

# Butterfly Conservation

Saving butterflies, moths and our environment



**HERTFORDSHIRE AND  
MIDDLESEX BRANCH**

**NEWSLETTER  
ISSUE *66***

*Autumn 2013*

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### Chairman's Notes - by Andrew Wood

Well the season is pretty well over now and it has been a roller coaster. The cold winter was followed by a cool and uninspiring spring and early summer. Numbers of most species were low and the weather did not make for good butterfly recording or watching. Then suddenly Summer arrived in July and now it seems we have had the warmest Summer for 7 years. Many species started off late and flew only to around their normal finishing dates. However who can forget the reappearance of numbers of Small Tortoiseshells and Peacocks that many of us thought might never happen again. Migration has been curious with relatively few Red Admirals, an average number of Painted Ladies and many more Clouded Yellows than usual.

It seems to me that we have had the unusual situation of all the three main migrant butterflies around in something near to equal quantities. What all this shows is how little we still know about butterfly populations and how they behave. It does reinforce the fact that short term weather changes are significant in the size of populations perhaps as much as local environmental changes. For instance when I started to write this piece on the 6th September the temperature was 30 degrees and nights were warm and humid and I was catching 250 moths in my moth trap each night, five days later the temperature was 15 degrees with cold nights and I was catching 30 moths a night. It is very difficult to predict these changes and shows how difficult it is to plan and manage for butterflies and other insects.

### **Request for 2013 Records**

Just a reminder to submit your butterfly records for 2013. We are interested in any butterfly records you have, whether there is 1 or 1000+. Please send them, electronically if possible to Andrew Wood.

If you do a transect and use Transect Walker please package and email the file copying in Andrew Wood, paper records can be sent to Andrew Wood

Please try to get your records in as soon as possible after receiving this newsletter as this will be very helpful for compiling the Butterfly report and getting it published early in 2014.

# Members' Day & AGM 29th March 2014

In 2014, we celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the formation of the Herts & Middx Branch of Butterfly Conservation. Our special Members' Day and AGM will be a day of celebrations.

These will again be held at the Welwyn Civic Centre, and we are delighted to announce that our Keynote speaker will be Dr Martin Warren, Chief Executive of Butterfly Conservation (who himself has just completed 20 years as an employee of the Society). Martin will talk on "Major milestones in the history of Butterfly Conservation".

Other presentations will examine the changes to our butterfly populations over the past 20 years, and also describe some of the key projects (e.g. on Purple Emperors, White-letter Hairstreaks etc) to have come from our Branch.

There will be the usual photo competition, raffles and food.

As we will be providing food, we will also be asking you to let us know in advance whether you are able to attend, so that we can plan accordingly. Further details, and the full program, will be provided in the Winter newsletter. Please save the date in your calendars now, and plan to join us in our celebrations.



### Chalkhill Blues Everywhere! by Andrew Wood

Our branch symbol is the Chalkhill Blue as it is such an attractive butterfly and strongly associated with Hertfordshire through the colony at Therfield Heath which has been a hot spot for butterfly collectors and now watchers for many decades. All our other colonies are on chalk downland sites at Aldbury Nowers, Telegraph Hill and Hexton Chalkpit. In recent years the population at Hexton Chalk Pit has been spectacular - visit on a sunny later-July or early-August day and you will be surrounded by swarms of pale blue male butterflies. The more secretive brown females can be seen being pursued by many males as they seem to far outnumber them.



Male Chalkhill Blue at Hexton  
Photo © Ian Small

Hexton in particular seems to be too small to hold its population of thousands (it is only about 300 by 100 metres). Males spill out into nearby road verges and field edges up to 2km away. However this year the population has dispersed even further (see the map where the existing colonies are red and the dispersal sites are in black. So far we have had reports and in many cases photographs of male Chalkhill Blues at:

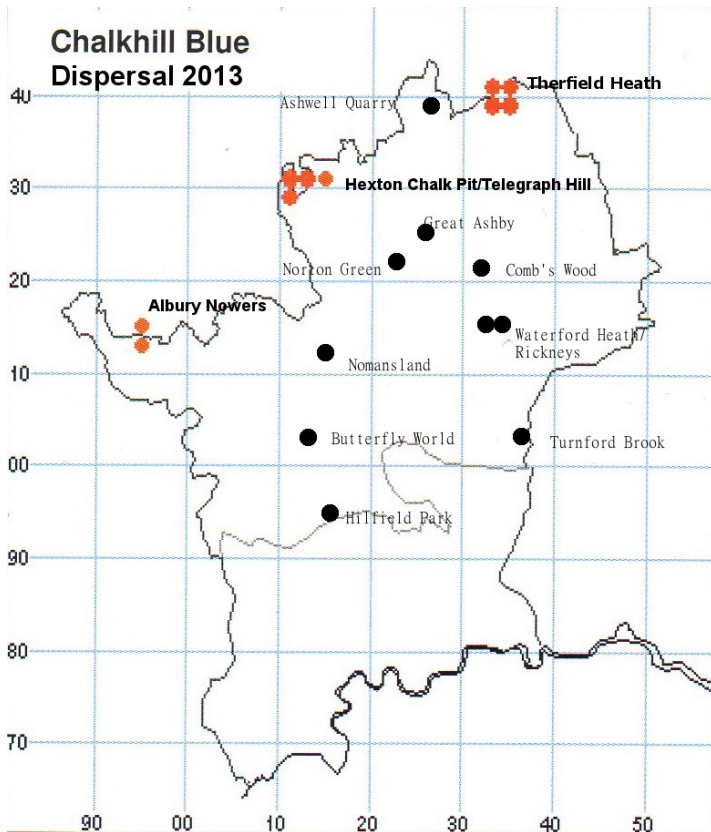
- Rickneys Quarry and Waterford Heath north of Hertford
- Nomansland Common near Wheathampstead
- Butterfly World
- Great Ashby Park on the north eastern edge of Stevenage
- Norton Green west of Stevenage
- Combs Wood near Little Munden
- Hillfield reservoir near Elstree
- Turnford Brook near Cheshunt

What is noticeable is that these sites are quite a distance from the known colonies. Do a few get blown at high levels across country and appear randomly or do they find sites with good nectar sources and

drop down there? None of these sites, apart from Butterfly World, have the larval food plant Horseshoe Vetch and of course there are no females recorded so this cannot be seen as a range expansion. There are signs of similar dispersal in surrounding counties too. There is much research to be done about this dispersal.

However there is one even more intriguing record from Ashwell Quarry much closer to Therfield Heath and with Horseshoe Vetch present. Two males were seen at the end of August: are these dispersals or could they be offspring from an un noticed dispersal in 2012?

As records come in we may get further examples. It will also be interesting to see what happens in adjacent counties after their results are in, I know that there are similar dispersal reports in Essex.



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## **FIELD TRIP REPORTS**

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### **Stanmore Country Park - April 27th, by John Hollingdale**

About eight people assembled in the Country Park's car park hoping to see some Spring butterflies. However the weather was cloudier than last year so no Lepidoptera were seen at all. We concentrated on the flora with Bluebells being most prominent. We also saw (well some of us) two Muntjac deer as well as signs of their grazing on Bluebell leaves.

### **W.S. Gilbert's Orchard - May 4th, by John Hollingdale**

Nine people turned up for this moth evening at this old orchard near Grimsdyke Hotel including Helenka, the head gardener, and Dick Middleton of the Ruislip and District NHS.

Moths came regularly and by the end of the evening we had recorded 19 species; 3 micros and 16 macros. The pick of the macros were Early Thorn, Least Black Arches and Dotted Chestnut; I can supply a full list if required. None of the 19 moth species were seen on the cold night last year.

### **Butterfly World, St Albans - June 16th, by Malcolm Hull**

Despite the dire weather forecast, 8 people showed up. The weather was mostly cloudy, but a few sunny spells allowed us to see a few butterflies. Common Blues were the most numerous with 12-14, mostly males seen sunbathing and occasionally nectaring in the meadows. We had three, possibly five sightings of Small Blue, the main target species. They were seen in two distinct areas of the site and posed obligingly for photographers. The larval food plant, Kidney Vetch is still plentiful on the chalk slopes and on other areas of the site. Brown Argus and Large Skipper were both recorded, as were Large, Small and Green-veined White, Common Carpet, Cinnabar Moth and many Burnet Companions. The sheer variety of wild flowers, birds and insects makes this a very rewarding site to visit.

### **Sharpenhoe Clappers- June 29th, by David Chandler**

After overnight moderate rains the day of the field trip dawned a cool 15 degrees, essentially dry, with high cloud. I arrived on site just before

ten in the morning to see the first of the members of the BC local branches and the BNHS arrive,

I had to re-work the planned route into two stages because the start time had been publicised as 10 o'clock and 10.30 am in different places, but this discrepancy caused no major problems as I was ably assisted by Peter Glenister and Dave Tyler. I certainly needed their help managing the throng as thirty four people turned up for the guided walk, which is a great turnout for a weekend field trip.

Although still a little cool for butterflies, we first took the early arrivals into Moleskin to look for Small Blue and were rewarded with a single sighting and, as a bonus, a late Dingy Skipper. Common Blues were also seen. I then left Peter and Dave to bring the party back to the car-park where I returned to greet the half-past tenners! Whilst waiting for the main party I talked about the transect data I record on the site and some of its anomalies, like finding both the usual brown and the blue form female Common Blue on Sharpenhoe.

At 10.40 am we all set off to try and see our target species the Dark Green Fritillary. I was quietly concerned as we walked towards Smithcombe hill because, having reconnoitred the site four days earlier, I found to my chagrin that, because of the cold spring, no Dark Green Fritillaries had emerged yet. However my hopes were raised as the clouds began to part and warm sunshine began to bring the site alive with butterflies. We first saw Speckled Wood, then Small Heath and a Large Skipper. We stopped to look at the Skylarks on the way in the setsaside field area. We talked about the local geology and the historic iron-age hill fort and the Roman rabbit warren remains found on the clappers hilltop.

Arriving at the chalk grassland meadow where the Dark Green Fritillaries breed on the violets found there, we walked along the top path but, other than more Common Blues, did not find our quarry. It was breezy so I was not too concerned as I knew that as we dropped down to the lower more sheltered reaches of the site we would be more likely to find active butterflies. Arriving at the base of the hill we found more Common Blues and pleasingly some fresh Meadow Browns. Then, amongst the myriad of colourful wild flowers in a

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band of Kidney Vetch, there were four Small Blues flitting around who, unlike the one seen on the steep slopes of Moleskin, were in an easier place for people to see and take photographs.

The party spread out. Some people were looking at the orchids, I was told there were five flowering in the meadow: Early Purple, Common Spotted, Pryamidal, Twayblade, Fragrant and Bee. Other folk were looking for moths and several day flying moths were seen including: Blackneck, Mother Shipton, Burnished Brass, Latticed Heath and Silver Y. Then, just as I was getting a little concerned that I was not going to deliver the target species to my large audience, we spotted four or five newly emerged male Dark Green Fritillaries. These fresh-looking fritillaries were not too active yet and afforded good photographic opportunities to those who wanted to take pictures.

We continued to wander along the base of the hill and saw Small White, Green Veined White, a Comma, a Red Admiral and, most pleasantly for late June, a late, albeit a tad tatty, female Orange Tip. Walking back up to the top of the hill the party gathered at a fork in the path.

It now being early afternoon the party split with some following Peter Glenister to the Clappers wooded hilltop to hunt for the rare yellow birds-nest orchid and those others with afternoon appointments following me back to the car park. On the way back to the cars I was told of other sightings not yet reported to me that included a late Brimstone, a Large White and a Brown Argus

Sixteen different species were seen on the day and over one hundred and ten butterflies in total. A truly splendid day in the field.

### **Stanmore Country Park (LNR) - June 29th, by John Hollingdale**

This field trip was attended by members from the branch, Harrow Nature Conservation Forum and Harrow Natural History Society. It was timed to see if Marbled Whites and Ringlets were on the wing. However what we saw in numbers were Large Skippers and Speckled Woods but no Ringlets or Marbled Whites. The late Spring and Summer had delayed their emergence. Also noted were several



Commas, a Red Admiral and various whites. A mystery butterfly was glimpsed but there was a difference of opinion regarding whether it was a White or Red Admiral. Near the end two or three Meadow Browns had emerged.

Two weeks later Margaret and I saw both Ringlets and Marbled Whites in several of the open areas and the Ragwort was almost smothered in Cinnabar moth caterpillars. One cannot win when scheduling the programme. I mentioned at the time that we were hoping to get cattle to graze in the large fenced field to avoid the annual mow. We were let down by Harrow School so no Longhorns but Denis Vickers, Harrow's BAP officer, has arranged to have a permanent herd of Dexters there instead. We will be monitoring the effect on the vegetation and butterflies in the coming years.

### **Hexton - July 14th, by Nigel Agar**

In North Herts, the crown of the beautiful summer of 2013 came with a guided walk from the Live and Let Live at Pegsdon, Beds, round the back of Hexton Manor to Hexton Common and then back through the village up to Hexton Chalk Pits on the Lilley Road.

Originally planned as a walk for the Welwyn Natural history society, the event was given wider publicity by Butterfly Conservation, Herts and Middx branch and about twenty people turned up on a glorious summer morning.

The Live and Let Live lies at the foot of the Pegsdon Hills which are chalk downland. On this occasion however we took the route north of the village to look out for the butterflies of arable countryside. Hexton common is in fact a green lane leading north from the village into the clay vale of the Bedfordshire countryside. It contained Ringlets, Meadow Brown and Small Tortoiseshell, a species that is having something of a revival this year. It is not normally a site for the chalk species but this year, the farmer has surfaced part of the green lane with loose chalk and Chalkhill Blues have colonised the site. It was the first time anyone could recall finding any Chalkhill Blues off the chalk bedrock itself. Hexton Common looks ideal for White Letter Hairstreak but no one could recall ever seeing any here. They have been known at Hexton Chalk Pits but their Wych Elm has now

gone.

Passing through the village and back into Hertfordshire, over the crossroads with its signpost that doubles as a village pump, we arrived at the chalk pits. The orchids were mostly over for the year with the exception of Pyramidal Orchids that are always the last to appear. Now a very hot late morning the chalkland butterflies were at their peak. Marbled Whites, Dark Green Fritilleries and Chalkhill Blues were all flying. The Chalkhill Blues were in vast numbers. We were of course too late in the year for Green Hairstreak although these had been seen in May and we were between broods for the Common Blues. Altogether, a very successful butterfly day out.

### **Whitewebb Woods, Enfield - July 14th, by Andrew Middleton**

Two clashing Purple Emperors 12.50 onwards, later two more clashing over Fir & Pond Wood also seen earlier by David Gompertz. Later in the afternoon (4.30pm) two chasing males through Northaw, (Purple Emperors that is!)

### **Ruislip Woods (NNR) - July 17th, by John Hollingdale**

This was a joint meeting between the branch and Ruislip and District Natural History Society. As Dick Middleton (member of both societies) was much more familiar with the woods he agreed to lead the group, which composed of 10 to 15 people of both societies. The weather was hot and sunny.

We first visited an unkempt field next to the Lido car park. No management had taken place for several years and so was a haven for butterflies. There were many Meadow Browns and Small and Essex Skippers. Also seen were several marbled Whites, Large Skippers and a few Ringlets. A large orange butterfly disappeared into the surrounding woods which was thought to be a Silver-washed Fritillary.

We then walked through the woods to Poors Meadow. On the way an obliging White Admiral sat on a leaf long enough for some photos to be taken. We also saw Small White, Green-veined White and Comma.

Moths also identified were Six-spot Burnet, Shaded Broad -bar, Buff Ermine and Silver-Y.

We then made our way up to Haste Hill to try and see the Purple Emperor. At this point I had to be transported back to the car park suffering from the effects of dehydration. Thank you Dick for the lift and Malcolm Hull for staying to keep an eye on me.

However John Revelly, Mark Morgan and Malcolm stayed behind and this is Malcolm's report on what they saw.

13.56 Two Purple Emperors in a chase at canopy height across the canopy gap closest to the St Vincents Nursing Home entrance to the wood

13.57 Presumably the same two in another chase across the same gap, but at 90 degrees to the previous sighting. Seconds later a single Purple Emperor on its own (presumably the victor) flew up to the top of the tree on the side of the gap closest to the wood entrance (this may be the site of a perching place)

14.28. Pair of Purple Emperors clashing at a height of about 30 feet above the same canopy gap, spiralling upwards (I imagine this was a separate contest to the first one)

14.38 Pair of Purple Emperors chasing across the same gap

We left at about 15.00. Mark spent a good part of the time watching the next canopy gap along, but with no sightings. We also had no luck looking from outside the wood, though it was too hot to stay there long!

Also saw several Purple Hairstreaks and a Holly Blue, as well as repeats of a few other species from earlier in the day.

### **Stanmore Country Park - August 9th (National) Moth Night, by John Hollingdale**

At last, a nice warm night with some cloud cover. Ten of us gathered around the UV light suspended over a large white sheet sited next to the woodland edge. Most of the faces were familiar but it was encouraging to see some that weren't.

The moths came regularly and at the end of the 2-hour session we had attracted over 50 species; 33 macros and the rest micros. Some of these (mostly micros) I took home to identify the next day and a few

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have been sent to Colin Plant for the same reason. New to the reserve were the following: a Yellow-tailed Moth, Tree-lichen Beauty (7 or more) and the micro *Phlyctaenia coronata*. Tiger moths were the target for this year so I was delighted when a Ruby Tiger appeared. Other moths of interest were the Antler Moth, two Lesser-spotted Pinions and two Sallow Kittens.



Ruby Tiger

Photo © Ian Kimber

As several of the participants were good at identifying moths all I had to do was sit and record. I'd like to thank everyone for their contributions. Please come again

### **Which White was That? By Andrew Wood**

When you are out and about looking at butterflies one of the most frustrating things is seeing many white butterflies but not being able to positively identify them.

Large Whites are generally not too bad as in most cases they are noticeably larger (Red Admiral sized). They also tend not to fly around so seemingly randomly and often settle on flowers to feed.

However the two smaller species - the Small and the Green-veined White - are much more difficult. They are the same size and both spend much of their time flitting around slowly but not slowly enough to look at them closely. At rest the veins on the underside of the Green-veined White, often showing through onto the upper wing are distinctive compared to the plain creamy/pale yellow colour of the Small White underwing. However once in flight it is very difficult to see these features. I have heard some observers claiming that you can tell the two species apart by behaviour but personally I don't agree with this.

Both species spend time sitting low in vegetation with the upperwings under the hindwing making them very difficult to see until your movement prompts them into flight, they then seem to be very reluctant to settle and often fly on for a long distance or disappear over a hedge. The other activity is to see the males flying around looking at anything vaguely white (flowers, leaves, rubbish) but never quite settling. The females also behave similarly while looking for larval food plants for egg laying.

Having said that I have found that the Small White, while not especially strongly attracted to flowers, will settle reliably on a few species. In later summer they have a particular liking for Burdock and Black Horehound (a purple flowered dead nettle type plant) both found in many hedgerows. For instance near Dane End I was walking along a path near a field edge and there were many active whites proving difficult to identify. I then came across a 200 metre stretch of hedgerow full of Black Horehound and counted 62 Small Whites happily feeding and easily identifiable on this plant.

In Spring the Green-veined White is attracted to bluebells and the flowers of larval food plants such as Honesty. The males of both species seem to be equally attracted to minerals in wet patches on the ground during dry weather, but at least they are then identifiable.



Green-veined and Small Whites mud-puddling near Patmore Heath. Photo © Andrew Wood

Our branch record and transect sheets have included a row for Small/Green-veined White but this category is not used in the national recording schemes so inevitably many of the whites that are seen cannot be identified and recorded. However this is not a big issue as the proportions of recorded butterflies should be correct given their similar behaviour and changes in numbers should be comparable year to year, it's just that the actual numbers at any site in a particular year may be an undercount.

### **Warmer Weather Allows Butterfly Numbers to Recover**

The hot summer of 2013 has enabled UK butterflies to bounce back following a string of poor years, the world's largest butterfly count has revealed. Long spells of warm sunny weather in July and August provided a much needed boost for our beleaguered butterflies with four times as many recorded during this year's Big Butterfly Count than in 2012.

A record-breaking 46,000 people took part counting more than 830,000 butterflies and day-flying moths across the UK. Washout 2012 was the worst year on record for butterflies and had followed a series of poor summers which had compounded the long-term declines of many UK butterflies. But perfect conditions this summer saw butterflies boom with large numbers recorded across the UK's gardens, parks, school playgrounds and countryside. Butterfly spotters counted almost twice as many individuals (on average) compared with 2012. The whites did well, with both Large White and Small White numbers up by more than 300%. Small White topped the Big Butterfly Count 2013 chart with the Large White in second place and Peacock a surprise in third. Garden favourite the Small Tortoiseshell recorded its best Big Butterfly Count result yet, coming sixth. Although the whites were very abundant it was the huge increase in Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock numbers that delighted the butterfly watching public. Both species have declined worryingly in recent years, but the Big Butterfly Count results are very promising, with Small Tortoiseshell numbers up by 388% compared to 2012 and Peacock numbers up by more than 3,500%.

In all, 15 of the 21 Big Butterfly Count species increased in 2013 compared with the previous year, and 12 of these were up by at least 50%. Several species that fared particularly well last year dropped back considerably. Ringlet and Marbled White numbers fell by over 50% and counts of Meadow Brown and Six-spot Burnet moth were also down on 2012. The warm weather has seen an increase of migrants from the Continent with Clouded Yellow, Painted Lady and Silver Y moth seen in impressive numbers. The Long-tailed Blue, a rare migrant from the Continent, has also been reported along the south coast of England, from Devon to Suffolk during August.

**Useful Web Addresses:**

*Herts & Middx Branch website:*

<http://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk>

*Branch website optimised for mobile phone use:*

[http://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/mobile\\_sightings.html](http://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/mobile_sightings.html)

*Branch Facebook link:*

<http://www.facebook.com/ButterflyConservationHertsMiddlesex>

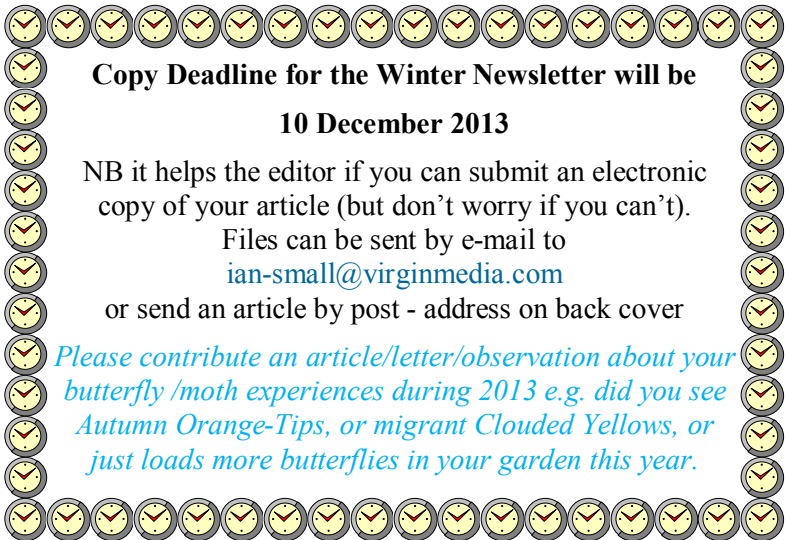
*Butterfly Conservation (National) website:*

<http://butterfly-conservation.org/>

*Butterfly Conservation Twitter*

<https://twitter.com/savebutterflies>

Would you rather receive your Branch newsletters as pdf -files by e-mail, rather than as hard-copy through the post? If so, please e-mail the editor (details in the box below) with your name and, if possible, your membership number (which is printed on the address label used to send this newsletter). If you don't have that to hand, just provide your address details and I will sort the rest.



**Copy Deadline for the Winter Newsletter will be  
10 December 2013**

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](mailto:ian-small@virginmedia.com)  
or send an article by post - address on back cover

*Please contribute an article/letter/observation about your butterfly/moth experiences during 2013 e.g. did you see Autumn Orange-Tips, or migrant Clouded Yellows, or just loads more butterflies in your garden this year.*

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