

Hertfordshire & Middlesex 2006 – Andrew Middleton & Liz Goodyear

Despite the heat, 2006 was very successful although there were several days when the heat took away all the enthusiasm to search out new woods and survey for potential territories. The season started on the 25th June, when Joan Childs visiting the Paradise Wildlife Park on the south-eastern side of the Broxbourne Woods complex saw a male Purple Emperor enjoying the delights of *Capybura* 'poo.' The season started in earnest on the 29th June when Andrew had two males at the Northaw territory – our key site for first and last dates. The last reported sighting was at Northaw on the 1st August.

On the 3rd July, we walked the entire length of the Wormley Woods NNR ridge (2km!) with our heads fixed upwards and thanks to a helpful pigeon found the true territory, a minute gap between oaks. Wormley Woods is different as the high ridge runs through the wood rather than along the edge. The territory was on the edge of the high canopy where it meets the younger sallow rich plantations. We had three males clash here, which for Hertfordshire is very rare.

Ultimate highlight came quite late in the season on a day when the heat had subsided and we felt more inclined to do some walking! An area to the west of the Broxbourne complex was identified by us in 2005 as having potential and although a wood is named on maps much has been cleared for horse paddocks. All that remains is a wide 'green lane' lined with some willows and the occasional cluster of mature oaks. We thought the territory would be in the tall trees by the houses about 1km along the path. We were wrong but saw a female Purple Emperor flying around a willow here. We started to walk back quite pleased with this result but realised that whereas we thought we had walked up to the houses, the path actually was quite undulating. We stopped at every cluster of oak to look up and then suddenly a male fly beside a tall oak and we know we had cracked another territory!

All our sites have low population levels, and patience is a huge requirement, observing behaviour other than territorial is only occasional and this year few females were observed apart from those at Broxbourne egg-laying, taking moisture from the ground or feeding at a sap-run. Our key site for non-territorial behaviour is the Broxbourne Wood Nature Reserve, a site popular with photographers. Here the early bird definitely got the photograph this year with groundings being recorded as early 8.30am. However, after only a few days the groundings stopped and by the date of the first field trip on the 8th July most sightings were of females. Afternoons have in previous years been times when they have been seen patrolling the willows but unfortunately as the willows grow taller this is becoming increasingly harder to observe.

In March 2006, the revised Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan was launched with Purple Emperor having been added with its own Species Action Plan written by us. We can only hope that this will help ensure positive management in Hertfordshire woodlands – there are unfortunately several woods that need some serious work being done, if the butterfly is going to prosper there.