



Butterfly Conservation

Saving butterflies, moths and our environment



HERTFORDSHIRE AND MIDDLESEX BRANCH

NEWSLETTER ISSUE **63**

Spring 2012

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Chairman's Report : Hindsight, by Andrew Wood

Looking back over the past year two themes have struck me about the butterflies in our area.

One, which you will be able to read much more about in the new edition of "Butterflies of Hertfordshire and Middlesex" which should fall out of the same envelope as this newsletter is the interesting effect that the weather had on butterfly populations during 2011. It is clear that the weather in a particular year is an important factor in the dynamics of populations in the short term but it is much more difficult to tell what the long term effect is of generally warmer but not necessarily hot years. We now have comprehensive data from 1995 to date and certain trends emerge from this, for instance earlier flight times and more butterflies seen into the autumn, but over a much longer term we cannot tell how significant this is. It is only by looking back that we are able to see what has happened and draw lessons from that and, of course, by then it may be too late.

Conservation organisations have been accused of being very good at monitoring and reporting decline but less good at proactively doing anything about it. The work Butterfly Conservation has done on the Large Blue in south west England has shown that a vital weapon is understanding the exact requirements that a species needs to thrive. In that case the butterfly did become extinct and the revival has been done through very carefully controlled reintroduction only when the exact requirements of the species and its dependence on a single ant species were understood.

The second theme is that at a number of sites, particularly, in Hertfordshire we have seen landowners both private and public undertaking extensive woodland works for conservation purposes. Such work requires licences and approved plans, but as is often the case with planning matters, finding out about and commenting upon such plans can be a difficult and not terribly transparent process. Even then licences and approvals can be granted despite what we from a Butterfly Conservation view see as valid reasons for objection or amelioration.

The general thrust of such plans such as ride widening, removing large

areas of coniferous plantation and allowing more light into the woodland is to be applauded. But often this involves indiscriminate removals of plants such as willow and honeysuckle which are vital to species such as Purple Emperor and White Admiral. What looks like a good plan at a high level is often executed without sufficient care at a practical level rather and this may create a serious threat to some of our most endangered and beautiful species.

Unfortunately we only discover the results of such work when it has been done and so what we need to do is continue our recording and monitoring and ensure that its results do get fed back to the landowners to try to ensure that future work is better planned and to make our branch of BC an expert partner in such conservation work.

Newsletter Frequency, by Ian Small, Newsletter Editor

Many of you may have been surprised not to receive a Winter newsletter at the turn of the year. Instead, you received notice of our AGM venue and details, plus a questionnaire.

Your Branch Committee have reluctantly made the decision to reduce the number of newsletters to two per year, one in Spring and one in Autumn. In addition, we will distribute 'information mailings' in Winter and Summer. Further, to minimise postage costs, we are combining distribution of the Spring newsletter with that of the Annual Review of the fortunes of the regions butterflies, with the Branch Report, which summarises the Branch Officers' reports for the AGM, and also the field trip list for 2012. [If you are attending the AGM, then please bring your copy of the Branch Report with you.]

The main reason for this change is that it has proven consistently very difficult to attract newsletter contributions from members. This is your newsletter, but if members don't support it, then its value to all is diminished by the reduced variety and number of articles. I would therefore encourage all of you to become active contributors, allowing everyone to share e.g. the highlights and experiences of your lepidopteral year, reporting interesting behavioural observations, describing your favourite site, or favourite butterfly etc.

Branch Questionnaire Update

All members recently received a Branch Questionnaire which they were asked to complete either online or by returning the enclosed SAE. By the time of writing, just over 200 of our 713 members had responded (30%) - many thanks to all of you. That of course means that a further 500 of you have not yet done so - it is not too late, so if this pings your conscience then do complete it and give us your feedback and suggestions - we have already paid for the postage.

You will have seen that the questionnaire covered a variety of topics, largely aimed at identifying how we can better serve our members. It seems that a high proportion of you, judging by the responders at least, have internet access and would like to receive these newsletters electronically, rather than as hard copy. This is certainly something we will look into, but of course this would only apply to any member who had specifically requested this and provided the necessary details.

Perhaps surprisingly, less than two thirds of you who have internet access are currently visiting the Branch website (<http://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/>). Checking in there is a great way to keep up with what is going on in the Branch area, and in particular to see up to date information from other members about what they have seen and where they have seen it. This is particularly interesting in Spring, as we all look forward to the first sightings of all our different species. For instance, did you know that the first butterfly seen in the Branch area this year was a Red Admiral, which was seen in Chorleywood on 2nd January ! No less surprising were the last sightings of 2011, when there were sightings of a Red Admiral in Trent Park and of a Brimstone at Therfield as late as December 22nd.

You have also provided us with valuable feedback on such things as field trips, conservation events and indoor meetings. The Branch Committee will be reviewing the outcomes, and in particular all the free-text comments and responses, as these provide a valuable insight into which activities we need to better tailor to suit your needs. The Committee would like to thank Malcolm Hull for volunteering to receive all the responses and for the resulting data analysis.

EVENT REPORTS

Moth Evening 24th September 2011 at Stanmore Country Park, by John Hollingdale.

It was a select band of people that attended this long awaited event; Margaret and myself. Not much came before the light had almost disappeared from the sky which was cloudy at first but rapidly cleared. The moths then came steadily. Most were common species including Sallow, Brindled Green and Lunar Underwing. A second brood Light Emerald in practically mint condition cheered us up. A few moths were put in the tray for later examination; most were fluttering too much to be certain what they were. There were 10 macros species in the 30+ moths but no micros.

After about 90 minutes the council came to lock up. I explained that I had a key but the gate was locked anyway. I turned round to see the site in darkness. Back across the field I hurried to find Margaret wondering what had happened. "The generator just stopped" she said. I looked in the tank to find that the petrol had run out; I thought that I had enough for the evening and I was fortunate that it was just the two of us present. A heavy dew was falling as we made our way home.

The specimens taken home that evening included a moth called White point; normally a rare migrant. As Colin Plant's books on London and Hertfordshire listed each recorded specimen the moth was sent to him for ID. His e-mail confirmed my identification and he also said that this moth had recently established itself along the South Coast and the Thames Estuary. Thanks Colin. I hope that more moths make their way to Harrow to take advantage of the increase in temperatures.



White-point *Mythimna albipuncta*
Photo taken in Dorset
© Paul Harris

Butterfly Field Trip in South Kensington, by Malcolm Hull

Wednesday 15 February is not usually a good time of year for a butterfly trip and Kensington is hardly a renowned butterfly location. But on a chilly February day, Roger Gibbons and I joined a party of 12 members of the Butterfly Conservation European Interest Group for a tour behind the scenes at the Darwin Centre in the Natural History Museum.

Opened in 2009, the Darwin Centre houses 20 million plant and animal specimens in a new purpose built climate controlled edifice. There is probably more biodiversity in this building than anywhere else on Earth. And 10 million of all the creatures inside are butterflies and moths, a collection which goes back 200 years. We were met by Martin Honey (Curator of Moths) and Geoff Martins (Collections Manager) who introduced us to the collections and the on-line database recording all the specimens. Members had been invited in advance to request particular species they wanted to study and many drawers of neatly pinned specimens were laid out in the display room.

I had chosen Green Hairstreak, a species I've always been intrigued by. Distribution maps show it to be the most widespread species in Europe, it is now largely absent from Herts & Middx. Interestingly many of the Green Hairstreak specimens in the collection originated from Tring in Hertfordshire. This is of course a location where it still occurs today, although it has died out in much of the rest of the county. Most of the Herts specimens (about 20 in all) had been captured in the period from 1880 to 1920. Nearly all specimens had been captured in the last week of May, with one in August and one in April. The late May peak matches the present day flight peak in Herts. In contrast, the specimens from another location in North Devon had all been captured in late June and early July, far later than it is usually seen in Herts. As well as the standard Green Hairstreak (*Callophrys rubi*), I also saw a drawer of Chapman's Green Hairstreak (*Callophrys avis*). Roger advised that the way to tell them apart in the wild is that *rubi* have red edged eyes, whereas *avis* have white eyes. I have never seen *avis* (a resident of southern Europe) in the wild and found it hard to distinguish between them in the cabinet.

The Cocoon is an intriguing seven storey construction containing

science labs, storage space and a superb public exhibition. This explains the problems facing butterflies and moths, explains about climate change and presents many other interesting facts in a way suitable for adults and children alike. There are many video displays and interactive quizzes and games, lots of which feature fascinating butterfly facts. The trail starts by taking a lift to the seventh floor, followed by a long slow walk down through the cocoon.

Although butterfly collecting is not encouraged in the UK nowadays, the historic collections offer a valuable resource both in terms of ID and variations. More important, it also provides scientists with access to valuable genetic material for research.

The Angela Marmont centre for UK Biodiversity on the ground floor offers an identification and advisory service and provides facilities for visitors to carry out research.

The centre is located in Exhibition Rd, London SW7. Entrance is free and the opening hours are 10.00 – 17.50. The NHM website contains a huge amount of fascinating information and can be accessed at <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/visit-us/darwin-centre-visitors/>

Anyone wanting to find out more about the European Interest Group and the tremendous conservation efforts, particularly in eastern Europe should visit their website at

<http://www.bc-eig.org.uk/> or contact me.

Conservation Work Party at Wormley Wood NNR, by Liz Goodyear

On the 21st February 2012, a conservation work party was held at Wormley Wood NNR. Arranged by Laurence Drummond, Andrew Middleton and Steve Kiln with the co-operation of the Woodland Trust and help from Countryside Management Service and the Heartswood Volunteers - over twenty people came along to give their assistance.

The Woodland Trust provided contractors to fell areas of trees to improve path conditions and at the same time help the Purple

Emperor. The volunteers did the clearing up!!! The picture taken by Helen Bantock shows volunteers at the end of the day in a clearing made along one of the pathways. This area of fairly tall woodland is rich with old sallows and the clearing will now provide a lovely open space for regeneration and nectar. The sallows are all of the same age-group and will likely start to die-off over the coming years as the wood matures and the sallows are outgrown. The sallows in the centre of the clearing have been pollarded and over time should regenerate into large strong healthy trees for the future, as sallows are lost in the taller wood.



Photo © Helen Bantock

We would like to thank the Woodland Trust and in particular Louise Neicho for her co-operation in arranging for the contractors to be on site and all the volunteers that came along on this lovely almost spring like day!

2011 – an Autumn of Unseasonal Moths in Wembley, By Debbie Pledge

In the autumn of 2011, I purchased a collapsible 15 watt actinic Heath type moth trap to allow me to extend the range of my moth trapping. On 22 September 2011 I met with Leslie Williams of Brent Parks Service to borrow their portable battery unit and test the trap. We chose Mason's Field, on the edge of Fryent Country Park, as Brent Council were successful in obtaining Heritage Lottery funding to restore it. Mason's Field was formerly a London Transport staff sports ground, and the restoration will improve access and join it up with the landscape of meadows and hedgerows.

As it was a test event and a little chilly we only trapped for 30 minutes, from 8.00pm. We trapped one Square-spot Rustic *Xestia xanthographa*, two *Tachystola acroxantha* (new for me and the Fryent Country Park list) and a noctuid I initially identified as a Deep-brown Dart *Aporophyla lutulenta* due to the season and presence of a few

small whitish marks on each leading edge. On checking with Colin Plant, the Local Moth Recorder for Hertfordshire and Middlesex, this moth was revealed to be a Brown Rustic *Rusina ferruginea*, which flies from late May to mid-July. A record from 22 September was most unexpected.

October 2011 was my third October running a moth trap at home and it returned first garden records of Sallow *Xanthia icteritia*, Chestnut *Conistra vaccinii*, Green-brindled Crescent *Allophyes oxyacanthae*, Barred Sallow *Xanthia aurago* and Merveille du Jour *Dichonia aprilina*. The trap comprises a Skinner-pattern box surmounted by two 30 watt actinic tubes, and my back garden fence marks the border with Fryent Country Park.

I decided to run the trap on 30 October 2011. I was not deterred by it being the first day after the end of British Summer Time. In fact, I was encouraged by the mild weather. It was 15C when I emptied the trap at 11.20pm to find one Feathered Thorn *Colotois pennaria*, three Red-green Carpets *Chloroclysta siterata*, one Green-brindled Crescent, one Light Brown Apple Moth *Epiphyas postvittana* and a noctuid which seemed both familiar and strange.

My first instinct was to look at the Autumn quakers. On drawing a blank I worked through the noctuids until I came to Common Quaker *Orthosia cerasi*. I was convinced, but knew it to be a spring species in the adult stage, having recorded it varying numbers every spring from 2009 to 2011. Waring and Townsend's 'Field Guide to the Moths of Great Britain and Ireland' has "small numbers sometimes emerging in mild spells during the late autumn and winter", but 'The Moths of Hertfordshire' showed no autumn records. Intrigued, I posted a message on the Herts Moth Group Yahoo list, and sent the specimen to Colin Plant who confirmed it was a female. The mild weather must have fooled this moth into thinking spring had already arrived.

The clement weather continued and up to 1 November 2011 I obtained first garden records of November Moth *Epirrita dilutata* and Satellite *Eupsilia transversa*.

The Common Quaker and Brown Rustic, and reports from other moth trappers on the Yahoo list, do seem to fit a pattern of unseasonal moths in the autumn of 2011.

Mud, Sweat and Tears, by Andrew Wood

One of the striking features about wildlife documentaries set in the tropics are the scenes of butterflies gathering on the ground around streams or damp patches to imbibe minerals and moisture. Many species can gather and their intent on feeding can allow a close approach. It is also a great opportunity to observe butterfly behaviour rather than just see them flying by or feeding on flowers. This behaviour is called mud puddling. What is perhaps less known is that this can happen in our somewhat less tropical climate.

It seems to happen when the weather is particularly dry and perhaps the nectar or honeydew that are butterflies main source of nutrition are in short supply. Over the years I have seen this with a number of species but during 2011 it seemed to be mainly Small and Green-veined whites that exhibited this behaviour in Hertfordshire. On a number of occasions I saw groups of anything up to a dozen gathering on farm tracks or on the sites of bonfires to top up their supplies from the minerals on the ground. It seem that this is a male pursuit and probably related to the need for minerals to ensure fertility. In other years I have seen Small Skippers gathered in a muddy tyre track in Balls Wood and in 2010 there were many more reports than usual of Purple Hairstreaks on the ground feeding. I have also seen this species seemingly taking water from a dew covered lawn. In woodland I have seen White Admirals and Purple Emperors feeding from the ground.

A number of species are also attracted to another ground level food supply - dung. The Purple Emperor is well known for this habit, but is by no means the only species to do so. In Dorset I have seen Adonis Blues feeding on cow pats and last year saw both Peacocks on dog mess and a Silver-washed Fritillary on horse dung. Human sweat, and presumably that of other animals, is also attractive to butterflies for the same nutritional reasons. Grayling seem particularly happy to use this food supply and I have also had Adonis Blues in Surrey land on and feed from my hands on a warm day.

I am sure there are other examples of this type of behaviour for instances in the tropics there are tear drinking butterflies and moths. It would be interesting to hear of any other instances, particularly from the UK.

New Moth Book Coming Soon...

Members who subscribe to British Wildlife magazine may have noticed the pre-publication announcement of a new Field Guide to the Micro-moths of Great Britain and Ireland, by Phil Sterling, Mark Parsons and Richard Lewington. The advance material indicates that this new work will describe more than 1000 species and include more than 1100 detailed colour artworks showing the moths in their natural resting postures. Each family has a full introduction, describing its features and life histories. There are also hundreds of photographs of the early life stages. For the first time, each species has an up-to-date distribution map specially commissioned for this Guide.

For anyone with an interest in micros, or who has been put off by the lack of a handy reference guide, this could definitely be a book to look out for when it is published later this year.

Moving House ? If you are moving house - please don't forget to notify Butterfly Conservation Head Office of your new address. If you are moving out of the Branch region, you can elect to stay a member of this Branch, transfer your membership to your new local Branch, or for a small fee become a member of both Branches.



Copy Deadline for the Autumn Newsletter will be

31 August 2012

NB it helps the editor if you can submit an electronic copy of your article (but don't worry if you can't).

Files can be sent by e-mail to
ian-small@virginmedia.com

or send an article by post - address on back cover

I look forward to hearing of all your exciting butterfly or moth observations and anecdotes from what we all hope will be an excellent year for all our Lepidoptera and other wildlife.

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