Dividend

Hampshire's emergence of Pearl-bordered Fritillaries seems to have been halted in its tracks by the spell of cool, unsettled weather. With longer journeys to Bentley Wood or the New Forest not an option, I was not too hopeful of success in making a short return visit to West Wood (Farley Mount) this afternoon, with the thermometer at 12 degrees, limited sunshine and showers in the vicinity. Although West Wood's pearl population might not even make double digits at its peak, lady luck was on my side, as a decent spell of sunshine greeted me on arrival at the regeneration site in the middle of the wood. The sun was very much needed to take the edge off the cold northerly wind and motivate a few butterflies to take wing.

Surprisingly, of just 3 butterflies seen during my short visit, 2 were Pearl-bordered Fritillaries (both males), the other being a Peacock. Whilst one of the fritillaries briefly posed between feeds on the plentiful supply of bugle flowers, the other, seen some minutes later, was almost constantly active. However a single confirmation photo was sufficient to confirm a different individual.

By the way, some of you may be interested to know that Pearl-bordered Fritillary emergence in neighbouring Sussex is now well advanced, with an incredible count of almost 250 in Rewell Wood (near Arundel) on 29 April. It proves that such halcyon days need not necessarily be confined to childhood memories!

3 photos of Pearl-bordered Fritillary posted to Latest Photos.



2 May 2019 - Stop-Start Progress Continues As Spring Searches For Momentum

With cooler weather on the way and quite a few other commitments during the coming bank holiday weekend, I took the opportunity to visit New Copse Inclosure in the New Forest this morning, to check for Pearl-bordered Fritillary emergence. The result was inconclusive due to the cloudy conditions during my short visit - no pearls seen (only Speckled Wood and Peacock) but judging from the immature state of the flora there, I would not be surprised if emergence has not yet begun.

The stop-start progress in the emergence of spring butterflies is of course not unusual, with pleasantly warm spells interrupted by regular returns to a rather more wintry feel to the weather.

Despite no pics from the forest, I post a couple more skippers to Latest Photos from the last couple of weeks, including a very dark brown Dingy Skipper seen in Rake Bottom (below), as well as a Grizzled Skipper from Stockbridge Down.



29 April 2019 - Pearl Emergence Begins In Hampshire

This morning I visited two sites separated by just a few miles which usually record a few Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, despite limited suitable habitat. First up it was a regenerating area in the middle of West Wood (part of Farley Mount Country Park). Finding Pearls here would have been a real bonus so early in their season. However, the occasional Duke is also recorded and, what I didn't know but was soon to find out, this felled area also supports a colony of Grizzled Skipper. In fact Grizzlies were the only key species I found there - 6 of them. I was not too disheartened as it may still be too early for woodland Dukes and also for the resident small colony of Pearl-bordered Fritillary.

I then moved on to Stockbridge Down. Unfortunately the cloud cover was greater by now, with only sporadic bursts of sun. A walk through the scrub area at the eastern end of the reserve produced



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

common species but also a Green Hairstreak flitting well above head height in hawthorn. So without further ado, I made my way up the hill to the Woolbury Fort area. Seeing several fresh Small Coppers basking close to the path was a good start, and there was the odd Grizzled Skipper too with more to follow in the rough areas around the fort. However, just one Duke of Burgundy was seen - a fresh male which disappeared into a thick bushy area not to re-emerge.

As I made my way back to the car, another observer said he had seen a Pearl-bordered Fritillary in the small National Trust clearing over the road from the eastern car park. As I joined him for another look, sure enough the earlier observation was repeated but this Pearl was clearly on a mission and not stopping for anyone! However, I have it on reliable authority that Pearl-bordered Fritillaries are now emerging in Bentley Wood.

3 photos of Grizzled Skipper and Small Copper posted to Latest Photos.



25 April 2019 - Green Hairstreaks And A Dingy Flypast At Stephen's Castle

During the butterfly season I always try to make time to visit a few of the lesser known butterfly sites, and as a reasonable swathe of broken cloud developed in the southernmost parts of the county this afternoon, I made the short trip to Stephen's Castle Down near Bishops Waltham. This is an eastward facing strip of access land with most downland species present - albeit in modest numbers. Several Duke of Burgundy were seen there on Monday, but in previous years at least, there have been Grizzled Skippers, Dingy Skippers and Green Hairstreaks, as well as common species.

A good place to start serious searching is the shallow valley (where the Dukes were seen) and the adjoining scrub areas which slope down towards Dean Farm and where, in principle, all the key species can potentially be seen. My quest today was aimed at Green Hairstreak, so I focussed more on the scrub/bushy areas further north - going further north than I had ventured previously at this site.

I am coming to terms with the fact that one often has to work harder these days for sightings, so was not disappointed with my tally of two Green Hairstreaks (one of which posed nicely on scrub) and a Dingy Skipper flypast (on returning to the aforementioned valley). Other species seen were Holly Blue, Orange Tip, Green-veined White and hibernators including Brimstone and a Small Tortoiseshell (but no Dukes or Grizzled by the way). 3 photos of Green Hairstreak posted to Latest Photos.



21 April 2019 - Dingy Skippers, Small Heath And A Duchess Take Wing In Rake Bottom!

As I pondered where to go on this gorgeous sun-drenched afternoon, I asked myself: "Where can all the early spring downland species be found together?" Whilst not unique in this accolade in Hampshire, Butser Hill is right up there, and the valley cutting into its western flank, Rake Bottom, avoids any strenuous climbs. Target species were Grizzled Skipper, Dingy Skipper, Green Hairstreak and Duke Of Burgundy.

Well I succeed with 3 of them, which was a decent outcome, bearing in mind I was not sure if Dingies or Dukes had emerged there yet. 5 fresh Dingies were seen, suggesting their season perhaps started as soon as the recent cool spell ended, joining around 10 Grizzled Skippers on the lower slopes of the valley. As a bonus, I also spotted an early Small Heath and other species were seen too: Orange Tips, Brimstones, Peacocks and a Comma. One slight disappointment was the lack of Green Hairstreak sightings. It's too early to know of this was just bad luck or foretelling of a poor season ahead for the species.

I was almost resigned to not seeing any Dukes either, bearing in mind they are later at this site than Noar Hill. So I was especially pleased when a very fresh Duke Of Burgundy flew up from the path on the return trek, as I neared the exit gate. It turned out actually to be a lovely Duchess. She set down once or twice on low vegetation before landing in shrubbery to the side of the path, allowing a few photos. At Rake bottom, Dukes are found in two areas, one close to the gate, the other higher up the valley, the small colony nearer the gate emerging first. I now refer to these as 'lowland' and 'highland' Dukes respectively - the lowland ones appearing first! 6 photos of Dingy Skipper, Grizzled Skipper, Duke Of Burgundy and Small Heath posted to Latest Photos.





Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

18 April 2019 - Upturn In Weather Ends Frugal Start To Duke Season

It's hard to believe that more than two weeks have passed since the first Duke Of Burgundy of the Hampshire season was recorded at Noar Hill, with no more seen until the middle of this week. Two weeks of cold weather and limited sunshine put the brakes on the season's progress for many species - thankfully that now seems to be at an end, as daytime temperatures pass the 20C mark.

This afternoon I visited Noar Hill again and whilst the Dukes were not easy to find, I did eventually record them in one's and two's in 3 different locations around the centre of the reserve, with 4 males seen in all. There was a sprinkling of Orange Tips, and hibernators (Brimstone, Peacock and Comma) around too, in addition to a single Holly Blue.

Buoyed by what seems to have been a long awaited success, I then headed west to Stockbridge Down, where 4 Grizzled Skippers were seen around the fort (but yielding just one partly obscured photo!). I had hoped that the odd Duke might put in an appearance in the sheltered ramparts, but none seen. Again, a few Orange Tips and the same hibernator species were seen at this site. 5 photos of Duke Of Burgundy and Grizzled Skipper posted to Latest Photos.



11 April 2019 - Wintry Temperatures Peg Back Spring Emergence

As often happens in spring, the initial flush of spring butterflies has been pegged back by very cool temperatures and a chilly breeze. Nevertheless, I could not resist the promise of sunshine today to make my first visit of the season to Noar Hill, arriving around midday.

I should have known better with the outside air temperature just 9 deg C. Perhaps it was surprising that I saw any butterflies at all - a male Orange-Tip and 2 Brimstones eventually braved the chilly air (admittedly after an hour or so had passed and it was probably 10 deg C!) No Dukes were seen however, which were my main target, following the first and possibly only sighting of one at Noar this season, way back on 1st April.

I think I will wait for temperatures to rise a few degrees before my next visit!

7 April 2019 - Green Hairstreak And Grizzled Skipper Take Wing At Magdalen

It was rather a case of chasing the sun in deciding the destination for my first short outing of the season. My selection of Magdalen Hill Down, as it turned out, was fully justified, the reserve being blessed with hazy sunshine during my visit. 3 season firsts were the result: a Grizzled Skipper on the lower slopes, a Green Hairstreak amongst the bushes in the extension bordering the original reserve and no fewer than 3 Orange Tips, including a female.

The female was clearly keen to procreate by offering up her abdomen to an initially interested male (but eventually to no avail). A few Peacocks, Brimstones and a Comma completed the sightings list. So a good result despite relatively few butterflies on the wing, in what is turning out to be a very early



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

season. I actually won't be sorry if a short cold spell now slows things down and avoids the season running away, which experience shows seems to end badly for many butterfly species.

7 photos posted to Latest Photos Gallery including the courting Orange Tips.



2 April 2019 - Duke Out At Noar Hill Hill And It's No April Fool!

Yes it's true - the Duke Of Burgundy is on the wing already at Noar Hill with a fresh male seen on April 1st! This is more than 3 weeks earlier than last year and is the earliest UK sighting of the species for at least a decade (April 3rd in 2011). It is only by chance I discovered the report since I really was not expecting this news so early.

With a cold snap just starting to bite, it may be that any Dukes on the wing already will seemingly vanish for a few days, before reappearing when the weather starts to warm up again.

(Update 3 April 2019: A Duke of Burgundy sighting is reported from Wiltshire on the Butterfly Conservation first sightings page even earlier , on 28 March 2019!)

25 March 2019 - New Season Is Here (Almost)!

For those envisaging (like me) that it will be a good couple of weeks before the new season really gets going - well think again! Two male Orange Tips were seen in West Sussex today, which is even earlier than the warm spring of 2017. If the usual pattern follows, sightings of this species, which is a traditional indicator of spring, are also likely in Hampshire within a few days, bearing in mind a favourable weather outlook.

Extrapolating even further (which is less certain), we can expect to see Grizzled Skipper, Green Hairstreak and Duke of Burgundy in multiple numbers by the second week of April. This is in addition to the three white species which are already recorded at UK level and I am fairly sure I glimpsed a Small White myself yesterday in a garden in South Hants, whilst driving .

Although not in the recently emerged category, I also received a report of a CAMBERWELL BEAUTY being seen and photographed yesterday in Hawkhill Inclosure in the New Forest. It seems the new season is intent on making quite an entrance!

18 March 2019 - Butterfly Decline: A Microcosm Of Global Biodiversity and Species Loss

The gathering of data into the rapid losses in biodiversity and species across our planet is invaluable to quantify the scale of the issues which need to be tackled urgently, many of which are the result of the pressures placed on our planet by human activities. Furthermore, we don't need to visit far flung places to witness the consequences of factors such as climate change, frequent extreme weather



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

events, loss of habitat, pollution and changing land management practices. Why - because they are right here in front of our noses!

Since I started this blog more than 12 years ago, the fortunes of Hampshire's small fritillaries can be seen to represent a local microcosm of what is happening on a global scale. Back then, it was possible to see 4 of the small fritillaries in the county: Pearl-bordered, Small Pearl-bordered, Marsh and Glanville. Now turn the clock forward to today: we have lost the Glanville Fritillary from the south coast and the Small-Pearl bordered is confined to basically a single site (Bentley Wood) where it is in danger. Admittedly the county does not really have long term suitable habitat for the Glanville Fritillary, but if it were not for other factors, it could still be present in small pockets on the south coast.

Furthermore, whilst the Marsh Fritillary survives in reasonable numbers at Martin Down, it just hangs on in Bentley Wood having been almost lost after high rainfall through the 2012 flight period. In compensation, the species is the subject of a managed reintroduction at two former sites in NE Hampshire. Lastly Pearl-Bordered Fritillary populations have declined significantly at its two main locations, Bentley Wood and the New Forest. In the case of the former, counts at peak season in the eastern clearing have dropped from 20+ a decade or so ago to typically single figures now. Thankfully the species does seem to respond to appropriate habitat management (as demonstrated by a successful programme in Sussex) and is appearing at one or two new and former sites in Hampshire through natural dispersion.

It is a cause of personal consternation that species forming part of the rich tapestry that is the natural world, which I have enjoyed through my adult life - and continue to enjoy - may not be around for my two young grandchildren when they are old enough to fully appreciate them.

5 February 2019 - Brown Hairstreak In SE Hampshire

I have noted with pleasure that a number of successful Brown Hairstreak egg searches have been conducted recently in the south-east of the county. In addition to very healthy counts of around a hundred eggs being found on blackthorn-rich hedgerows to the south of Soberton, more modest counts on hedgerows close to Creech Woods and near Southwick are also confirmed. This follows isolated sightings of adult Brown Hairstreaks in these two locations during the last few years.

It is known (from the Brown Hairstreak population in the NW of the county, around Shipton Bellinger/Cholderton and elsewhere in the UK) that the species tends to be found in low density over quite wide areas, where there is suitable hedgerow habitat, with higher population nuclei around master trees. Based on the egg counts around Soberton, it is likely one or more master trees exist in this area, which is great news.

Isolated Brown Hairstreak sightings have also been recorded from Swanwick Nature Reserve and Swanmore village in recent years, so it is possible that the Brown Hairstreak network actually extends much further west than the current egg search areas in SE Hants. It may be coincidence, but this whole area (from Swanwick in the west to Creech Woods in the east) lies within a large tract of land once occupied by the Forest of Bere, with significant woodland remnants of this once large forest still existing today.

For anyone interested in conducting further egg searches during what remains of the winter, I have extracted a few findings and recommendations from a paper published in 2010 by Thomas Meckx and Koen Berwaerts on the type of hedgerows favoured by Brown Hairstreak, based on field surveys.

- Greater density of eggs found on young blackthorn growth, with implications for hedgerow management to avoid annual flailing, which removes much of the young growth and any laid eggs.
- Greater density of eggs found near the ends of blackthorn stands (e.g. suggesting a few eggs are laid by females leaving or arriving at a blackthorn rich section of hedge).



Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

- Mixed hedgerows with blackthorn growing with other shrubs/trees is favoured compared to solid blackthorn.
- Scalloped hedgerows are favoured over straight edges (microclimate?).
- North facing hedgerows are not favoured.
- Surrounding environment (arable, pasture, scrub and even roadside) is not a significant factor in egg density, nor the proximity of woodland.

26 January 2019 - The Butterfly Season Never Really Stops!

As early spring beckons, with the prospect of slightly warmer, brighter days, it is clear that butterfly activity has never really stopped! Already 7 species have been recorded nationally since the beginning of January, including Speckled Wood and a Holly Blue (rescued from a pond in Essex) as well as the usual hibernators. Larvae too are up and about, with Wall larvae seen feeding in Sussex on at least two days during the month.

Nearer to home, a successful Brown Hairstreak egg hunt was held last week, focussing on the blackthorn rich hedgerows near Soberton. It confirmed that a potentially decent population of this elusive species exists in that area, several miles south of its main east Hampshire stronghold around Noar Hill.

As the days grow longer and, dare I say, warmer, signs of spring are all around, from the new growth of flowering plants and shrubs, trees in bud and birds in song. It's a bit too early yet for many insects, including butterflies (excepting a few hibernators venturing out on warmer days), but we are only a few short weeks away from the appearance of newly emerged species. Indeed, strictly speaking the first non-hibernator has already been seen at UK level - a Speckled Wood in London recorded in late January.

Initial indications are that spring will once again be somewhat early, since the winter has not been cold overall with very little snow in the south, despite a few cold snaps. There is still time for a prolonged cold spell to slow progress (but unlikely I feel), and I will continue to monitor with a view to suggesting when the season is likely to start in earnest.