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## HERTFORDSHIRE AND MIDDLESEX BRANCH NEWSLETTER.

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ISSUE 10

JUNE 1997



### What a difference a year makes By Malcolm Newland

Last year I had recorded twenty three butterflies in my garden by the 15th of May. This year the figure was one hundred and thirty! Not surprising really, but further proof if any was needed of the effect of the weather on the success rates of our butterflies. I now have new early records for Brimstone, Small Tortoiseshell and Speckled Wood. Humming Bird Hawk-moth nectared on my Daphne Mezereum on the 21st March and again on the 2nd April, but I have no way of telling if this was one or two individuals. Colin Plant says that mine

## **Hertfordshire and Middlesex**

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were not the first reported to him this year. Were they early migrants or had they over-wintered locally? Let's hope that this early promise is maintained with a bumper year for residents and visitors alike.

One sure way to see lots of butterflies on a wet April Saturday was in the butterfly house but our visit to Mole Hall Wildlife Park on the 26th was very poorly supported by our members. Phillip Jenner gave us a conducted tour of his tropical house showing us a variety of superb specimens in all stages of development together with their larval and nectar foodplants. The pupae of some of the moths were enormous. There were some good photographic opportunities which Brian Sawford took full advantage of and I kicked myself for forgetting to take my camera.

By the time you read this the field trip season will be in full swing but as the emergence of many species has been accelerated by the warm spring our "targets" may be a little tatty!

1998 has been designated "Gardening for Butterflies years" by our society and we will be promoting this theme in talks to gardening clubs and by selling plants at the various shows which we attend. I know that many of you are keen gardeners and all contributions grown from seed, cuttings, division or whatever will be most welcome.

Finally, I will be standing down as Chairman at the A.G. M. in October as I feel that it would be good for our branch to have a new person at the helm with fresh impetus and ideas that a change would bring. I have enjoyed my stint which goes back to 1990 when we made our first move to establish a separate section north of the Thames and have had the help of an enthusiastic and hard working committee. I wish my successor well and assure him or her of my continued support.

## Recording on Wheels

### By Valerie Carter

My introduction to Butterfly Conservation came three years ago, through an article in a national newspaper. I wrote for details, joined the national organisation and our local branch, and was soon hooked on an absorbing hobby that could easily become an obsession.

I began keeping a monthly note of the butterflies seen in our garden in 1986. Sightings in the early years were sparse, partly because I still had a full-time job, but mainly because I had not 'got my eye in' and did not know what I was looking for (or looking at). Soon after I retired I bought the excellent *Butterflies of the British Isles* by J A Thomas, and began to appreciate what I had been missing. I realised that Whites could be Large, Small, or Green-veined, and that the Common Blue was sometimes brown. I also discovered that the strange insects I had seen feeding on the Buddleia and catmint were in fact butterflies (Large Skipper and Small/Essex Skipper). Other surprises were in store. It had never occurred to me that I might see a White-Letter Hairstreak in the garden until I found one dead on the path in 1994; since then I have seen them regularly in July and August, occasionally on a Buddleia but more usually on Clover.

The turning point came in 1995 when I took part in the National Gardens Survey. I enjoyed it so much that in 1996 I kept weekly garden records for our branch, and was astonished to be able to log 20 different species. Although, we live on a busy road, we are situated on the edge of the green belt and are fortunate in having a large, mature garden, ringed with trees and surrounded mainly by open fields (parkland and rough grazing). There are plenty of nettles and brambles in odd corners of the garden; we have planted Buddleias and other shrubs, and a few wild flowers and perennials

as nectar sources, but we interfere with the bramble undergrowth and rough grass as little as possible.

An overgrown boundary hedgerow is a haven for Speckled Wood; numerous ancient holly bushes and a high wall covered with ivy is ideal for Holly Blue, and the ivy is a magnet for Red Admiral and Comma in October. Ivy is also allowed to grow unchecked on trees around the garden. In early summer the so-called lawn is cut less frequently to allow the extensive patches of clover and buttercup to flower (the buttercups attracted a Small Copper this year). Elsewhere, rough grass is rich with crocus (Brimstone), followed by dandelion (Green Veined White and Comma), milkmaid (Orange Tip) and ground elder (Small Tortoiseshell, Meadow Brown).

My recording is restricted to the garden because I am permanently confined to a wheelchair. However, in many ways this is an advantage when watching butterflies, and I would recommend other wheelchair users to take up this rewarding interest. I follow the same route round the garden each time, noting details as though on a transect walk. That task completed, I can return to busy spots and watch the butterflies while sitting in comfort instead of having to stand. For long distance or detailed observation I use a monocular; this has an excellent range and is especially useful in giving good magnification on objects as close as two feet (which means I have occasionally been able to distinguish between the Small and Essex Skipper - I think)

Like all members, I am now looking forward to the 1997 season. Realistically, I probably cannot expect to exceed the 1996 total of different species in the garden this year. But I am learning all the time and there is always the hope that something new or unusual will turn up. Which is, of course, part of the fascination.

Conservation - Chalk Downland - See Page 9

## Butterfly In the Spotlight

### No.3 The Grizzled Skipper - by Gavin Vicary

The Grizzled Skipper is a butterfly that has declined rapidly in Hertfordshire over recent years. In fact sightings had become so few that it was feared to be in danger of imminent extinction from our branch area altogether. It was, with great relief, therefore, that reports were received last year of reasonable numbers from a site called Waterford Heath, just north of Hertford.



The Grizzled Skipper is a small butterfly that is unlikely to be confused with any other British species, except perhaps the Dingy Skipper with which it often flies. Two day flying moths; the Common Heath and Latticed Heath also bear some resemblance to it however, this butterfly often lands on the ground and basks facing the sun at which point the chequerboard black and white markings on the upperwings are quite unmistakable. On the continent, there are more than twenty similar species of Skipper making identification more difficult.

Brian Sawford in his book 'The Butterflies of Hertfordshire' points out that the decline of the Grizzled Skipper started in the 1950's and 60's. Late cold springs being a factor accentuated by loss of habitat through the shading of woodland rides and clearings coupled with the loss of grasslands through improvement or ploughing. Like many species this was accelerated by the demise of rabbits due to myxomatosis. He also highlights that this species is likely to be under-recorded due to its small size and colouration and that the darting flight of the adult makes it difficult to follow. In addition when there is a warm sunny spring, Grizzled Skippers may be on the

## Hertfordshire and Middlesex

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wing by mid April and over before the end of May thus avoiding the attentions of fair weather naturalists, although the usual flight period is from early May to mid June.

The caterpillars feed on several members of the Rose family, growing in sheltered sunny places. Most commonly Wild Strawberry or Creeping Cinquefoil are used with Tormentil, Agrimony and small shrubby Blackberry bushes less often used. Overwintering takes place in the pupal stage. A small second brood can occur towards the end of August although this is rare in Hertfordshire.

The Waterford Heath site is owned by Redland. Formerly used for gravel extraction it is now being turned into a nature reserve and a number of conservation organisations have been consulted on this process of which the Groundwork Trust have emerged as the main organisation involved in management of the site. Public access is possible from Vicarage Road, near Waterford Village. A field trip (see page 10) is planned for early June and should give a good opportunity to view this butterfly.

The editor recently visited the reserve on the 3rd and 5th of May. On the first occasion the sun disappeared behind cloud on arrival with the result that apart from one brief moment when a Latticed Heath Moth was discovered there was no sign of the target butterfly. It did however, give a good opportunity to discover the area. The main part of the reserve is a large 'bowl' where gravel extraction occurred and the upper parts of the surrounding banks have been planted with trees and shrubs. Much of the area is still devoid of vegetation with the early plant colonists chiefly consisting of Teasel, Wild Strawberry and Birds Foot Trefoil which form extensive carpets in some areas.

The return visit took place in mixed sun and cloud and it was not long before the first two Grizzled Skippers were found basking together. Over thirty were counted during a forty five minute visit.

Only part of the site was covered during this time, and large areas are fenced off and inaccessible such that the actual numbers present must be far greater than the number encountered.

One side of Waterford Heath is bounded by railway line and one theory is that the Grizzled Skipper survived on embankments of this in smaller numbers. When gravel extraction ceased and the amount of suitable habitat for this species increased, the butterfly then spread out from there. Whatever the reason, the sudden discovery of such a large colony of this local butterfly is very welcome, although there may be some concern about susceptibility to genetic weaknesses if the colony reached very low numbers.

Waterford Heath is a dynamic site that will undergo much changes as it is colonised following the cessation of gravel extraction. Suitable management will be required to conserve the Grizzled Skipper, although the early indication on this front are good as it is believed that it is intended to implement the management regimes required. In the meantime the optimist may even hope that the presence of such a large colony may lead to further colonies being established where there is suitable habitat in the surrounding area, particularly as there are other former gravel extraction sites near by as well as nature reserves such as Kingsmead and Balls Wood that have undergone renewed management and where the butterfly's food plants are known to occur.



## **Talks and Trips**

Everyone is welcome, just turn up on the day at the location given.  
Any queries contact John Hollingdale on 0181 863 2077

### **8 June 1997 - Waterford Pits TL 317150**

Come and see the nature reserve that is being created that supports strong colonies of Grizzled Skipper, Wall and Common Blue. All should be on the wing at this time. Meet Alan Downie at Vicarage Lane in Waterford Village, near Hertford at 11.00 am.

### **15 June 1997 - Lee Valley Park TL 365038**

Come and see the Orchids and Butterflies of the Lee Valley Park. Meet at 10.00am at Turnford Brook Car Park, half mile before East Herts College, on the high road coming north from Cheshunt.

### **29 June 1997 - Thursley Common SU 90-39**

A car trip to Surrey, to this National Nature Reserve, that is renowned for its Dragonflies and other Heathland specialists including Sundews, Hobbies and Sand Lizards. We may be lucky and see Silver Studded Blue or Grayling. Meet at Thursley Car Park at 10.00 am for a joint trip with RSPB local group and the Cheshunt Natural History Society. Leader on this occasion will be Ted Bell.

### **6 July 1997 - Sharpenhoe Clappers TL 065296**

A trip into Bedfordshire just north of Luton. Meet at the reserve car park just south of Sharpenhoe village at 10.00am where we hope to see Marbled White.

### **13 July 1997 - Balls Wood TL 352018**

Meet at 11.00 am outside the India College Arms Pub in Hertford Heath village. The target species is White Admiral, although a number of other butterflies should also be seen.



**26 July 1997 - Bayfordbury TL 314105**

A Saturday morning trip where Rob Souter will be emptying a Moth Trap run the previous night and then leading a walk around the site to see the large number of Ringlets present. Meet at the University Field Station car park at 9.30 am.

**2 August 1997 - Rowley Green Moth Evening TQ 216960**

Meet in the layby opposite this Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust nature reserve near Barnet at 8pm.

**10 August 1997 - Poors Field TQ 086893**

Meet John Hollingdale at the end of Reservoir Road at 10.00 am to look for Butterflies at this reserve near Ruislip in Middlesex.

**17 August 1997 - Porton Down - Wiltshire**

We have a limited number of places to Porton Down, one of the best butterfly spots in the country. Please book by phoning John Hollingdale as early as possible as the places will be allocated on a first come first served basis.

**Sunday 31st August Icknfield Way TL 104279**

Chalk downland restoration. Meet near Mortgrove Farm at 10.30am. Please bring gardening gloves.

**Wednesday 15th October 8p.m.**

Cross Street Centre, Dagnall Street, St Albans. Annual General Meeting followed by member's slides.

**Saturday 15th November 2.30pm**

Silver Cup Pub in Harpenden. "Preparing for 1998, Gardening for butterflies" - an illustrated talk by Malcolm Newland.

## Moths

by Rob Souter

### **Moth trapping in 1997.**

The branch now has its own light traps and generator enabling us to organise a number of moth trapping events from this year. Two dates for your diary as listed in the Field Trips list are 26th July at Bayfordbury near Hertford where you will be able to see the effectiveness of the Robinson trap that will have been run overnight. The morning opening of the trap should provide a great deal of interest and amazement. The following week on 2nd August an evening trapping session is booked at Rowley Green HMWT reserve. With our own equipment we will also have many other opportunities to have moth evenings and I hope to announce more events in the next newsletter.

### **Moth records for 1996.**

I have received moth lists from 8 people for 1996 as well as a few casual records. A moth section has been included in the annual branch report this year so I won't go into detail about 1996 sightings here. There was, however, an interesting note on the LEPS-LIST newsgroup on the internet back in June 1996 that I thought I would share.

Ian Woiwod wrote "we have certainly been getting record numbers of migrant moths throughout the UK in the light trap catches of the Rothamsted Insect Survey this month (June), mainly *Autographa gamma* (Silver Y), *Plutella xylostella* (Diamond-back Moth), *Nomophila noctuella* (Rush Veneer) and *Udea ferrugalis*, too many of these to give full details here. One of particular note was a *Helicoverpa peltigera* (Bordered Straw) in a trap in Harpenden, Hertfordshire on 13th June, one day later than the previous Hertfordshire record. Some of these species are beginning to make an agricultural impact. My colleague Alan Dewar estimates about 5

A.gamma larva per plant on sugar beet. If this is so then then are about 108 billion caterpillars out there just on UK sugar beet!"

**Attraction of moths to light.**

Here is another article taken from the LEPS-LIST which may be of interest.

The Amateur Entomological Society of the UK has just recently published a booklet "A Guide to Moth Traps and their Use" by Paul Waring & Reg Fry. This has a section on the Light Trap Response quoting a reference to Hsiao 1972. "Attraction of moths to light and to infra-red radiation". It suggests moths see a dark area around a light because of lateral inhibition between the ommatidia in their eyes. This is called the "Mach Band Hypothesis" by Hsiao. He said that the moths try to get away from the light by flying toward the "dark area" they perceive around the bulb. This of course would bring them right to the light and keep them circling.

Waring and Fry observe that moth behaviour around a bright light seems to be more consistent with this hypothesis than the navigation hypothesis (using the moon):

- flight paths near lights become more erratic
- powerful moths often make a series of flights past the light, landing between each pass, getting nearer to the light each time.
- weaker flying moths often behave as if 'reluctantly' drawn to the light, often escaping to one side or settling some distance from the light.
- with lights positioned low down moths will also attempt to fly under the light, hitting the ground, and buzzing around on the cloth
- moths landing near the trap in a shadow, may next fly directly away from the lamp.
- they note that a single light against a dark background is more effective at attracting moths than multiple lights of the same type near to each other.

## **Australian Holiday**

### **By Malcolm Newland**

As we were going to Oz during their winter I felt that our best chance of seeing some butterflies would be while we spent a few days in Queensland before going to on to visit relatives in cooler Sydney and cooler still Adelaide. The temperature in Cairns was up in the eighties and we were lucky enough to see several of the States's emblem, The Ulysses Blue, flying about but never showing any signs of settling. My wife described them very aptly as "flying blue silk handkerchiefs" and with their size and intense colour they made an unforgettable sight.

Although the weather in Sydney was sunny and mild we didn't see a single butterfly during our short stay there.

Adelaide, however produced a pleasant surprise for us as on the odd days when the sun came out and the temperature "soared" to the mid fifties we walked from where we were staying to a nearby sheltered valley and encountered as many as twenty Monarchs at a time. Gliding gently about and often settling they were quite approachable and we managed to take some reasonable photographs of them. They are breeding in that part of Australia on native and introduced members of the Milkweed family and I saw some nectaring on Hebe in gardens. We also saw the Australian Admiral, Painted Lady and Small White which was accidentally introduced in the nineteen thirties, but they don't have the Large White.

It was good to see in the local garden centres that they are promoting the sale of plants which are beneficial to butterflies.

If we go again we will try to make it at a time when we are likely to see more of the three hundred and sixty or so species of butterfly found in Australia.

## **Camberwell Beauty Remembered**

### **By K. B. King**

Somehow, I missed the article in last year's Branch Newsletter giving advice and suggestions as to butterfly photography. I have become aware, however, that many photographers feel whatever equipment they have (and however much it cost) if they manage to get hold of a new "Superauto-bemax" to fit onto the camera - or for that matter some of the new wonder film, then those photographs will be that little bit sharper and better composed.

Being male, and moderately well off until I retired last year, I have spent a fair amount on equipment. I worked on the basis that if I had the best optics (and I will leave readers to consider what are the best optics but will say that in my book there are only three firms to choose from and one of those has now dropped out of the 35mm market) then any mistakes would not be the camera makers, but mine.

In early 1966 I obtained a superb macro lens - 100mm and capable of producing a 1:1 image on the negative. It was not new, but even so the price was not one that I will admit to at home. On the 20th April I fitted it to the camera body loaded with Kodachrome 64 and went out to see what might result.

It was a fine day - one Brimstone on the way to my favourite bit of butterfly Hertfordshire which is in Knebworth Park. There I saw, but failed to get within sensible distance three Peacocks, another Brimstone and a Small Tortoiseshell. Not bad, the first real butterfly day of the year, although it was a pity about being unable to use the new macro lens other than on some nice Horse Chestnut buds. Then as I was about to leave I noticed a strange movement, a dark leaf with an edge catching the sun perhaps? But moving upwards? I watched in disbelief as a Camberwell Beauty dropped from a tree to

settle on the ground.

The routine was simple; take a photograph and move two steps nearer, two more and then another. I was waiting for the insect to decide I was too close and fly away, but, I finished up lying on my stomach peering through the viewfinder a matter of a foot away. Through the magnification available I could watch the wind rustling the body hairs. Eventually the inevitable happened and off it went to settle between two parallel deer fences and become completely inaccessible.

So - there is value in spending money on good equipment when it provides subject matter like that; what does Thomas say "a once in a lifetime experience". The lens was great - but I could still have done with more depth of focus to get that far wing tip in. And, dare I admit it? That expensive lens is subject to camera shake on some occasions.

### **Butterfly Records**

I'm sure this extraordinary early season has already produced some interesting records. It would be very helpful in the preparation of the Branch's Annual Report if records up to the end of June could be sent to Dr John Murray (address on the back cover) without waiting for the end of the season. Please, too, use the standard recording forms available from John Murray.

Michael Healy

## **Tring Park**

### **By Brian Jessop**

I have always found Tring Park to be a special place, because it is rich in butterflies and wild flowers. Early in the year, there is not much chance of seeing any species of butterflies, unless the weather is mild with the sun shining and no wind, then you might see the odd Small Tortoiseshell, Peacock, Comma or Brimstone, which have been enticed out of hibernation.

As spring advances and turns into summer gradually more and more species emerge and 27 have been recorded for butterfly conservation over the past two years; Small Tortoiseshell, Small Skipper, Brown Argus, Peacock, Essex Skipper, Common Blue, Red Admiral, Large Skipper, Holly Blue, Comma, Wall Brown, Small Copper, Painted Lady, Large White, Orange Tip, Meadow Brown, Small White, Dark Green Fritillary, Ringlet, Green Veined White, Speckled Wood, GateKeeper, Brimstone, Marbled White, Small Heath, Green Hairstreak, and Clouded Yellow.

Many of the species are common but some are quite rare in Hertfordshire and need to be protected and encouraged, like the Dark Green Fritillary, Green Hairstreak and Wall Brown. Clouded Yellow, Red Admiral, Painted Lady, are migrants and can and probably do breed here, but do not survive our winters. I believe I have seen one Painted Lady (31/3/96) that almost certainly survived the 1995/96 winter, because it was so tatty that I do not believe it could possibly have flown here in the condition it was in.

It is possible there are other species which as of yet, have not been seen or recorded, which could include Purple Hairstreak, Grizzled Skipper, Dingy Skipper and the White Admiral, which is known to be in woodland not far from Tring Park. Roll on the 1997 season so we can start recording again!

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