

## Purple Emperor *Apatura iris* update for Hertfordshire

Andrew Middleton and Liz Goodyear ~ January 2011

### 2009

The first branch area reports for Purple Emperor in 2009 came on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 2009 from Ruislip followed the next day at Broxbourne Woods - these dates are slightly later than the national records where the first known sighting had been on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June in Sussex.

The emergence also coincided with several weeks of wet weather, and although it was similarly wet in 2008, temperatures were higher in 2009, so the Purple Emperor was more active in moments of sunshine! Looking at the records, the best days were the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> July when there were several reports from Broxbourne Woods and many happy photographers. However, it was very good news that more reports were received from Balls Wood. Laurence Drummond undertook a lot of the survey work and was able confirm that the Purple Emperor was still present in some of the smaller woods where it was found four or five years ago by Andrew Middleton and Liz Goodyear, who were preoccupied in 2009 looking for White-letter Hairstreak!

There was one **field trip** at Broxbourne Wood Nature Reserve on the 9<sup>th</sup> July 2009.

“A larger crowd than of recent years joined this field trip and soon located a male purple emperor feeding down on the path for an hour or so. The butterfly was in pristine condition and allowed very close approach for all in the 20+ group who wished to take pictures, be it with mobile phone or more professional looking equipment. Eventually it flew to the tree tops then later made off north, whereupon everyone appeared to be satisfied, apart from a few late arrivals.” (Andrew Middleton)

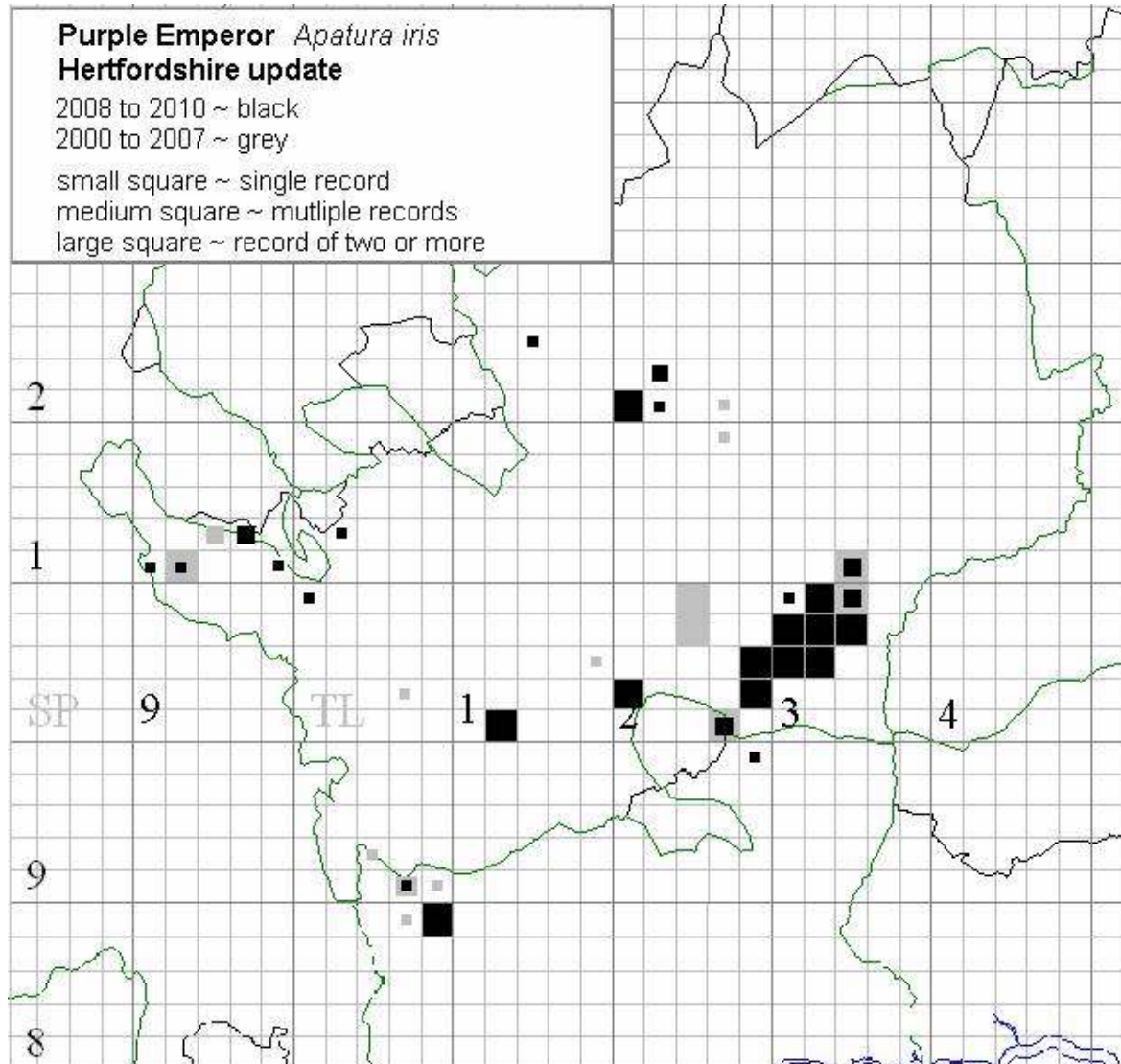
Only one new area was reported in 2009 when a male was seen near stables north of **Bayford** on the 2<sup>nd</sup> July.

The last local sighting of the year was on the 16<sup>th</sup> July, which is considerably earlier than most years. The species was probably still flying later in July, but recorders had stopped looking!

## 2010

Whilst 2009 was a quiet year in the study of the Purple Emperor in Hertfordshire, 2010 was much more exciting, with the species confirmed as resident in two important landscapes ~ one being Bricket Wood Common, linking across southern Hertfordshire ~ and the other holding the species' historic haunts in the north-west, generally between Welwyn, Hitchin and Luton.

The first known sighting came from Steve Pash at Ruislip Woods in Middlesex on 30<sup>th</sup> June (2) followed the next day by Clive Burrows' report from Bricket Wood in Hertfordshire. At a national level there is a report on the Hampshire & IOW Branch website from the 24<sup>th</sup> June, although the first reports from Surrey were not until the 26<sup>th</sup> June, which is a bit later than in recent years. The last known sighting was at Northaw Great Wood on the 5<sup>th</sup> August when one was seen by Andrew Middleton.



### Bricket Wood Common (TL131009)

Report from Clive Burrows ~ 1st July 2010

“Saw a male purple Emperor today at Bricket Wood around 4pm. It took off from ground as I approached around 20 feet away. Flew up into tree and away out of sight. Certain of identification being so close.” It was along the coppiced ride just to the north of where this crosses the main path (TL135018), resting on a bare patch of a damp area.

Liz Goodyear, Malcolm Hull and I visited on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2010, with the hope of finding a territorial area where the males might be seen. Whilst the whole site is fairly flat, Liz used a high definition map to identify some areas where the land was 1 or 2 metres higher. The day was a bit too cloudy for observations, but 2 or 3 spots were highlighted, including an area of tall, mature oaks, with sheltered gaps, at a higher spot within the wood, about 500 metres from Clive's observation.

Report from Colin Everett

"Following Clive Burrows' initial record of Purple Emperor at Bricket Wood ten days ago on 1/7/10, Malcolm Hull and I have intensified our efforts to locate this species' master tree in the surrounding woodland. After guidance from Liz Goodyear & Andrew Middleton, we concentrated our vigils in Mutchetts Wood (W of the railway line and SW of the Common, grid ref approx TL 126 010). This has resulted in sightings of Purple Emperors at that site on each of the afternoons of 9th, 10th and 11th July. All observations were made in and between the crowns of the tallest oaks, and have included two presumed males in a prolonged aerial chase at 1525 hours on the 10th. Note that Purple Hairstreaks and White Admirals are also present here, the latter generally at lower elevations but occasionally in high-ascending altercations."

Report from Malcolm Hull ~ 18<sup>th</sup> July 2010

"Two sightings of Purple Emperor today in Bricket Wood - both in the same spot about an hour apart, so could have been the same individual. Lots of Purple Hairstreak activity in the treetops through the cloudy hours around lunchtime & also good numbers of the same species active down near ground level."

There have been a very few sporadic records of *A.iris* in this landscape over the decades, and the species is well recorded in nearby 10km squares at North Mymms (to the east), Ruislip (south-west) and Ashridge/Tring Park (north-west). Congratulations to the above observers, and Malcolm has arranged for a conservation task (9<sup>th</sup> January 2011) to manage the ride-side willow regeneration here, for the long-term benefit of *A.iris*.

### North-west Hertfordshire

#### Holl Lays Wood ~ Knebworth area

Report from Julie Wise ~ 10<sup>th</sup> July 2010



"I found a male Purple Emperor in our bedroom this morning around 10.30, this is the first I have ever seen so very exciting. We are bordered by oak and hornbeam woodland and are fortunate to have a very large oak tree in the garden so I am hoping it came from there.....I am really pleased that there is still evidence of this beautiful butterfly in our area. I saw two others flying above our oak tree on Saturday after emailing you. There is some willow at the bottom of the field adjacent to us and I have been considering planting some at the edge of our meadow so this will make me go ahead this autumn."

Photo: ©Julie Wise

Liz and I visited on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2010, when it was mostly cloudy and damp. I visited on the 14<sup>th</sup> July 2010, and although a bit cloudy, I saw several flights by at least one male *A.iris*, if not two, starting with some low flights from 12.45. Liz and daughter Katherine visited from 12.00 on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2010 and saw two males in flight, despite it being windy and at times cloudy. Katherine may have seen a clash, with the combatants chasing down rather than up, in the strong wind. Julie's garden abuts the top corner of the wood, where the males hold territory around the mature oaks by the public footpath. The wood appears to have a good number of willows, and no doubt Julie will be planting more willows on her land and following up conservation efforts with local landowners.

### Old Knebworth (TL232206)

Report from Helen O'Callaghan ~ July 2010

"Hi. I was talking to a member of the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust today in St Albans and mentioned that in July, whilst on a walk with my daughters, we picked up a dead butterfly which we found on the grass at the side of the road near Knebworth House and brought it home. We managed to identify it as a Purple Emperor and I understand that they are quite rare. Unfortunately I don't have it anymore but the man I spoke to suggested that I report it to you."

### In the vicinity of Watery Grove, Knebworth (TL230230) ~ private wood with adjacent bridleway

Report from Steve Lane ~ July 2010

"I have a friend, Tony Hukin, who has seen Purple Emperor and Silver-washed Fritillary in the vicinity of Watery Grove this year, but as yet has not reported them. He has not got a computer, so does not email. I've also been told that a Clive Brackenbury has seen them as well, but I don't know him. Tony has a photo of the Purple Emperor."

**Westbury Wood, Great Offley (TL143259) ~ private wood with adjacent public footpath**

Report by Andrew Middleton ~ 16<sup>th</sup> July 2010

“After the excitement of the sightings in the Knebworth area, I decided to survey a number of woods through the Hitch Wood landscape, scene of several reports from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a single report from 1940s and then more activity in the 1980s but none confirmed since. I prepared several maps showing prospective high spots at woodland edges, but on the day a strong south-westerly prevailed, blowing directly into most of these areas. From my maps, only Westbury Wood had a moderate high-spot on its sheltered north-east side, adjacent to public access, so I thought I would take a look. After a fair walk, I reached the area around 3.00pm, and found quite a nice tall oak and an ash, at the slightly higher spot. It was brighter now, so I raised my binoculars to scan along the woodland edge at about 100m distance, and soon saw a high flight beside the canopy of the tallest oak, of what appeared to be *A.iris*, although I found it hard to believe. I moved closer and saw another flight by the crown of the adjacent ash. Although it turned cloudy, I subsequently found the male perched on the oak canopy just inside the wood (see image below).”



Photo: ©Andrew Middleton

Records at these four widely spaced locations confirm *A.iris* as present in the wider landscape between Luton, Hitchin and Welwyn, where there have been occasional recent documented (and rumoured) sightings. Our interpretation remains that *A.iris* should be regarded (and managed for) as a landscape species in this area, capable of colonising any suitably wooded and sallow-rich neighbourhood.

**Tring Park - woodland area (SP933105)**

Report from Phil Woodward ~ 10<sup>th</sup> July 2010

“Went for a walk in Tring Park this morning and was thrilled to see a Purple Emperor swoop down briefly under the Lime trees in the wooded area at the top of the escarpment (about 10.30am). It then flew into some brambles before taking off again very quickly. However, I was able to see it long enough to identify this wonderful butterfly and decided to stick around in the same area to see if it would fly around again, which it did 15 minutes later, but flew up into the ash trees again very quickly. This is the first time I have seen one here since 2006. I also saw 3 Silver- Washed fritillaries in different parts of the wooded area to complete an excellent morning.”

A welcome record from Tring, with fewer sightings in recent years.

**National Trust Ashridge Estate, Berkhamsted (SP 970130) ~ Gateway from Meadley's Meadow**

Report from Brian & Siân Barton ~ 15<sup>th</sup> July 2010

“13.45hrs ~ sunny, warm and breezy ~ One male, initially resting on ground, then it flew up, circled round my vehicle and headed for the tops of the trees. The sighting was at a point which is about 200 metres on the Herts side of the Bucks/Herts border.”

A welcome continuation of records from the Ashridge Estate area.

**Fir & Pond Wood (TL277006)**

4<sup>th</sup> July 2010 ~ 1 male over the Pond Wood high spot around 1pm (Andrew Middleton)

Report from David Gompertz ~ 9<sup>th</sup> July 2010

“1.20 PM Fir & Pond Woods NR. .. Purple Emperor flying in high oaks at top (north) of Pond Wood (at last I've found one myself!)”

**Hatfield House and Park (TL2408)**

Report by Andrew Middleton ~ 8<sup>th</sup> July 2010

“None seen where several would have been expected at a number of locations a few years ago. This outcome is of no surprise as the majority of the sallows, allowed by the previous manager to prosper along various woodland edges, have since been felled, despite all relevant information being lodged with the Hatfield Estate management.”

## **Balls Wood (Hertford Heath), Broxbourne Woods complex including Bourne Wood and Broxbourne Common, Northaw Great Wood and the North Mymms area**

Reports were received from all these areas in 2010 although no reports came from Ermine Street, Danemead or Blackfan Wood.

### **Field Trips**

There was one **branch field trip to Broxbourne Wood NR on the 10<sup>th</sup> July 2010.**

“Several people joined us this morning although there were concerns that the Emperor would not appear as this had been the case the previous day. However, around 10.30 a male flew around and eventually started to enjoy the delights of some dog’s muck. It didn’t stay long, but one returned later and found some hidden dog’s muck in the bracken. Then one then moved to the trunk of a dying oak tree, but didn’t appear to be sap run feeding. All individuals flew off, so may have been the same butterfly. However, suddenly a male flew out of a willow and down the ride and away. Then another Emperor flew along the ride and appeared to be more interested in the willows. We didn’t get a good sight of it, but we thought this was a female. Perhaps say 3 individuals in total. Later we were informed one had been seen on the path leading from the west carpark around the edge of reserve. In the afternoon a few of us then went to look for territorial behaviour, ending up at the Northaw territory where at least two emperors were observed. Many flights around the canopy but only a few clashes even though we could see two emperors” (Liz Goodyear and Andrew Middleton)

### **Middlesex**

**Park Wood, Ruislip Woods (TQ094896)** ~ good numbers seen again, including 2 seen by Steve Pash on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2010 ~ the first of the season’s sightings.

**Ferny Hill Farm, Enfield Chase (TQ286982)** ~ a female seen in flight by Robert Callf and Bob Husband on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2010.

### **Cambridgeshire**

**Bedford Purlieus (TL040996)**

Report on the Cambs & Essex Branch website:

9<sup>th</sup> July 2010 ~ A **Purple Emperor** on southern ride while watching White-letter Hairstreak on thistles. Plus White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary ~ Roger Orbell.

*Paul Fisher later reports:* “Just like to confirm the P. Emperor sighting at Bedford Purlieus on the 9th. The guy who was there before me had taken pictures of what he thought was a White Admiral with purple bits, I asked to have a look saying it sounded like a P.E. Within 2 mins of confirming it as a P.E., one landed right in front of us on the track.”

### **Conservation**

**Broxbourne Wood Nature Reserve** ~ management was undertaken during the winter of 2009-10, which involved widening the main ride and opening up a glade alongside the brook. Full attention was paid to managing willows, through retention of selected trees, reduction of canopy competition, and pollarding for regeneration. This will provide a wider age diversity and a strong willow population for future decades. Volunteer conservation work will be ongoing, as in previous winters.

In addition to this, and a willow-orientated conservation task at Bricket Wood Common, Laurence Drummond has made great strides with the Woodland Trust concerning the **Wormley Wood** complex in particular, where he has put in a great deal of effort searching for *A.iris* and assessing habitat. As a result of this work with the Woodland Trust, a conservation task is planned for 16<sup>th</sup> February 2011. The abundant willows in the southern part of this wood are over-mature and are showing predictable signs of decline as the wood matures. However, some new rides have been cut through the area in recent years in addition to existing rides, and the plan is to further manage this ride system to open them up and improve public access. As a result of this, rideside willows will be treated favourably (resources and task manpower allowing) and further open areas will be created. Laurence also put in great work searching for *A.iris* throughout the wider Broxbourne Woods complex.

At **Balls Wood** the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) planted over 100 willows in areas where they were absent or scarce. The planting programme which also included hazel for dormice was supported by several local environmental groups and was to offset carbon generated by an event held in Hertford earlier in the year. At **Danemead** the HMWT also thinned around some of the willows which were pollarded in 2005 to help encourage growth and enable more light to get into the compartment.

Of significance the **Forestry Commission (FC)** has been in discussion with Catherine Wyatt, the Hertfordshire Biodiversity Officer, with regard to incorporating rideside willow management in woods where the species is present within the Woodland Grant Schemes. We are currently discussing the potential to increase this to the wider landscape. All Hertfordshire & Middlesex Butterfly Conservation data is now held by the Herts Biological Records Centre and can be made available to the FC to help them give advice on woodland management within the Grant Schemes. We also hope that landowners will in future be informed that the species is present on their land through the County Wildlife Sites Partnership.