

HERTFORDSHIRE AND MIDDLESEX BRANCH NEWSLETTER

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In the pdf version of this document, active hyperlinks are displayed in bold blue font - clicking on this will take you directly to the source. For those reading the printed version, the full internet location is either obvious in the link or is detailed below it.



Chair's Report, by Malcolm Hull

It's been a hectic butterfly summer, with August and September providing many more sightings than last year.

Time to make sure you've submitted all your records, either online or directly to Andrew Wood (contact details on back page and see [page 5](#)).

I've enjoyed meeting many of you at our butterfly walks and seeing some great butterflies. The sheer number of Brown Hairstreaks on Nick Furtek's walk at Ruislip was impressive.

Finding Purple Hairstreak at Gillespie Park Islington was a bonus, as this species had never been reported from this Borough before. Adonis- and Chalkhill Blues were the stunning highlight of Nick Keeps walk at Therfield Heath.

Read a summary of this year's trips on [page 21](#) and start making plans for your butterfly trips in 2024.

What's coming up?

There's plenty to look forward to in the next few months

- I'm delighted to say that we will be running another series of winter talks online in the new year – watch out for a mailing after Christmas.
- Andrew Wood will soon be working on our Annual Report. This provides the most comprehensive information on all butterfly species in our two counties and we hope to publish it in the Spring.
- Our popular Brown Hairstreak egg hunts are back for the winter - see [page 4](#).
- Our Annual Members Day will be on Saturday 6th April at a new venue in Greenwood Park, Chiswell Green near St Albans. A



Brown Hairstreak (above) &
Adonis Blue (below).
Photos © Malcolm Hull

great opportunity to meet up with other butterfly enthusiasts and find new friends. Make a note of the date and look out for details including star speakers nearer the time (- see [page 4](#)).

Our Strategy

Creating Wild Spaces for butterflies and moths in and around our towns and cities is an important part of our Butterfly Conservation work.

Many of our members and friends are already providing habitat in their gardens or working with their local parks.

Butterfly Conservation have now launched the Wild Spaces Hub, with the aim of providing a comprehensive information source, presented in an easily accessible manner

Find out more and how you can join in on [page 8](#).

Landscape Plans

The other part of our strategy is to work on larger landscape-scale projects, improving habitat management, creating new sites and joining locations through green corridors. At our September committee meeting we were joined by BC Chief Executive Julie Williams to discuss how best to press forward with our plans. We approved our first plan which is focused on the network of Grizzled Skipper sites along the Beane Valley between Hertford and Stevenage. Next step is for an action plan to be worked up in conjunction with Sharon Hearle, BC's senior conservation officer in the region. More information on this in the new year.

Our next Landscape Plan to work on is for the Hertfordshire Chilterns. This will help many of our rarer species such as Duke of Burgundy, Grizzled & Dingy Skippers, Green Hairstreak and Small Blue. Over the next few months we will be visiting sites, meeting with potential partners and exploring fundraising opportunities. All ideas and suggestions gratefully received.

Thanks so much for all the records submitted so far and all the help and support you've given me over the last six months

Dates for the Diary

Sunday 3rd December 2023 – Brown Hairstreak egg hunt at Stafford Road Open Space, Ruislip Gardens – ideal for those wanting to learn the extra skills needed to find eggs. Booking will be required - details will soon be available on the [Branch Website](https://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/)
[<https://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/>]

Saturday 6th April 2024 - Members' Day at Greenwood Park Community Centre in Chiswell Green, near St. Albans. Keynote speaker will be Pete Eeles, Chairman of the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Branch, keen photographer and author of 'Life Cycles of British and Irish Butterflies'

A programme of Winter online presentations will start in the New Year – details will be circulated to members in due course - please ensure we hold your e-mail address if you want to attend.

VOLUNTEERS WANTED

Volunteers are wanted for the following transect walks (up to 26 walks from April to Sept over established survey routes). Help and training can be provided.

- Cranford Park transect
- some transects in the London Boroughs of Harrow and Hillingdon
- Two transects at Northaw Great Wood in south Hertfordshire
- Thorley Wash near Sawbridgeworth
- Parkland Walk in Haringey, and
- Templewood Vale in Welwyn Garden City.

There are also vacancies for conducting the Wider Countryside Butterfly Survey (2 walks - one in July and one in August over

established survey routes). These walks take place in OS grid squares TQ2480 (Notting Hill area) and TQ2782 (Regents Park) .

If you think you can help with any of these surveys, then please reach out to Andrew Wood, whose contact details are on the back cover of this newsletter.

Newsletter Editor Role

After editing this newsletter for over 25 years I have decided that it is time to step aside and allow fresh blood to bring new life to it.

The role is far less onerous these days as the majority of members access the newsletter in pdf format, which can be generated by several software packages.

[I will be able to continue printing and distributing the few hard copies that some members require, at least for now.]

If you think this could be a role for you, then please reach out to me - I'm more than happy to discuss what's involved and what is needed.

(see back cover for my contact details)
Ian Small

2023 Butterfly Records - Andrew Wood

Whatever method you use to make records, I would be very grateful if they could be **in by November 9th** to give me time to analyse them and get our database updated. If you use, iRecord, iRecord Butterflies, iNaturalist, Butterflies for the New Millenium, or UKBMS (transects and WCBS) I will have access automatically and do not need separate copies.

Tribute to Nigel Agar (1936-2022), compiled by Liz Goodyear

This article was scheduled to appear in the Spring 2023 newsletter, but was inadvertently omitted.

In November we learnt of the sad death of Nigel Agar in July 2022. Nigel had joined Butterfly Conservation in 1979 and would have been one of the founding members of the Branch. We wish we could have represented Butterfly Conservation at his funeral.



Nigel was passionate about all aspects of wildlife, and loved the Pegsdon Hills near to his home of Hitchin where he would often be found looking for his favourite butterfly the Green Hairstreak in spring. However he will also be remembered for his dedication to Branch committee work having served as the Chair of the Branch Conservation Committee from 2004 to 2008. He remained on the main committee until 2019, when ill health forced him to stand down. He was also species champion for the Green Hairstreak, and acted as HMWT Reserve Warden at Telegraph Hill and Hexton Chalk Pit, to name just a few of his roles.

Nigel was a historian and author and taught history in Hertfordshire. He was elected to Hertfordshire County Council in 1993 and represented North Hertfordshire for many years. This involvement with HCC led to his greatest legacy - when he encouraged the Branch to get involved with the construction of the Baldock Bypass. Liz Goodyear writes 'I can't remember the exact circumstances but I was approached by Nigel in 2001 and he started to tell me about the Baldock Bypass, and how he envisaged the creation of a corridor of butterfly habitat along the planned route and wanted to involve the Branch. He had been inspired by the work done to create wildlife-friendly chalk banks during the construction of the Brighton Bypass on the A27 in Sussex.' He told the Conservation Committee that 'The chalk faces of the (Baldock) cuttings were not going to be landscaped and would make superb butterfly habitat. The engineers were agreeable to having advice with regard to the biological aspect and he was setting up an advisory body to meet with the engineers in the early New Year (2002).' Many other Branch committee members were involved in suggesting seed mixes, advising the site engineers

and attending meetings over the years before the bypass finally opened. It wasn't all plain sailing and we didn't get all the plants we wanted but the bypass soon became a mass of flowering Kidney and Horseshoe Vetch. These plants were also included in the seed mixes planted on the spoil heap that was created at the eastern end of the bypass near Clothall Common. Nigel probably didn't realise that the habitat he helped create was now supporting Small Blue, Chalkhill Blue and in 2022 Adonis Blue!

As County Councillor he also took a keen interest in the county's rural estate and he was involved in various management initiatives, which included Saffron Green Meadows just north of Arkley becoming a public open space, and incidentally a potential Brown Hairstreak site!

Nigel was very proud of some of his butterfly sightings and would often recall how he had seen a Large Tortoiseshell on April 10 1981 and how he was one of the first people to see a 'modern' Purple Emperor. Nigel was helping with Brian Sawford's survey work for The Butterflies of Hertfordshire when on 25th July 1985, he passed a cottage on the path between Preston and Whitwell, and saw a Purple Emperor fly up from a pile of chicken feathers, between 11 and 12 o'clock. Nigel wrote 'About the same time I gave a talk on butterflies to the children of St Paul's Walden School in Whitwell, and a girl in the class said she had seen one in their garden in the village and said she had got a book out the library to see what it was'. Nigel is convinced the girl had seen a Purple Emperor.

A year later, on 28th July 1986, Brian Sawford went to a cottage in the same area and released a male Purple Emperor that had flown into a bedroom....' – the rest is history although it wasn't until 1999 that the real story of the Purple Emperor in Hertfordshire really started and Nigel was there from the beginning.

(Reference: Goodyear, L. and Middleton, A. (2003) The Hertfordshire Purple Emperor. Hertfordshire Natural History Society.)

Nigel was also a keen moth recorder and a regular contributor to the Herts & Middlesex Moth Group data base. Although in his last few years, ill health meant his involvement was curtailed – he will be remembered for his enthusiasm, and dedication to all aspects of Hertfordshire life!

Wild Spaces in Your Area, by Malcolm Hull

80% of our butterfly species have declined since the 1970's and for many of them, numbers continue to fall. Butterfly Conservation's Wild Spaces initiative is all about inspiring people to take action to help their local butterflies and moths. There's so much which can be done in a small or large garden, local park, or community space.

To share all our best ideas we have just launched a new website, which can be viewed at: www.wild-spaces.co.uk It includes information about Wild Spaces, an interactive map to see Wild Spaces near you and the ability to log-in and create a dedicated 'My Wild Space' page. There are also case studies, blogs and a species ID guide. A new Wild Spaces animation will follow soon. The content is bitesize and non-technical with audiences new to BC in mind.

There are lots of ideas of try in your Wild Space to help butterflies and moths thrive.

To qualify as a Wild Space, you don't need to start a new project – an existing garden is fine. My allotment at Folly Lane in St Albans is one of the case studies. I'm now up to 25 butterfly species recorded there, with Small Heath being the latest addition, the first seen only last month. That's taken several years to achieve, but it's surprising how quickly butterflies and moths can respond to new plants and move in.



A rather worn Small Heath
Photo © Malcolm Hull

The scale of this project is ambitious, but it will only succeed if people join in and support it. So why not take a look at the website, think about a space you can work on and register it. You will then be able to access information on the species you might see or attract there and ideas and suggestions on how this can be achieved.

The website is a work in progress and more will be added over the next few months. If you have ideas to contribute, use the contact email address on the website and copy them to me.

There are already several Herts & Middx Wild Spaces showing on the map, with more on the way. It's so interesting seeing what others are

doing and a great way to learn new ideas.

Our Branch is supporting the initiative by providing personalised advice should you be unable to find the information you need on the website. This can include a site visit when that is helpful.

Feel free to get in touch if there's any aspect you'd like to discuss.

A Chalk Bank for Hemel Hempstead, by Christine Ridley

Over the past few years Hemel has been getting wilder. The Dacorum official in charge of Green Spaces in Hemel, Rob Cassidy, is keen to make the town a more sympathetic place for insects and other wildlife and has been letting areas of grass grow over the summer, only cutting and collecting the grass in the autumn, and also supervising the planting of areas of wildflowers in Gadebridge Park.

Butterfly Conservation's Landscape Scale projects initiative has prompted Malcolm Hull to contact Rob and suggest further areas to let the grass grow, and the construction of a chalk bank to increase the biodiversity and make a joined-up landscape for rare butterflies such as the Dingy Skipper and the Small Blue, both of which species have small colonies in or near Hemel. A suitable site on a south facing slope near the playing fields in Gadebridge was chosen and Rob arranged for the turf to be scraped off the area and for chalk to be levelled over the prepared ground.

Timing meant that the seeding took place in December, and the chalk was frosted when local volunteers began the job, although the sun had melted the ice by the time the task was finished. Probably because of a winter cold snap and a cool spring, the seeds took their time to germinate, and the bank was still looking like a white desert this spring. The residents of Gadebridge were far from impressed, and poor Rob has had to deal with many complaints. However, over the summer the plants have fared better and there is now an array of wildflowers coming up, some of which are in flower. Species include Bird's-foot Trefoil, Greater bird's-foot



Seeding in frosty conditions
Photo © Christine Ridley



The Chalk Bank in August 2023
Photo © Christine Ridley

Trefoil, Knapweed, Oxeye Daisy, Lots of Kidney Vetch (no flowers yet), Yellow Mignonette, red and yellow Poppies, and more. The number of butterflies in the area have noticeably increased, and Small Copper, Common Blue, Gatekeeper, Small Tortoiseshell, Meadow Brown, Comma, various Whites and a day-flying moth - a Dusky Sallow - have all been seen close to the bank or in the long grass nearby.

We are hoping that the bank will be a riot of colour next summer with all the Kidney Vetch plants flowering, and other plants spreading to cover the chalk; and who knows, we may catch sight of a Small Blue butterfly.

A Year of Surprises in Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, by Terry Lyle

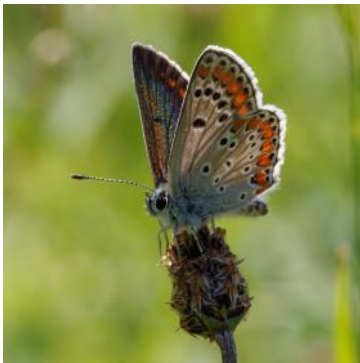
In issue 85 of this Newsletter I wrote about our long experience of butterfly conservation and recording in the Park. I focussed particularly on the new arrivals we have seen over the years and on insights gained by long observation of the behaviour of common species. This, among other things, is of great help identifying similar species on the wing. I have never seen a Common Blue fly high, but Holly Blues do so habitually. When both Meadow Browns and Ringlets are flying, it can be hard to pick out the Ringlets, but the behaviour of searching males is different. Male Meadow Browns frequently dip down into the tall grass. Ringlets never do. I conclude that unmated female Meadow Browns are likely to be at ground level, unmated female Ringlets higher up, perhaps on the grass heads.

The summer of 2023 has had very different weather from that of 2022 and this July and August, numbers of many species have been unexpectedly high: every year we all hope for a few memorable sightings, and perhaps a species previously absent or occasional on the

site becoming established. This has been such a year. Outstanding was the discovery of Green Hairstreak, a species we've always kept an eye out for but never seen, but which must have been present since at least 2022 and probably longer. It's our third Habitat Specialist. On 24 May, a colleague I was with said he'd spotted a small green butterfly on a leaf, which soon flew off. He didn't know Green Hairstreaks existed. We searched unsuccessfully for it, so I felt I had insufficient evidence to report it. On the transect on 28 May, not deliberately searching for them, I chanced upon 2 females at rest, 60 metres apart. One on Sanfoin, one on Lucerne. Photographs showed they were 2 individuals, one with wing margins fraying. Both plants are listed as foodplants. We do not have the usual London foodplants, Broom and Gorse, apart from 3 Gorse bushes on the opposite side of the Park. We do have ample Dogwood, Purging Buckthorn and Bramble, other possible foodplants. If anyone fancies coming to search next spring, let us know and we'll orient you if you don't know the Park. The final Green Hairstreak sighting was on 9 June. Again, the person who spotted it, at the opposite end of the Park from the other 3 sightings, knew only that a green butterfly was unusual and worth a photo.



Green Hairstreak
Photo © Ian Small



Brown Argus
Photo © Ian Small

The major surprise of the summer months was an unprecedented number of sightings of Brown Argus. For several years now we've recorded a trickle, on an off transect. Two on transect in 2022. Some of them have been females laying on Cut-leaved Cranesbill. This year, one was recorded on transect in spring, 28 May. Between 11 July and 19 August, 51 were recorded on transect. Cut-leaved Cranesbill is an annual plant, flowering in early summer, then dying. New seedlings quickly germinate. Last year's dry summer

greatly favoured the plant. Thinner grass growth let in more light to seedlings.

There were anxieties last winter that the lower than usual number of Brimstones sighted after the new brood emerged in July might mean lower numbers in spring. I didn't share that anxiety, and it wasn't realized. Brimstones with us were in their usual abundance.

Every year we watch out for Silver-washed Fritillaries and Small Blues, which are our other 2 habitat specialists. The Fritillaries were back. Of 7 sightings, at least 3 were females. Unsurprisingly, given that drought killed almost all our Kidney Vetch in 2022, no Small Blue sightings. But we now have many new plants from last year's seed, so we haven't given up hope. Small Blues are elusive, and butterflies with foodplants liable to failure may have survival strategies unknown to us. This summer has seen 2 sightings of White-letter Hairstreak, the first for several years.

Although some of the commoner butterflies have been very scarce this summer, notably Ringlet and Large Skipper, many have been remarkably abundant in July and August, especially Speckled Woods, Holly Blues, Red Admirals, Commas and Gatekeepers. We recorded 58 Speckled Woods on the transect on 17 August. Their abundance biases the transect count. When there are few, they fly less often, as there are fewer other Speckled Woods to engage with, so they would often remain unobserved. They not only fly up to other Speckled Woods, but to any other butterflies.

A common experience in our woodland clearings, which are rich in butterfly numbers despite being smaller than we would like, is how all can be quiet, then something flies up, which brings about a melee of other butterflies. Speckled Woods, Holly Blues, Commas, Large Whites, Green-veined Whites, with perhaps a Brimstone and a Red Admiral or two. In most years there's a territory-holding Large Skipper, almost as skittish as the Commas. But not this year, with only a handful of Large Skipper sightings. When the excitement's over, all subsides for a couple of minutes.

If anyone would like to find out more about our butterflies and our conservation work, help us search for Green Hairstreaks next spring, or join the 2 of us in the transect team, you can get in touch with me at: contact@fothcp.org or phone 0203 982 8670.

The Future of Whitewebbs Park, Enfield, by Mark Saunders

Silver-Washed Fritillaries and Purple Emperors have been the highlights of the Butterfly year at Whitewebbs Park in Enfield, Middlesex. There are also good records of White-Letter Hairstreak butterflies and a single record of the elusive Brown Hairstreak on the site.



People often think of Trent Park as the centre of butterfly biodiversity in Enfield. However, Whitewebbs Park boasts 29 species, with 7 of these being London Priority Species.

Situated within an area of Special Character of Enfield Chase, Whitewebbs Park is linked to Forty Hall by a network of footpaths, bridleways, and hedgerows.

The site has around 100 acres of Ancient Oak and Hornbeam woodland. The woodland is designated as a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation. The Municipal Pay and Play golf course closed 3 years ago and has since become a meadow that is naturally re-wilding. Small Heath butterflies are increasing in number over the site, along with Essex and Small Skippers, Small Copper, and Brown Argos butterflies.

The area was purchased in 1931 by Middlesex County Council for public recreation use as Public Trust Land. The former golf course of around 100 acres is surrounded by three Sites of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation, (Hillyfields to the south, Archers Wood to the east on the Forty Hall Estate and Whitewebbs Wood to the west). The Ancient Woodland borders the former golf course and provides a rich habitat that includes Elm before transitioning to the new re-wilding meadows with Silver Washed Fritillaries feeding on the Brambles and Burdock around the woodland margins.



However, around 40 acres of this newly created meadow land could soon disappear and be converted to plastic football pitches. Enfield Council has

issued a disposal notice for the Parkland and entered into an agreement to lease Whitewebbs Park to Tottenham Hotspur Football Club. This would see the newly created meadow and parkland converted to elite training pitches, expanding Tottenham Hotspur's current training facilities in the area.

Whitewebbs Park was purchased as Public Trust Land in 1931 by Middlesex County Council. Following legal advice, CPRE London, Enfield Road watch and the Friends of Whitewebbs Park have used Crowd justice to raise pledges of around £18,000 to challenge Enfield Council's disposal of the land and agreement to lease, with the aim of keeping this Public Trust Land open and accessible for public use and protecting its current biodiversity.

Bird Poo, Butterflies and Moths, by Andrew Wood

Many animals are strongly averse to the droppings of other organisms. Among the most commonly seen droppings are those of birds and a wide variety of moths and butterflies have put this aversion to good use in their attempts to not get eaten before completing their lifecycles. So I thought it might be interesting to look at some examples of this mimicry in these species. The key characteristics are that the moth or butterfly has a black-and-white coloration that appears reasonably random or shapeless so that the fact that this is a living creature rather than a dropping is not obvious to a predator. In some species this is so well done that the human eye, too, is fooled as evidenced by a number of specimens of bird poo that I have carefully collected in a pot at the moth trap, only to find that they are an inanimate object and by the occasional photographs I get sent which prove to be said inanimate object.

Now a number of our common butterflies are coloured black and white but their way of resting with wings held above their bodies and their size mean that they could not be mistaken for bird droppings, unlike some moths that we will come to. However, there is one very good butterfly larval mimic of the bird dropping and that is the caterpillar of the Comma. It feeds on the leaves of stinging nettle, elm and hop and is equipped with the usual Nymphalid defence mechanism of spines. Although much of the body is orange, the top of its rear half appears to have had white paint poured over it producing that random white splurge pattern that fits the criteria I mentioned

above and makes it look like a bird dropping on top of a leaf.

There are so many moths that look like bird droppings to a greater or lesser degree that there is a handy book called "Bird-Dropping Tortrix Moths of the British Isles: A Field Guide to the Bird-Dropping Mimics" and very useful it is too as there are several dozen moths in the UK, often quite similar that fit this description. Most being under 10mm long are small enough to look like small droppings when sitting on a twig, leaf or stem.



Comma Butterfly caterpillar
Photo © Andrew Wood

However, most of the examples that I am going to be mentioning are larger "macro-moths". There are three that can be found reasonably often in our area. The first two are members of a group called geometers and rest with their wings open flat against the surface they are resting on. The pattern on the wings is symmetrical, which could be a giveaway, but they sufficiently break up their outline so as to be reasonable facsimiles of a bird dropping. The first is the Scorched Carpet, a medium-sized moth, the second is the smaller Lime Speck Pug. The latter's more elongated shape I think wins the contest between these two as the best dropping mimic.



Scorched Carpet moth (left) & Lime Speck Pug (right)
Photos © Andrew Wood

Hertfordshire and Middlesex

But these are outdone by a small "Macro moth" called the Chinese Character, named after a faint mark on the wing said to resemble a piece of calligraphy. However, that is hardly visible while its 3D resting position bears a clear resemblance to a fresh bird dropping. Undoubtedly it wins this competition unless you can think of something else....



Chinese Character
Photo © Andrew Wood

One Year - a Tale of Two Halves! - by Liz Goodyear

Several of you may know that in addition to butterfly recording I have also been recording the moths in my Ware garden for over 20 years. To do this I use twin 30w actinic tubes set just above a home-made 'Skinner' trap which is filled with egg boxes where the moths, once attracted to the light, hide. Here they stay until the morning and I then record each species present and the number of moths of each particular species. Once counted, they are taken to my front garden well away from the trap and released into the vegetation. Macro-moths, which are generally the larger moths I usually don't have any difficulty identifying now, but the smaller moths known as micro moths are much harder and even after 20 years I am only just beginning to get to grips with their identities. This has partially been helped by having more time in the mornings since I retired and even more because of the aid of a head band magnifier my daughter bought me a year ago for my birthday. This magnifier helps pick up so much additional detail, not otherwise visible and now with so many books and online resources available makes this process so much easier.

I should warn you that, despite the popularity of various identification Apps now available (I shan't mention actual names), care must be taken, they are far from accurate at times and at least one can throw up American names – always refer back to an identification book and /or a reliable moth related website. Social media is awash from strange butterfly or moth names being used this summer!

Each year brings a few new species and my list of garden macros has,

at the time of writing in September 2023 reached 413 (including those recorded by using pheromone lures such as the clearwings). The micro list is still expanding and has a long way to go before it reaches three-quarters of that figure!

At the end of each year, I submit my records to Colin Plant (the Hertfordshire Moth Recorder) and start to wonder what the following year will bring. There are several moths that I recorded in my early days of recording and I long to record them again! However, for a few early years I used a brighter light but I had so many complaints from my daughters at the time, I decided to change to actinic tubes. On the whole actinic are less effective and I will miss some of the species that the brighter light might have attracted but they still work very well. Some people will stay up and watch their trap, but I might on what might seem to be a 'good' night have a quick look just before bed but I tend to just simply wait until the morning to see what moths have flown in. Obviously I will miss a species or two, and by the time I walk up to the top of the garden with my mug of coffee, some will have flown off but that is a chance I take.

So this year began and although many people don't use their traps in the winter, mine is on most nights of the year, unless there is a continued spell of frosty weather when I do turn it off. Winter numbers are always pretty low and there will be several nights in a row when nothing is recorded but without these records or lack of records the data wouldn't be available for others to study. As March arrives then the Orthosia family of moths such as Common Quaker and Hebrew Character start to appear – some in large numbers and the egg boxes start to fill up. For many weeks this year the weather was very hit and miss with warm dry days but cold clear nights or cold days and cold nights with just the occasional 'good' night. With the added effect of last year's drought, numbers for several months were very low and overall the species list for this year will be much lower than last year. On various social media accounts, moth recorders bemoaned the poor counts and lack of species.

However, then something happened.....numbers relative to last year did increase as did the daily species count. As some readers may recall in 2018 I wrote in the [Autumn Newsletter](#) about the large numbers of Jersey Tiger moths I had started to record in my garden.

[<https://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/Newsletters/Herts%20&%20Middx%20Newsletter%2077,%20Autumn%202018.pdf>]

Hertfordshire and Middlesex

One morning in August 2018 I wrote that I had recorded 141 and that the total count for that year was 575 Jersey Tigers!

Well since that article, my yearly counts of Jersey Tigers have generally increased with 582 in 2019, 955 in 2020, 1174 in 2021, but then a big drop in 2022 to 498 possibly caused by the very hot spell of weather during the flight period. I was actually hoping in 2023 that lower number would start to be the norm as counting these large numbers of Jersey Tigers is actually very difficult!!! The Jersey Tiger season started slowly in 2023, with the first record on 8th July and for the first four weeks numbers were manageable with just 300 being recorded. Then after a week away.....on the morning of 10th August with what I described in my note book as ideal moth conditions I counted 177, with 399 macro moths in total and 54 macro species – this was high for my garden!

Unfortunately unlike many of the other moth species, it's almost impossible to relocate Jersey Tigers to my front garden, once counted they simply fly off into the nearby vegetation or spend the day nectaring on my buddleias so it would be necessary to turn the light off for 24 hours to allow for a natural dispersal. I thought 177 was a lot but then after a slow increase in numbers the count on the 22nd August was 299 (it was probably 300 but I felt that sounded a too made up a figure) which could be a national garden record!!!! My garden was likened to the Valley of the Butterflies on the Island of Rhodes which is known to support huge numbers of the moth despite being called the Valley of the Butterflies! In addition to this on 18th August although there was only 83 Jersey Tigers, the actual macro count was 662 bolstered by several other moths species exploding in numbers including 108 Straw Underwing! The last Jersey Tiger was recorded on 13th September



Jersey Tiger moths in Liz's moth trap



Jersey Tiger
Photo © Andrew Wood

with the total count for 2023 of 2336 individuals – an increase of over 450% on 2022! However, as the number of Jersey Tigers decreased, the garden started to become ‘invaded’ by other moth species such as Large Yellow Underwing, Common Wainscot or Setaceous Hebrew Character! The daily species count had by now dropped by nearly 20 species but the numbers of moths have remained very high. A look at my records has shown that since 2002 I have had 33 nights when the number of macro moths has exceeded 300, and 17 of those nights have been in 2023 with the highest total ever on the 11th September with 669 and even by the end of September over 16,000 macro moths recorded my highest ever yearly total!



Straw Underwing
Photo © Andrew Wood

So what started as a very miserable worrying year for moths, in my garden - it has now become probably the best year ever for actual moths but not so for specific species and with autumn moths now turning up, little chance of catching up – there’s always next year though.

Transport for London’s Managing Road Verges for Wildlife, by Paul Busby

Monitoring volunteers from Butterfly Conservation have undertaken surveys across 11 survey sites across London, 7 of which are in our Branch Area.

Summary of Sites

1. Swakeleys roundabout, Hillingdon
- 2-3 A40 western avenue WB offslip at Hillingdon (two sites), Hillingdon
4. Rowley Lane, Barnet
5. Green Street Green Roundabout A21 NB approach, Bromley
6. A406 South of Stonebridge Park Station, Brent
7. Redbridge roundabout, Redbridge

Hertfordshire and Middlesex

8. Trinity Road (western verge on approach to B234), Wandsworth
9. A406 Gunnersbury Avenue, Ealing
10. A23 Farthing Way, Croydon
11. A406 Pinkham Way, Barnet

Road Verge Trial Sites

Increasing biodiversity is one of the key elements of the Mayors' transport strategy. In 2019, Transport for London reduced mowing at two sites to improve grassland habitat and encourage wildflowers. This has increased in subsequent years and in 2023 will be extended to over 20 sites, an area of over 50,000 square meters. After years of intensive mowing the number of plant and animal species that these plots support is limited. However, with a cutting regime that keeps the nutrients in the soil as low as possible, it is hoped that species number will diversify over time.



Interventions may be required, such as sowing wildflower seed, but before doing so it is important to assess what species already present.

You can read more about the approach TfL are taking [here](https://tfl.gov.uk/travel-information/improvements-and-projects/managing-road-verges-for-wildlife?intcmp=58186)

[<https://tfl.gov.uk/travel-information/improvements-and-projects/managing-road-verges-for-wildlife?intcmp=58186>]

Interim Results

This is just the first year of monitoring with approx. 25 surveys carried out, recording over 250 butterflies, 15 species.

Results have been variable across some sites, but at all low-mow sites more insects have been found, although some interventions maybe required at some sites to remove rank vegetation. The highlights were finding a Small Heath, Brown Argus, Jersey Tiger and the discovery of a Brown Hairstreak on Ragwort on one of the A40 sites.



Brown Hairstreak
Seen on one of the A40 trial sites
Photo © Paul Busby

Some Highlights from this year's Events Programme

These highlights are taken from the event reports submitted by the leaders to the Branch Website. Many thanks to all event leaders, even if their event is not mentioned here.

On 27 May at Heartwood Forest, Sandridge, and despite the sun, butterflies were few and far between. However, a mating pair of Common Blues obligingly posed for photos. Frustrated by the lack of success in finding Small Blue, a group of 6 stayed on to visit the site adjoining the Airfield fence. Finally, they located a Small Blue and then a second, egg-laying between the florets of a flower head still in bud. In total they had 6 Small Blue sightings, at least 4 separate individuals.



Mating Common Blues (left) and Small Blue (right)
Photos © Ian Howarth

On 24 June, a moth event was held with Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea and Friends of Holland Park. They opened a moth trap full of micros but also some interesting macros. The standouts were the White Satin and Clancy's Rustic. Both colour forms of the Box-tree Moth were present. Less welcome was a nest, low down on an oak of Oak Processionary Moth. The White Satin has never been a common moth in Herts and it is local in Middx, with records scattered across the entire county.



White Satin moth
Photo © Andrew Wood

Hertfordshire and Middlesex

On 27 June at Chorleywood Common, the main focus of the event was to spot butterflies and moths, but interest in the local flora also took up much of the discussion. Butterflies spotted included Marbled White and Purple Hairstreak, plus also a good number of Peacock caterpillars in the stinging nettles. Unfortunately it was rather cloudy which could be why the Silver Washed Fritillaries and Common Blues weren't seen. Moths seen included the Six-Spot Burnet and the very welcome Forester moth, of which three were seen. Cinnabar caterpillars were spotted on ragwort and the unwelcome Oak Processionary caterpillars on three oak trees.



Forester moth
Photo © Chris Hankinson

On 11 July at the Eastern end of Therfield Heath, the overnight rain had cleared and the cooler conditions meant that many butterflies were quite lethargic. As a result, most people saw most of the low abundance species when they settled. The target Chalkhill Blues were still well below peak numbers for this year and were not seen until well into the walk.



Chalkhill Blue (left) and Painted Lady (right)
Photos © Paddy Grove

On 13 July at Norton Green it started spitting with rain minutes after they set off and it steadily got heavier at times until midday when the sun eventually burst through for several minutes. In periods of brightness, quite a few butterflies were seen (15 species), including Purple Hairstreak and Silver-washed Fritillary. Moths included Hummingbird Hawkmoth and Silver Y. Up to 3 Hornets were seen feeding on the sap of an oak tree. Sadly, no Purple Emperor or White Admiral were sighted.



Silver-washed Fritillary
Photo © Bob Clift

On 13 July at Ruislip Woods the overcast weather didn't deter an enthusiastic group of butterfly hunters on the trip round Ruislip Lido. Purple Hairstreaks were numerous and several male Silver-washed Fritillaries patrolled their territories and a White Admiral flew slowly through, stopping to nectar on bramble and providing good views. An unusual black and yellow caterpillar was identified as Alder Moth, an uncommon species in Middx. Unfortunately, the weather was again unfavourable and no Purple Emperors were seen.



- Purple Hairstreak

Alder moth caterpillar -

Photos © Malcolm Hull



On 16 July at Bricket Wood Common it was another grey morning when we the group set off and butterflies were few and far between. Then they found a bramble bush in the sun and a shout of 'White Admiral' went up, giving excellent views and photo opportunities. The ride is quite shaded these days, but still produced a decent crop of butterflies more were added upon entering the clearing, bringing it to 13 species. An estimate of 12 Silver-washed Fritillaries (of which 2 were females) and 8 White Admirals were seen.

Hertfordshire and Middlesex

After the walk finished a few stayed on to look for Purple Emperors in Mutchetts Wood. The new canopy gap provides much improved visibility. The clouds and stiff breeze were against us, but three times in an hour a single male Purple Emperor glided across the gap.



Comma (left) and Silver-washed Fritillary (right)
Photos © Chris Newman

On 13 August, despite the somewhat gloomy forecast and under grey skies a group of adults, juniors and 1 impeccably-behaved dog assembled for this trip to Stafford Road Open Space at Ruislip Gardens. Contrary to the forecast, the sun appeared and remained out for much of the day and they soon came upon their first Brown Hairstreak (BHK). Over the next 2 hours as the group walked the paths the BHK count increased to at least 16, which were all nectaring on thistle heads, enabling everyone to get long views from every angle. Around 1pm the walk ended at the Bedford Road site entrance where we were treated to the last 3 BHK, busy nectaring on thistle providing the perfect end to the field trip.



Brown Hairstreak
Photo © Nick Furtek

On 19 August at Therfield Heath a large group, aged from 1 to 90, gathered for the second Branch walk on Therfield Heath. The leader

decided with such a large group and with a recent Branch sighting report of Adonis Blue on the Rifle Range, to stick to the Eastern Heath rather than go to Church Hill. As expected, it turned into an "identify your Blues" walk. The group were soon rewarded with a steady stream of Chalkhill Blues of both sexes. Further up the side of the Rifle Range, male Adonis Blues gleamed out. Common Blue of both sexes (mostly quite elderly) were added to the mix particularly at the bottom of the bowl. A few Brown Argus, again past their peak, were spotted and a couple of Holly Blues were found towards the end to complete the identification points.



Male Adonis Blue
Photo © Paddy Grove

Comparison of First Sighting Dates 2023 vs 2022, by Ian Small

Each year, the first local sighting dates of each butterfly species are recorded on the Branch website. The weather in 2023 was very different from that in 2022, so I was curious to compare this year's data with last. I have tabulated the results below, sorted by the magnitude of the difference (in days) - a negative number means the species emerged (or was seen) earlier in 2023, and a positive number shows it was first seen later. There were very few 'winners' in 2023, and quite a few 'losers'....

Species	2023	2022	Difference (days)
Speckled Wood	2 Feb	22 Mar	-48
Peacock	13 Jan	30 Jan	-17
Clouded Yellow	16 May	23 May	-7
Small Copper	30 Apr	6 May	-6
Green-veined White	9 Apr	10 Apr	-1
Gatekeeper	27 Jun	28 Jun	-1

Hertfordshire and Middlesex

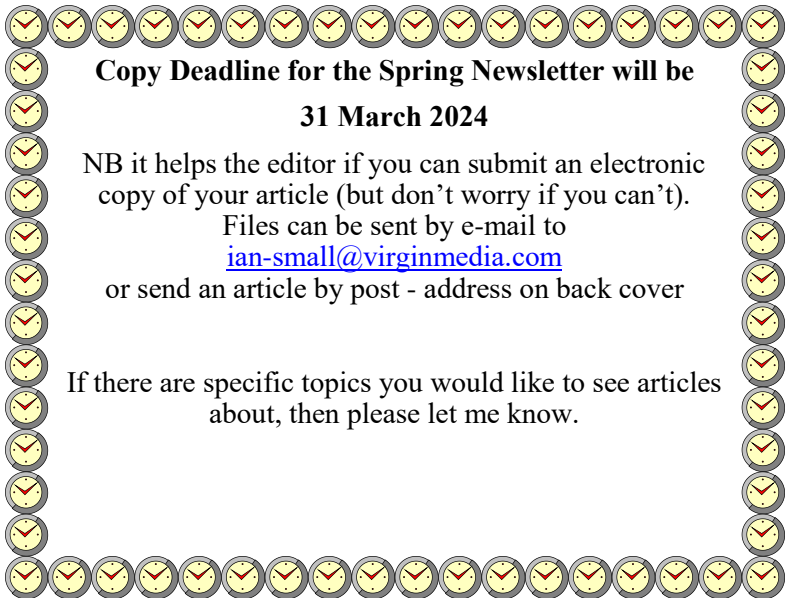
Species	2023	2022	Difference (days)
Purple Emperor	24 Jun	22 Jun	2
Small Skipper	13 Jun	8 Jun	5
Essex Skipper	21 Jun	16 Jun	5
Purple Hairstreak	22 Jun	16 Jun	6
Small Heath	7 May	30 Apr	7
Dark Green Fritillary	14 Jun	7 Jun	7
Small Blue	18 May	10 May	8
Meadow Brown	4 Jun	27 May	8
Silver-washed Fritillary	24 Jun	16 Jun	8
Ringlet	19 Jun	10 Jun	9
Common Blue	16 May	6 May	10
Brown Argus	11 May	30 Apr	11
Marbled White	13 June	2 Jun	11
White Admiral	21 Jun	10 Jun	11
Green Hairstreak	28 Apr	16 Apr	12
White-letter Hairstreak	22 Jun	10 Jun	12
Orange-tip	7 Apr	24 Mar	14
Adonis Blue	22 May	8 May	14
Chalkhill Blue	6 Jul	22 Jun	14
Holly Blue	7 Apr	22 Mar	16
Dingy Skipper	7 May	21 Apr	16
Brown Hairstreak	30 Jul	14 Jul	16
Comma	19 Feb	1 Feb	18
Large White	30 Apr	12 Apr	18
Large Skipper	8 Jun	21 May	18
Small White	3 Apr	10 Mar	24
Painted Lady	7 Apr	14 Mar	24
Red Admiral	5 Feb	1 Jan	35
Small Tortoiseshell	13 Feb	1 Jan	43
Brimstone	15 Feb	1 Jan	45
Grizzled Skipper	3 May	15 Mar	49

The range of data is quite staggering - from Speckled Wood seen 48 days earlier in 2023 vs 2022, to Grizzled Skipper, seen 49 days later in 2023 vs 2022. Overall, about 80% of the species in our Branch area were first seen later in 2023. Of these, the majority were delayed only by 1-2 weeks or so.

The other way to look at this data is from the perspective of which is the more 'normal' year. It is noticeable that there were many very early sightings in 2022, including 3 species on New Year's Day, all of which appear in the bottom four entries as 'losers' in 2023. The Grizzled Skipper also appeared about a month earlier in 2022 than it had the previous year.

So, if we take into account the many extremely early 2022 sightings, the impact of weather on emergence dates in 2023 probably averages out at only 1-2 weeks or so across species.

So what will 2024 bring? - anybody's guess, but it does give a challenge to those setting field trip dates in the hope of seeing peak numbers of specific target species!



**Copy Deadline for the Spring Newsletter will be
31 March 2024**

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

If there are specific topics you would like to see articles about, then please let me know.

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