



2008 Blog

2 November 2008 - Climate Change & Our Woodland Butterflies

I am following up my posting last week on the 2008 butterfly season, with a posting from a slightly different but very relevant perspective - one with potentially far reaching consequences for the composition of our woodlands and their wildlife, including woodland butterflies.

Basically Britain's trees are succumbing to climate change - our changing seasons with mild winters, periods of drought, followed by torrential rain, and the ravages of pests mean trees that have been around for decades are now under increasing stress.

Native woods of Oak, Beech, Ash and Scots Pine from Cornwall to Scotland are most at risk from climate change. Beech trees in southern England are already experiencing limited dieback during recent droughts and such problems are likely to occur more often in future. You may have noticed that the familiar conkers produced by Horse Chestnut have been unusually small this year - thanks to - well actually the effects of the larvae of a leaf mining moth which is now thriving in our milder climate. Three new exotic pests have also recently been found in southern Britain.

In the next decades there could be fundamental and irreversible changes in the composition of our woodlands, and if trees are changing than so too will the characteristics of the woodland floor especially important for some of our key species, including several woodland dwelling fritillaries. The longer growing season, facilitating larger leaf growth, could further restrict the amount of light and heat reaching the woodland floor affecting the decomposition of leaf litter and the profusion of flowers such as violet, primrose, cow parsley and garlic mustard, as well as wild honeysuckle - all important butterfly larval foodplants.



Climate Change Could Have Profound Consequences For Several Of Our Woodland Butterflies, Such as Pearl-bordered Fritillary And White Admiral

So if some of our native trees are struggling, others which presently do not thrive here at present but are quite common in Southern France for instance, could become a familiar sight in 50 -100 years: walnut, sweet chestnut, kiwi fruits, date palm and vines for instance. Indeed, a time traveller retuning to Southern England might be excused for thinking they had arrived in Biarritz rather than Blyth!

Plenty of food for thought here I think - and I don't mean walnuts and kiwi fruits - but the future for our woodland butterflies.

24 October 2008 - A Few Thoughts On The 2008 Season

I don't think I would be in the minority to say that 2008 has proved overall a disappointing season for our native butterflies. After the dreadful summer of 2007, a good summer this year was really needed to provide a springboard for the recovery of our butterfly populations - but sadly it was not to be, with sunshine once again in short supply and rain plentiful.

Whilst a few of our most common and resilient species, such as Meadow Brown and Large White, are reasonably well adapted to the vagaries of our climate, several of our specialist species have continued to struggle, with the survival of some marginal colonies now hanging by a thread. The high rainfall has meant that numbers of some chalk downland species which require short sward (such as Adonis Blue and Silver-spotted Skipper) have plummeted, with their Hampshire habitats becoming less well suited as a result of vigorous grass growth during the normally drier summer months. Difficult migration conditions have also seen a major downturn in migrant numbers such as Painted Lady and Clouded Yellow. Whilst these examples might represent extremes, it is fair to say that most of our butterfly species have had a poor season with numbers well down on normal.

Surely there must be a glimmer of good news somewhere? Well, a drier interlude during early September resulted in a late influx of Small Tortoiseshells from the continent leading to an increase in the number of reported sightings from our region compared to last year. It is hoped that many of these individuals have now found sheltered hibernation locations to survive the winter, thus sowing the seeds for a revival in the fortunes of this once familiar species. Much earlier in the season, one or two spring species had tolerably decent flight periods, including Duke of Burgundy and Pearl-bordered Fritillary. If you recall these species were not really affected by the poor summer of 2007, having largely completed their flight periods before the weather turned sour. Yet oddly, other spring species fared poorly this year including the Orange Tip, which had an unusually short flight season. On a more personal note, whilst I was not aware that Purple Emperor and Brown Hairstreak had particularly good seasons, I did manage reasonable success with close encounters of both these elusive species. It just goes to show that even in a generally poor season, persistence, patience and a slice of good luck can still produce a few memorable moments on which to reflect for years to come.



The Wet Summer Has Degraded The Quality Of Hampshire's Adonis Blue Sites, However The Little Duke Of Burgundy Fared Better As An Early Spring Species

I shall be following up this blog within the next couple of weeks with a short article on the effects of climate change from a slightly different perspective.

3 October 2008 - Third Brood Wall Brown Very Scarce But Also Some Good News

It has been my intention that the destination for my final butterfly outing of 2008 would be the Lymington-Keyhaven nature reserve in SW Hampshire, in the hope of seeing third brood Wall Brown. Having made the choice that sunshine, albeit with a cold northerly wind, was better than the very unsettled but slightly warmer weather forecast for the weekend, I visited the reserve this afternoon. Sadly no Wall Browns today and indeed third brood 'Walls' seem very scarce so far in S England.

However, there has been some recent good news about this species, in that it survives, but only just, in SE Hampshire. A third brood male Wall Brown was seen on 29 September at Fort Gilkicker near Gosport - the first

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

sighting there for 2 years! Nevertheless, it is not uncharacteristic for this species to reappear at a location, albeit in very small numbers, after years of apparent absence. I say apparent, because we don't really know if this is because adults were actually present during those years but simply not recorded, or if the immature stages have the ability to override their normal body clock and remain dormant for long periods (even years). It is known that some alpine butterfly species, for instance, have a life cycle of two years, from eggs through to adult emergence.

So, as the curtain comes down on another butterfly season (and overall one has to say a rather poor one at that), the number of postings here will reduce as butterfly outings are put on hold until next Spring - apart from maybe the odd local walk. Over the next month or so I will be setting down a few of my thoughts on the season as well as adding an end of season gallery containing a few photos which didn't make it first time round - and I'll be doing a bit of housekeeping on the site. As usual updates will be notified on the "What's New" page

27 September 2008 - Influx Of Small Tortoiseshells?

Walks for me at present are constrained to being short and slow due to an ankle sprain, so my (probable) last butterfly outing of the season will have to wait a week or two. So I took the opportunity to browse a few butterfly websites instead. A couple of articles on the Butterfly Conservation website took my eye in particular, the first relating to a possible resurgence of Small Tortoiseshells, probably due to an influx from the continent along the east coast during early September, from whence they have spread to other central and southern parts. The increase in numbers may still be local and sporadic, since Hampshire does not seem to have prospered hugely, but numbers are up on last season and in some neighbouring counties there are even some reports of sightings in double figures! This species badly needs and deserves a boost, having suffered terribly in southern England over recent years, probably due to parasites. The key question will be if this influx from the continent can successfully hibernate and awaken next spring to mate and breed.

The second 'article' I have to admit to having seen before - well not actually an article but a short film called 'Saving Dartmoor's Crown Jewels'. It tells the story of the High Brown Fritillary on Dartmoor and the efforts being made to save it. The film, in the form of a mini-documentary, has been excellently crafted and, for those who have not yet seen it, is well worth watching.

21 September 2008 - Summer Ends In Glorious Sunshine With Butterflies Making The Most Of It

It's the autumn equinox tomorrow which means today is officially the last day of summer. It seems like we have had to wait until the last few days of summer for a decent fine spell, having previously been rationed to the odd reasonable day here and there. The butterflies were certainly making the most of the belated good weather, and judging by my short walk on Portsdown Hill this afternoon, Large Whites are thriving, easily outnumbering other species. Along with at least 20 Large Whites, several Commas, Red Admirals, Brimstones and Small Whites were enjoying the sunshine and intent on feeding on whatever nectar sources they could find, including the now brownish pink heads of hemp agrimony. In less good condition (well let's be honest and say rather faded!) were a few Meadow Browns, a couple of Common Blues and a single Brown Argus. Species notable by their absence were Clouded Yellow, Painted Lady and Small Tortoiseshell, although I notice from other websites that the Small Tortoiseshell is faring a little better this year with some reports of multiple sightings! Although not seen on Portsdown today, I also saw several third brood Small Coppers during a brief stop at Pennington (near Lymington) on Friday.



4 photos of Comma, Brimstone, Brown Argus and Small Copper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

12 September 2008 - Season Fading But Brown Hairstreak Can Still Be Found!

The thundery showers were already starting to roll in at Noar Hill when I arrived there mid-afternoon, which made for a disappointing set of sightings, amounting to a dozen fresh Speckled Woods, 1 Peacock, 5 Meadow Browns, 3 female Common Blues, 1 Brown Argus and 2 Large Whites. Overall the reserve has that end of season feel, with the vibrant colours of summer giving way to the more subdued colours of autumn - flower heads fading, leaves turning brown and berries ripening. However, I was cheered on learning of 4 Brown Hairstreak sightings from another observer who had been there since late morning when the weather was better. The location was an ash tree on the rim of the large chalk pit just north from the visitor board - so clearly a place to bear in mind for next season. A few weeks ago this area was fenced off for grazing, whereas now the fenced area is along the east side of the reserve, including 'the triangle'. All the hairstreaks were rather faded, making sexing difficult, but at least it shows they are surviving the continuing unsettled weather conditions.

30 August 2008 - Return Visit To Shipton Bellinger Provides Defining Moment...Read On!

I had not been planning to return to Shipton Bellinger again this season, however today was one of very few really good weather days we have enjoyed this month in Hampshire and I succumbed to the chance of seeing Brown Hairstreak again. I am really pleased I did since the visit provided one of the defining moments of what has been a rather disappointing butterfly season overall.

So how about this for a defining moment - not only did I witness at close quarters a female Brown Hairstreak ovipositing on blackthorn, but I managed to capture the event on a camcorder! I first spotted her flitting around bramble foliage towards the top of the subsidiary track running west from the village (just before it rejoins the main track). Since she was in less than pristine condition and seemed quite active for good still photos, I decided to go for some camcorder footage instead. No sooner had I recorded the first sequence of her sitting with open wings on a bramble leaf, when she flitted down to start crawling the young blackthorn close to the track, clearly searching for egg-laying opportunities. I kept the camcorder rolling and to my delight on viewing the footage later, the laying of at least one egg is clearly visible with one more probable and possibly others whilst obscured by foliage.

After two or three minutes in her presence, she flew over the hedge and up into the trees along the main track, eventually settling high in a sycamore tree - the same one in which I saw a male last week. Further searching of the tracks and scrub area at the end of the main track produced no further hairstreak sightings however 1 Chalkhill Blue and 1 Brown Argus were seen in the scrub as well as common species. Taken together with my sighting of an Adonis Blue yesterday, these sightings support that view that chalk downland species are in the vicinity bearing in mind the proximity of Salisbury Plain.

Update - 5 September 2008: I have now created a short video of the Brown Hairstreak which can be accessed via the Video Archive page. Having carefully viewed the original footage at leisure, I can no longer be sure an egg or eggs are laid due to the presence of debris caught on a spider's web. Nevertheless, clear egg laying behaviour can be seen at 47 secs and also 50 secs into the video as the abdomen is lowered briefly into contact with the blackthorn stem. So, I still feel privileged to have witnessed this behaviour at close quarters.

29 August 2008 - Shipton Bellinger Delivers Brown Enigma...And Another Surprise!

I made a return visit to Shipton Bellinger this afternoon - and under completely overcast conditions I expected it to be little more than a reconnaissance opportunity at one of Hampshire's two Brown Hairstreak sites. However in the warm, calm, cloudy conditions I was encouraged to see common butterflies (Meadow Browns, Speckled Woods, Whites and Brimstones) quite active and numerous as I progressed along the main track heading west from the village. I was even more encouraged to see male Brown Hairstreak activity high in the ash trees (2 seen) giving me hope that this could be more than just a site examination.

Indeed it proved, as I explored the blackthorn hedge and scrub beyond the end of the main track, a female Brown Hairstreak was spotted crawling a blackthorn bush. She soon made a short flight to rest with open wings on

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

bramble foliage, before taking off again - this time in my direction, narrowly missing me! As I spun round to follow - yes - the enigma had vanished into thin air! I suspect she was still in the area but a thorough search failed to re-locate her.

On this occasion I did notice the solitary ash tree at the end of the main track, just a few yards from the sighting location, confirming that this area as well as the main and subsidiary parallel tracks west from the village with thick hedgerow between, all provide suitable Brown Hairstreak habitat. These locations provide abundant blackthorn hedgerow or scrub, a decent nectar supply (mainly brambles) and of course a few favoured ash trees.



As if that was not enough for a good afternoon's work, a return down the aforementioned subsidiary track back to the village produced a major surprise. I had noticed several Common Blues in the blackthorn scrub at the end of the main track, so when another blue butterfly was seen along here, first instinct was a Common Blue. However its bright colouring told another story and indeed a closer look confirmed it was an Adonis Blue. As a downland species, it would be interesting to know if there is a colony of Adonis Blue in the area (bearing in mind the proximity to Salisbury Plain) from which this one may have strayed.

So, a much better outcome than I had expected, and who cares about reconnaissance anyway when the real McCoy is on offer! 4 photos of Adonis Blue and Brown Hairstreak posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

24 August 2008 - Electric Blue & Silver Add A Little Sparkle To Fading Season.

Each time I visit Hampshire butterfly sites at this time of year in late August, the reality that it may be for the last time this season begins to dawn. I am not about to confirm that will be the case for Old Winchester Hill, which I visited yesterday afternoon, however the impression that many of the species on the wing are now looking decidedly tired (particularly the Browns and Chalkhill Blues) with numbers beginning to dwindle creates that end of season feeling.



It's not the case with all species however - Silver-spotted Skipper numbers at the bottom of the car-park slope have significantly increased since my last visit - around 15 seen today including some fresh ones and there were a few glimpses of electric blue from a doubling of Adonis Blue numbers - well it sounds impressive anyway even though it was actually an increase from just one individual last visit to two yesterday! I was also pleased to see

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

that Small Heaths were bucking the trend of the other grassland Browns with several fresh ones also seen yesterday.

4 photos (Adonis Blue (2), Silver-spotted Skipper and Small Heath) posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

(PS for those who haven't noticed from other butterfly websites, "The One Show" (BBC1) is running a mini-series this week (4-5 minutes) on several of our butterfly species, starting on Bank Holiday Monday with the Large Blue and finishing on Friday with "The Emperors Breakfast". The programme starts at 7.30pm on Monday, 7pm other evenings and should be good viewing!)

22 August 2008 - Brown Hairstreak Keeping Their Distance At Shipton Bellinger.

Having had limited success with Brown Hairstreak at Noar Hill this year (and I'm not the only one!) I ventured further afield to Shipton Bellinger this afternoon, and the only other known colony of this elusive species in the county. The location is just to the west of the village, comprising unintensively grazed arable land with scrub and wooded areas, criss-crossed by tracks with thick hedgerows.

I concentrated on the lane going due west from the village, focussing particularly on the few ash trees dotted along its length connected by thick hedgerow with plentiful blackthorn. A total of 7 Brown Hairstreaks were seen, mainly sitting on leaves but occasionally flitting amongst the boughs well above head height (and mostly above 20ft). Most were faded males but one seemed brighter and could have been a female or a fresher male. In one of the ash trees there were at least 3 Brown Hairstreaks with two seen in flight simultaneously - the first time I have seen this. Furthermore one of the 7 was not in an ash tree but was seen briefly flitting close to the top of a mature sycamore tree also located along this lane, and in fact one of the tallest trees along there. Sadly none came close enough for decent photos but I did get a few long range shots for the record - a faded male that perched around 20ft up, providing both closed and open wing views.

The thick hedgerows and scrub areas with plentiful blackthorn at Shipton Bellinger provide the basis of an excellent Brown Hairstreak site and it is probably the scarcity of ash trees on which Brown Hairstreak spend much of their time - feeding on sap and aphid honeydew, which prevents the site reaching its full potential. There is an area of excellent blackthorn scrub at the end of the lane (where there were good numbers of common blue), but sadly not an ash tree in sight!

2 photos posted to recent photos gallery (but don't get too excited about the quality!)

15 August 2008 - Silver Spotted Skipper & Adonis Flying At OWH But Disappointing Butterfly Numbers Overall.

It seems at present we are rationed by the British Summer to about one day of reasonable weather per week. So it's perhaps not surprising that butterfly numbers this summer are disappointingly low - and that coming after an even worse summer last year. I visited both Noar Hill and Old Winchester Hill this afternoon, on the one good weather day this week! Numbers of butterflies on the wing at both sites was disappointingly low and very uncharacteristic for a fine mid-August afternoon.

Looking on the bright side, I did see several Silver-spotted Skippers at Old Winchester Hill (compared to dozens I would have expected) and also a single male Adonis Blue (with a wonky wing). Both these species are at the northern limit of their range in Southern England and need flower rich chalk downland with short, well grazed sward to thrive - this summer the grass has been growing more vigorously than normal, fuelled by the rain, hence creating less suitable, cooler conditions. The longer sward is not a problem for the Chalkhill Blues and Meadow Browns at Old Winchester Hill but even their numbers were well below normal levels.

I am also quite concerned about the status of Brown Hairstreak at Noar Hill - I saw none during my early afternoon visit today and management work in the triangle certainly does not seem to be aimed towards this species - much of the young blackthorn in the triangle has been cut down during the winter and the very young re-growth since then seems now to have been sprayed with herbicide!

3 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

10 August 2008 - Brown Hairstreak Hard To Find - Especially Females!

I made a return visit to Noar Hill early this afternoon in conditions well short of ideal - mainly cloudy with the odd light shower and a blustery wind. Despite finding a male Brown Hairstreak nectaring on agrimony in the far chalk pit, it was clear from speaking to other observers that sightings this season are proving quite difficult. Perhaps the butterflies are spending almost all their time out of view in the tree tops, due to the prolonged spell of unsettled weather. The male seen today however, certainly seemed to be bucking this trend and spent about two hours in the same vicinity until mid-afternoon, nectaring on agrimony or perched above head height in a nearby hazel tree, sometimes with part open wings. It was even unperturbed by a light shower, choosing to continue to feed throughout.

Having first gathered a few photos, I spent most of my time searching other parts of the reserve with no further hairstreak successes, returning occasionally to the far chalk pit for an update on our male from other observers. Perhaps even more surprising, is that I am not aware (from the branch website or speaking to other people today) of any female Brown Hairstreaks being seen so far this season at Noar Hill. Let's hope that changes soon!

2 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery, including one of the hairstreak perched in the hazel tree.

7 August 2008 - Scotch Argus In The Scottish Borders.

I took the opportunity of a family visit to the North Of England to enhance the variety of my butterfly year by making an excursion to see Scotch Argus in the country after which it is named - Scotland. I didn't need to go very far over the border as there are several colonies around Selkirk in the Scottish Borders. My research paid off and my visit to the Lindean Reservoir, 2 miles east of Selkirk was successful. A circuit of this small lake (naturally referred to as a "loch" by the locals) produced about 30 Scotch Argus in the damp meadows around its edge. Males strongly outnumbered females, some showing wear but some quite fresh. By the time I got round to attempting photos, the sun had decided to hide behind some thick cloud which wasn't ideal, except that it did subdue the activity of these sun loving butterflies, which were then happy to settle in the long grass. This gave me good opportunity to reflect on their attractive colouration, the deep reddish brown markings of the males in particular being a perfect complement to the very dark brown base colour. I was informed by a local that had I been there earlier in the morning, I would have seen a pair of otters by the side of the loch! 3 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



2 August 2008 - All Hampshire's Species Now Emerged But Still Plenty Of Interest During August

August tends to be regarded as the last of the main months of the butterfly season and whilst all resident Hampshire species have already emerged (with Brown Hairstreak and Silver-spotted Skipper bringing up the rear) there is still plenty of interest during this month and, perhaps a few surprises as well. The two species just mentioned are in the early days of their flight season and there should be second brood Adonis Blue (already seen at sites in Dorset and Sussex) appearing in the next week or two and perhaps a few 2nd brood Dingy Skippers. The summer broods of some of the commoner species should continue to build including Common Blue, Holly Blue, Small Copper, Brimstone, Peacock and Red Admiral and there is still opportunity to see some less common species such as Wall, Grayling and Brown Argus.

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

So far it has been a poor year generally for Nymphalids. Indeed it has been a very poor year for Painted Lady and, dare I say, a disastrous one for Small Tortoiseshell. Clouded Yellow sightings too have also been scarce up to now but hopefully will start to increase as mid-summer turns to late summer. So it's worth looking out for all of these species during August. As for surprises - well who knows - but remember last year a couple of Dukes (Of Burgundy) made an early August appearance at Noar Hill and sporadic sightings of Large Tortoiseshells along the south coast are not so rare these days, perhaps as a consequence of global warming.

As for me - well I am taking a few days break from butterfly outings but hope to be back in action again before the week is out. In the meantime I have posted a couple of additional photos taken during July with very much a purple theme - a further photo of the male Purple Emperor at Bentley Wood enjoying his meal and a chance meeting with a rather tired Purple Hairstreak sat on a leaf at Noar Hill.

30 July 2008 - Small Brown Butterfly Stands Out From The Crowd!

I made a lunchtime visit to Noar Hill today. There were plenty of butterflies about making full use of the abundant nectar supply at this time of year - the larger ones including Peacocks, Red Admirals, Silver-washed Fritillaries, Commas, Brimstones and Meadow Browns. On the bank at the far end of the reserve, I noticed one small brown butterfly which stood out from the crowd of larger butterflies feeding there - it was a **Brown Hairstreak** feeding on hemp agrimony high up on the bank! Scrambling up the bank by the rudimentary steps, I managed to get within a few feet of it, taking a couple of long range snaps on the way, but as I was arriving "on station" it took off over a nearby ash tree. It was a fresh male, feeding itself up before the females start to emerge, hopefully within the next few days. Ah well, just means I'll have to make a return visit!

There has been much management work going on at Noar Hill over the past months, clearing scrub and introducing a new grazing scheme. Work was even going on today and one area is still out of bounds, being grazed by cattle. The "triangle" which is usually a good place to observe Brown Hairstreak has been largely cleared of maturing blackthorn (so no doubt some Brown Hairstreak eggs lost) and it will be interesting to see what the impacts are both this year and in the future. Brown Hairstreak are never the easiest of species to observe, especially low down, and I think even more patience than usual will be required this year! 2 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



25 July 2008 - Summer Finally Arrives With 14 Species Recorded At Beacon Hill

A late afternoon visit to Beacon Hill (Warnford) in warm sunny spells, produced 14 species of butterfly, both along the path from the car park and on the steep chalk downland escarpment, the sheltered, nectar rich area at the bottom of the slope being particularly productive. I have to say that despite the good variety of species on show, butterfly numbers seem subdued compared to a few years ago (except for Meadow Brown!) but at last summer seems finally to have arrived in Hampshire with a prolonged generally fine spell of weather. The 14 species seen were as follows: Red Admiral, Comma, Peacock, Chalkhill Blue, Common Blue, Small Copper, Brown Argus, Small White, Green-veined White, Brimstone, Small Skipper, Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper, Small Heath.

4 photos (Peacock, Red Admiral, Brown Argus and Small Skipper) posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



23 July 2008 - Take Advantage Of Balmy Summer Evenings For A Butterfly Stroll!

Well, at last a prolonged spell of summery weather has arrived (about time too!) so why not take a stroll to see what butterflies are still on the wing in the early evening - even up to around 8pm? Mature woodlands with plenty of nectar sources along the rides and flower rich chalk downland are good places to see the species reluctant to 'have an early night'. Many butterflies are of course beginning to settle down to roost or bask motionless with open wings, gathering the weakening sun's rays, but on warm evenings they can also be partial to some gentle flying practice. The Nymphalids (Red Admiral, Peacock, Comma and if you're are lucky Painted Lady and Small Tortoiseshell) are still quite active on sun-bathed balmy evenings, but the Browns and Skippers also need very little persuasion to take flight - and let's not forget the Purple Hairstreak - they are probably most often observed flitting high in the oaks during late afternoon/early evening.

As for me, I did manage a late afternoon stroll yesterday on a different area of Portsdown Hill amongst the flower rich area below Fort Southwick. I connected with Brown Argus (2 fresh ones), Common Blue (1) and Small Blue (2) as well as several immaculate Peacocks. Brown Argus are generally scarce on Portsdown and I don't manage to see them there every year, so this was particularly pleasing.

Photos Of Brown Argus (as below) and Common Blue (underside) posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



16 July 2008 - The Browns Rule At Noar Hill - But Still Room For Essex Skipper!

A short visit to Noar Hill during late afternoon in mainly overcast conditions showed why members of "The Browns" have been so successful in UK - they are still able to utilise the indifferent weather of our British Summer, flying, feeding and courting in dull and even drizzly conditions. Marbled White, Ringlet, Meadow Brown were all present by the dozen and Gatekeeper numbers are building. By contrast, not a single Vanessa was seen, nor any true whites and very few skippers. I say very few skippers - but I decided to grab a photo of one which landed closeby and was pleased to find when I examined the shot later, that it was actually an Essex Skipper. Note the dark antenna tips and the male scent mark which is parallel to the front edge of the forewing (whereas on the small skipper it is slightly slanted towards the body).



Finally, having raised already the topic of the weather (and not for the first time recently), it seems that decent summer weather is once again being heavily rationed - and whilst we cannot complain too much compared to last year's incessant rain, another poor summer is likely to further weaken many of our butterfly populations. Let's hope things improve soon!

3 Photos of Gatekeeper, Marbled White and Essex Skipper posted to Recent Photos Gallery

16 July 2008 - Summer Brood Small Blues On The Wing - A Mating Pair Too!

A trio of brief visits to Portsdown Hill was completed today, and perhaps the best waited till last with the "discovery" of summer brood Small Blue on the wing in the scrub at the foot of the Paulsgrove quarry face. 6 Small Blue were seen (surprisingly some already showing wear) including a mating pair. The happy couple were only spotted after a single male landed just a few inches away from them! Soon afterwards however, they took off in tandem to fly a few yards, dropping less than gracefully into the grass and proceeding to then clamber up a grass stem.

It's clear that one of my tasks during the closed season will be to review the butterfly flight period chart since second brood Small Blue would normally be expected to peak in early August! 2 photos of mating pair posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



15 July 2008 - Quick Visit To Portsdown Shows Summer Butterfly Numbers Building

I made a brief return visit to the central section of Portsdown Hill yesterday and was pleasantly surprised by the number of butterflies on the wing there, despite quite blustery conditions. Chalkhill Blue numbers were well up on my visit last week (around 30 seen), with clusters of them being found in the more flower rich and sheltered areas. On two or three occasions several would fly up in a sort of mini-cloud as one walked. Marbled White, Large White, Small White, Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper, Red Admiral and Small Skipper completed the lunchtime compliment. 2 photos of male Chalkhill Blue posted to recent photos gallery.

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

11 July 2008 - White-Letters, Dark Greens, Grayling & Chalkhills Seen Today, Despite Poor Weather

I managed to record a very good spectrum of species this afternoon during short visits to Stockbridge Down and Browndown South, including several of our less common species, despite typically 90% cloud cover and some rain showers. In a way, it was refreshing to see how butterflies cope in less than ideal weather, still managing to make the best of brief sunny intervals and dry periods between showers.

First stop was the eastern end of Stockbridge Down. Amongst the flowery scrub, Marbled Whites were very conspicuous, but also seen were several fresh Commas, Meadow Browns, Ringlets, Green-veined Whites and Small Whites. There was also a male Chalkhill Blue in this area (perhaps a stray from the colony on the main area of downland) and I even disturbed a somewhat faded Dark Green Fritillary from its resting place. The main objective of this stop was however, the colony of White-letter Hairstreak. I waited patiently beneath the elms under overcast skies, initially with no evidence of tree-top activity. Then, when the sun eventually emerged and the breeze dropped, several White-letter Hairstreaks were seen high up, making short, jerking flights, within their favoured elm or in one case between trees, but never landing in view.

The next and final stop was Browndown South near Lee-on-the-Solent. I would have expected Grayling to be on the wing there by now and had already been tipped off that the first one was seen in early July. Sure enough, soon after reaching the area in front of the firing range wall, I disturbed my first Grayling of the season followed by a further 7. A Small Heath and a Small Copper seen in the same area brought the number of species seen during two short stops in poor conditions for mid-July, to a respectable dozen. 2 Grayling photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



10 July 2008 - Chalkhills & Gatekeepers Emerging On Portsdown

I took a lunchtime walk on the central section of Portsdown Hill today in just about passable conditions - well at least it wasn't raining but it was quite dull with a stiff breeze. Nevertheless a few male Chalkhill Blues were disturbed from their roosts but sought to resettle quickly amongst the scrub - and I also saw my first Gatekeeper of the season. The lower slopes of the hill are carpeted with wild flowers at present - scabious, ragwort, clover and lots of kidney vetch (so it will be interesting in late July to see if any Small Blue are there). Also seen were a few rather faded Marbled White and several Small Whites. A return visit in hopefully better conditions is already in my diary! Single Chalkhill Blue photo posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

4 July 2008 - His Majesty's Appearance At Bentley Provides Regal Reward!

I met up with other butterfly enthusiasts this morning for a visit to Bentley Wood, with the main target being, of course, His or Her Majesty, the Purple Emperor. Arriving soon after 8 am, there were few butterflies about for the first couple of hours with the vegetation very wet after a heavy overnight dew and in rather cool and at times rather cloudy conditions. Even so, there were a couple of possible glimpses of Emperor activity high in the oaks around the car park and along the switchback, with two White Admirals and several Silver-washed Fritillaries also seen.

As cloud gradually dispersed and temperatures increased by mid/late morning, our air of hopeful expectation turned into delight during the return leg along the switchback. An Emperor flew up from a pile of dung on the track

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

as we approached, initially settled on bracken, only to return to its meal a few moments later. It stayed in the vicinity for at least the next 45 minutes (when I had to leave for a non-butterfly related appointment), taking minerals from the track, feeding on the main dung pile or surrounding fragments or perching in a nearby hazel tree for a rest between courses! It also made several flights around its awe-struck observers during the period.



At first it was thought to be a female as the purple sheen was not evident, however it became clear it was a male when the differing light conditions and angles began to produce glimpses of its full purple glory.

A generous 6 photos posted to the Recent Photos Gallery as an appropriate regal offering for His Majesty's appearance!

2 July 2008 - Two Day 'Expedition' To NW England

A two day 'expedition' to NW England on 30 June/1 July will go down as one of my season highlights, despite missing one of the target species - and yes I did go by public transport!

Let's begin with the good news - yesterday morning I visited Gait Barrows NNR in Lancashire - a key site for High Brown Fritillary in its only remaining stronghold area within in the UK - namely the limestone outcrops around Morecambe Bay. I saw at least a dozen High Brown Fritillaries by following the way-marked 'limestone trail' around the reserve. Most were very fresh and active with the best place being the part of the trail called 'open glades' which passes along the margins of the main limestone pavement area forming the centre of the reserve. The High Browns were putting on a great flying display as they skimmed to and fro around the scrub and bracken areas, pausing only briefly for nectar on or to bask on bracken. Another target species - Northern Brown Argus was also encountered in the open glades section of the trail, flitting in scrub alongside the path, although most were fading to some extent, bearing in mind their flight period probably started around mid June.



So the very productive day yesterday followed a somewhat disappointing one a little further north on the previous day - I visited Fleetwith close to the Honister Pass in the Lake District, hoping to see Mountain Ringlet. A search of the tussocky grassland areas of Fleetwith accompanied by several other would-be Mountain Ringlet observers produced no sightings. To be honest, it was anyway a hopeless case due to the very strong winds and severe chill factor up on the shoulder of Fleetwith, despite some sunshine - had any Mountain Ringlet taken wing they

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

would have been blown away! Alas, my good memories of that day are largely confined to the magnificent scenery!

3 photos of High Brown Fritillary and 1 of Northern Brown Argus posted to Recent Photos Gallery (earlier photos now transferred to Photo Archive under "2008 Early Summer" Gallery).

Note: Whilst you need a permit to visit some parts of the Gait Barrows reserve or to use the reserve car park, you do not require a permit if you keep to the waymarked trails.

28 June 2008 - White Admirals Out In Force & A Surprise At Bentley Station!

I visited 3 different sites this afternoon and news is generally good. The afternoon saw my first visits of the summer to two more of my favourite woodlands, the Straits Inclosure of Alice Holt Forest and Whiteley Pastures (the other being Bentley Wood of course). In managed woodland like these no two years are ever quite the same in terms of butterfly populations and distribution, with this year being no exception. In the Straits Inclosure, it looks like another good year for White Admirals, with a total of 12 seen, the distribution being more heavily focussed toward the far end of the main track from which several narrower glades radiate. Admirals seemed to be converging regularly in this area, sometimes pausing for minerals on the track or to take nectar from the bramble flowers. Already, despite it still being early in the season, several had nicks or wing tears but some were fresh. This area also seemed best for Silver-washed Fritillary with a total of 15 seen.



A briefer visit on the way home to Whiteley Pastures had some similarities in terms of distribution. The margins along the section of main track as far as the cross tracks at the ridge have been widened and cleared of scrub. Whilst this will encourage biodiversity, in the short term it is a little too open for White Admirals and Silver-washed Fritillary. Nevertheless both species are doing well in one of their core areas – the shady glade beyond the ridge where there is good supply of nectar in the form of thistles (for the fritillaries) and bramble. In late afternoon I saw 6 White Admirals and 10 Silver-washed Fritillaries. Brief glances up to the oaks along the main track also produced two glimpses of Purple Hairstreak activity high in the canopy.

I mentioned at the beginning, that I visited 3 sites, the other being Bentley Station Meadow which adjoins Alice Holt Forest. I had hoped to add to the tally of Admirals or Fritillaries there. Well I did, but not of the White or Silver-washed varieties. What I did find however was perhaps more surprising – a Dark Green Fritillary at rest for several minutes on a thistle in the meadow at the north end of the reserve. In Hampshire Dark Green Fritillaries are mainly associated with chalk downland and the New Forest heaths, so this sighting will be welcome news for the local branch of butterfly conservation who manage the Bentley Station Meadow reserve. It will be even better news if they are breeding there.

26 June 2008 - Paphia, Camilla & Iris All Now Flying In Hampshire's Woodlands!

The build up to one of the highlights of the butterfly season is now in progress in Hampshire's woodlands, with the flight seasons of three of our most spectacular species now underway - namely Silver-washed Fritillary, White Admiral and Purple Emperor. In case you were puzzled by the blog title, their species names are Paphia, Camilla and Iris respectively and numbers should build gradually over the next couple of weeks in all cases.

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

So far, I have seen two out of these three species - a late afternoon visit to Bentley Wood yesterday produced a single Silver-washed Fritillary (first recorded in the visitor book on Sunday) and 3 White Admirals (first sighting recorded there on Tuesday). The Fritillary and Admirals were in flight, however one of the Admirals did pause from its high flying for some arboreal open wing basking, captured in the heavily cropped distance shot below. These two species have also been reported from several other locations in the county, supplemented yesterday by the first report of Purple Emperor - several males seen in the Alice Holt woodland complex in the NE of the county, and reported on the branch website. It will be interesting to see if the dreadful weather we experienced last year during this period has seriously affected the fortunes of these marvellous species.



20 June 2008 - Dark Green Fritillaries Flying At The Mount!

Yesterday afternoon I visited the Pitt Down area of Farley Mount Country Park, based on my "hunch" that the first Dark Green Fritillaries could be on the wing by now. The first area of downland I checked produced a few fresh Marbled Whites but no Dark Greens. The same outcome initially looked likely in a similar area further west, and I reluctantly resigned myself to following another Marbled White, at least to gain some photographic record of the visit. As I followed it, I suddenly caught sight of a pristine Dark Green Fritillary a few yards in front of me, feeding on a dandelion!

Unfortunately, it set off and disappeared before I could get close enough for a photo, but re-energised by this find, I continued the search of the area. A few minutes later another Dark Green was seen in flight – and I was determined this one wasn't going to escape the camera! With increasing cloud subduing its high level of activity and powerful flight, it settled to rest on low foliage for a full twenty minutes, before the sun started to reappear. Needless to say this individual provided some very good photo opportunities. Ah well - I never did manage to photograph that Marbled White, but am grateful for its sense of direction!

4 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



13 June 2008 - Emergence Of Silver-studded Blue Signals June Gap Nearly Over

Following reports of Silver-studded Blue on the wing in the New Forest and in the north of the county at Silchester Common, I visited a site in East Hants this afternoon at Broxhead Common. Finding Silver-studded Blue there looked as though it was going to be difficult at first, but sure enough I located a couple of more

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

sheltered pockets where a few were already on the wing, with a total of 8 seen, all males. Their flight season is just starting there and I would be confident that in a couple of weeks this count of single figures will be replaced by scores or even hundreds, with these little butterflies becoming much more widespread across the heathery common.

The emergence of Silver-studded Blue in the county for me signals we are coming to the end of what I call the June gap. Hampshire's butterfly list is such that the first couple of weeks in June is normally a quiet time, with little new to see, the spring species having already ended or almost ended their flight periods before the main crop of summer species have emerged. Further afield however, this is not necessarily the case, and this part of June is a good time to see some of our less common species in other parts of the country, such as Heath Fritillary, Large Blue, Black Hairstreak and of course Swallowtail, which I was lucky enough to see in Norfolk last Sunday.

2 photos of Silver-studded Blue posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

9 June 2008 - Magnificent Swallowtails At Strumpshaw, Norfolk!

Yesterday will almost certainly turn out to be one of my season's highlights – a visit to Strumpshaw in Norfolk – the weather was fantastic but the Swallowtails were even better! I saw a total of 15 of these magnificent insects in superb condition, both in the meadow within the RSPB reserve itself and also along Tinkers Lane just outside the reserve. Whilst the fen meadow on the reserve provided good views of several Swallowtails in natural surroundings, they were very flighty here in the hot afternoon sunshine and provided few photo opportunities.



In contrast, Swallowtails were making regular stopovers at the flower border of the cottage at the end of Tinkers Lane. At one time 3 were feeding voraciously on the abundant array of garden flowers ranging down to none at other times. As an unexpected bonus, back along the lane and just east of the cottage, a small uncultivated field provided further photo opportunities, with Swallowtails dropping in occasionally for a rest or a spot of open wing sunbathing on their way to (or from) their cottage garden feasting, or so it seemed!

And by the way in case you were wondering, the cottage owners welcome visitors to their beautiful flower border – for the purpose of observing Swallowtails of course and yes I did go by train (Brundall Station is just over a mile from the reserve - see my blog of 8 February) although I would not recommend Sundays for a train visit if you can avoid it.

4 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery – what a great butterfly day!

6 June 2008 - Mainland Glanville Colony At Hurst Holding Its Own

I have slightly delayed this posting on the Glanville Fritillary colony at Hurst Castle until after the peak of the flight period, in line with the code of practice (fragile site). I visited Hurst at the end of May (29th) and am pleased to report that the Glanville colony is holding its own, with a total of 10 individuals seen, comprising a balanced mix of males and females. It was notable that two of these Glanvilles were in the grassland beside the castle walls, having crossed the path from the meadow.

One needs to exercise caution in making judgements based on a single visit, but numbers seem lower than last year and the long term future of this fledgling colony is by no means assured. Indeed, grassland colonies on the

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

Isle of Wight tend to be transient anyway, prospering only in good years with the possibility to be replenished from the core colonies located along the crumbling undercliffs and chines. Unfortunately the Hurst colony, being very isolated, will not have this luxury – unless, as we hope, further fledgling colonies can be established in the vicinity, as the butterflies disperse towards the end of their season.

3 photos posted to recent photos gallery.



30 May 2008 - A Dozen Small Pearls Seen At Bentley With Confirmed Sighting In New Forest Too!

Following my blog from the beginning of last week, it is with relief that I can report a reasonable emergence of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries in the Eastern Clearing of Bentley Wood. An hour spent there yesterday afternoon produced 12 Small Pearls including a few fresh ones - furthermore they seem to be distributed around the clearing, and expanding to occupy adjoining areas to the north which have recently been cleared. So unlike last week, when I recorded 10 Pearl-bordered and just one Small Pearl-bordered, the staggered flight periods of these two species now mean an effective reversal of sightings with just two (faded) Pearl bordered Fritillaries seen yesterday.

Whilst both Pearl-bordered and Small Pearl-bordered are still doing OK in the Eastern Clearing, numbers are reduced from a few years ago. It is hoped that clearance of adjoining areas to enlarge their habitat will help reverse this trend and help diminish the trampling damage which is presently focussed in the main clearing. I also noted that the area at the bottom of the clearing which used to be the traditional breeding area for Small Pearls is now very much bracken dominated with very little bugle available on which the adult fritillaries like to feed.

I am also pleased to be able to report my first confirmed sighting of a Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary in the New Forest – also seen yesterday in a damp clearing in the Wootton Coppice Inclosure and shown below. 4 photos posted to the Recent Photos Gallery.



23 May 2008 - Adonis Takes Wing In Hampshire - And Still Some Fresh Dukes About!

Despite the dubious forecast, this afternoon turned out to be almost perfect butterfly weather in mid and south Hants – pleasantly warm, calm and bright - and the butterflies (and me!) were determined to make the most of it.

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

At Old Winchester Hill a couple of male Adonis Blues (one freshly emerged) were mingling with the more numerous Common Blues on the lower part of the south facing slope close to the fort, one in particular preferring to spend most of his time comparing different patches of bare ground for the best sunbathing spot. The other male seemed happier among the vegetation, with nectar being the priority on his afternoon's agenda.



Prior to visiting Old Winchester Hill, I decided it would be nice to see one of my favourite species again, Duke Of Burgundy, possibly for the last time this year, as their season is now well advanced. I chose the Rake Bottom area of Butser Hill to say farewell – and they had turned out in numbers to greet me – 12 seen, mostly in the scrub at the upper end of the valley. What really pleased me however was that, although several were seriously fading, there were a couple of fresh males. So at this site, at least, the little Duke could be around for another week or two. There were also good numbers of Dingy Skipper, Grizzled Skipper, Small Heath and Common Blue on the lower slopes and even a couple of Brown Argus, which I have not seen at this site before. On the downside (if there was one) I did not see any Green Hairstreak and it is also odd that Orange Tips now seem to have disappeared – looks like they have “enjoyed” a very short season this year.

4 photos of Adonis Blue, Common Blue and Duke Of Burgundy posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

20 May 2008 - Two Sites, Three Fritillaries - By Train!

Not one to do things by halves, I did some "practicing what I preach" yesterday by visiting two good butterfly sites by train. First up it was Bentley Wood (Dean railway station). An hour in the Eastern Clearing produced 10 Pearl-bordered Fritillaries. A search of the area where Small Pearl bordered Fritillaries are usually found produced nothing (reckoning they normally emerge close on two weeks after their larger cousin). However, on returning to the main part of the clearing I had a feeling that one of the Pearl-bordered's I was following was not all it seemed.

So it proved - it was actually a Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, and not even freshly emerged. I do have some concern about this sighting since one explanation is that the habitat there for Small Pearl bordered is becoming too dry and unsuitable as a breeding area, forcing them to disperse and so lose focus. It will be interesting to monitor sightings of the species over the coming two or three weeks to see if my sighting was just an anomalous blip or if there are more ominous underlying reasons.

Then it was back on the train, destination Maiden Newton, the closest station to Hog Cliff NNR in Dorset. Reaching the heart of the reserve from Maiden Newton was much more taxing than I had envisaged, however that soon paled into insignificance on finding Marsh Fritillaries on the flower rich south facing slope at the end of the main valley. I count myself fortunate to see this species, since by now it was largely overcast and cool (even cold) with just brief sunny spells. During the cool overcast periods, the fritillaries were dropping torpid into the grass stems. Nevertheless, a total of 8 Marsh Fritillaries were seen, all males, some very fresh and resplendent. Brown Argus, Grizzled and Dingy Skippers, Common Blue and Small Heath were also in present in decent numbers and more widely distributed.



Little more than half an hour after leaving the Marsh Fritillary site, I was back at Maiden Newton station for the journey home, a journey slightly marred by train delays. So it was mission accomplished and all by public transport. Nevertheless it was an exhausting day (~ 8 miles walked!) and not something I would want to do every week, but 2-3 times per season makes a welcome change and provides an enhanced sense of achievement.

4 Photos of Small Pearl-bordered, Pearl-bordered and Marsh Fritillary posted to Recent Photos gallery.

12 May 2008 - Small Blue Flitting Again At The Quarry!

A short visit this afternoon to the Paulsgrove quarry face on Portsdown Hill produced my first Small Blues of the season. Once again they were flitting amongst the scrub at the foot of the "white cliff", just to the east of the small pool. I saw 8 Small Blues, mostly males but at least one female. Surprisingly some were starting to fade suggesting they emerged at the start of this warm spell of weather, but there were also some fresh ones. Two photos posted to 2008 Recent Photos Gallery.

9 May 2008 - Good Day For Dukes And Dingies!

In perfect butterflying weather this afternoon, I visited two Duke Of Burgundy sites. At a small chalk downland site in central Hampshire, I recorded 7 Dukes and also 3 Grizzled Skippers. (Note: fragile site under code of practice, so precise location not published on web).

I then moved on to Butser Hill (Rake Bottom) where 4 Dukes were recorded, 2 at each end of the valley. Dinky Skippers are doing very well there with 12 seen along the scrub on the east side of the valley floor. Other notable sightings in this area were 3 Grizzled Skippers, 1 Green Hairstreak (in flight) and 1 Small Heath. The area is a good one to visit at present, with Orange Tips present along the lane approaching the valley and even the odd Speckled Wood in the shadier sections. With Whites and hibernators, a total of 12 species were in evidence during a walk of just 1 mile south from Ramsdean to the valley head – not bad for early May!

2 photos of Dinky Skipper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

7 May 2008 - Pearl-bordered Flight Season Just Beginning In Bentley Wood

With Pearl-bordered Fritillary already reported from neighbouring Sussex, I thought my visit this afternoon to Bentley Wood Eastern Clearing in glorious weather would be a "banker". However, it soon became clear it was going to be much tougher when the first Pearl bordered report in the visitor's book was just yesterday. 20 minutes in the Eastern Clearing did produce my first Pearl-bordered sighting of the year, however my fortunes only improved significantly as a result of following my hunch that I could be better off in the Wiltshire section. In the Hawks Grove area (1/2 hour walk from Eastern Clearing past the farm) I recorded a further 8 Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, in the felled areas along the margins of the southbound track and in a clearing on the right. The fritillaries were all very active, spending most of their time on the wing, with just brief pauses to feed on bugle. The 2008 butterfly season, whilst not exactly late, now seems to be preceding the 2006 season by just a few days in terms of flight periods and is significantly later than 2007. This can provide a guide for other species soon to appear in the county.

2 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

5 May 2008 - First Small Heath Of The Season

It took until Monday afternoon for skies to brighten in southern Hampshire this bank holiday weekend. Rather than risk a wasted journey further afield, I revisited Magdalen Hill Down this afternoon. In bright but damp conditions on the down, the Grizzled Skippers still seem to be doing well with 8 seen, but otherwise it was rather subdued on the butterfly front. In addition to the skippers, I recorded my first Small Heath of the season along with several Brimstones, 2 Holly Blue and 2 male Orange Tips. The weather is set to improve in the next days (as many people return to work!) so let's hope the season can really get some momentum going soon.

1 photo of Grizzled Skipper posted to Recent Photos Gallery, this time a female complementing the male posted last weekend.

2 May 2008 - Weather Forces Change Of Plan But Decent Outcome In The End

I had planned to visit a couple of sites in central Hants this afternoon, but heavy cloud with showers around Winchester caused a change of direction – east in fact to Noar Hill. Even there it was largely cloudy during mid afternoon with little to be seen initially, but as the clouds gave way to decent sunny spells, I saw 3 Duke Of Burgundy, all males, and happy just to spend their time basking on low vegetation between brief flights. My Duke watching was interrupted to follow a fresh male Orange Tip which fortunately sat down just long enough for a photo (below). 3 photos (Duke and Orange Tip) posted to the Recent Photos gallery.



26 April 2008 - Perfect Butterflying Weather Produces 4 Season Firsts

Today's almost perfect butterfly weather (warm, bright, and not too windy) produced 4 season firsts for me at two of Hampshire's key sites – with Noar Hill and Magdalen Hill Down neck and neck at two each.

At Noar Hill, I wasn't the only visitor looking for Duke of Burgundy during the early afternoon. Perhaps no surprise then to find that the only Duke conspicuous at that time had quite an audience, some observers from as far afield as the North of England. Nevertheless this male Duke, shown below, seemed oblivious to all the attention, as he perched and basked for minutes at a time, occasionally flitting around the same few square yards of the penultimate chalkpit. Noar Hill also produced my first Orange Tip of the season flitting down the lane on the way out, but unlike the Duke, the male Orange Tip was in no mood for a photo session.

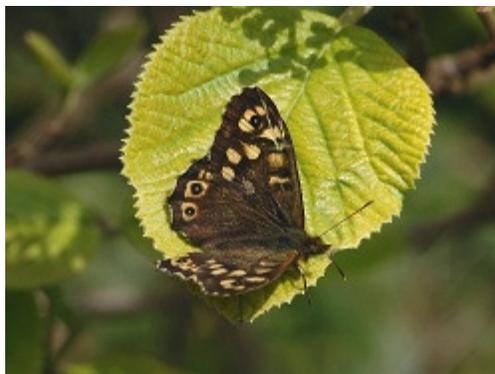


I then headed west to Magdalen Hill Down, walking along the bottom of the main reserve close to the hedge. My season firsts here were Grizzled Skipper (8 seen) and Green Hairstreak (3 seen). The Grizzled Skippers, both male and female, were all very active in the warm but hazy sunshine, darting around between basking sessions on foliage or bare earth. Of the 3 Green Hairstreaks, two were disturbed from ground foliage with the third seen above eye level in the hedgerow. Occasional sightings of Holly Blue, Brimstone and Peacock, all enjoying the clement weather, made for a very colourful and enjoyable afternoon.

4 photos, including the one above, uploaded to 'Recent Photos' gallery.

22 April 2008 - Spring Is Warming Up At Last!

As Spring temperatures at last begin to reach the mid-teens, I took a very pleasant lunchtime stroll on Portsdown Hill below Fort Purbrook. There were several Brimstones, Large Whites, Small Whites and Speckled Woods enjoying the warm sunshine as well as a couple of fresh Holly Blues. It will soon be time for a longer excursion, weather permitting! I took my first butterfly photo of the season too - a Speckled Wood basking on a leaf, shown below.



12 April 2008 - Season On A Bit Of A Go Slow In Europe Too!

Perhaps based on recollections of last April, which saw the UK butterfly season off to a *flying* start (pun excused), this year is a much more stop-start affair, with continuing bouts of very unsettled and even wintry weather slowing down the emergence of our spring butterflies. I did however manage to see my first emerged species of the season, – 3 Small Whites and 1 Large White (which was a female) seen on Portsdown Hill on Thursday, as well as two Brimstones.

Interestingly, whilst the near continent is understandably already well ahead of UK in terms of species count, observers there are also bemoaning the lack of stable weather, including one I viewed based in the Lyon area of France. Nevertheless, species such as Green Hairstreak, Wall Brown and Wood White have all been recorded there since mid-March. This is in addition to species not found in UK, such as Scarce Swallowtail and Violet Fritillary – the latter being slightly reminiscent of our own Pearl-bordered Fritillary. The commentary also has links to recent photos, including Green Hairstreak, taken in the region.

5 April 2008 - Numbers Of Emerging Butterflies Beginning To Increase

As Spring begins to gain the upperhand in the transition from Winter, then so we are beginning to see greater numbers of butterflies, both hibernators and also emerged species. Without really trying, I managed two male Brimstones yesterday afternoon within the space of a few minutes, seen along the back roads in the south of Hampshire. On the Hants and IoW branch website, recent sightings of Orange Tip, Small White, Large White, Holly Blue and Speckled Wood are reported, with some reports being of multiple sightings. When multiple sightings of newly emerged species are reported like this, we can be confident that the pace of the season is beginning to accelerate.

So, just before the season really gets going, I just want to say a few words on the way I am approaching this, my third season of running this website. During the past two years I have allowed the website to influence visits, which probably was necessary in order to gather new material (e.g. for site features) and putting myself under a slight pressure to see most if not all of Hampshire's species during the season, including achieving a few first sightings for the county.

Now that the site is fairly well established, I don't feel the need to put this pressure on myself. So this season I plan to take a slightly more relaxed approach, perhaps making fewer visits to key sites within the county, focussing visits more towards mid-flight period and not being too concerned about missing a few species along the way.

I hope to maintain reasonably frequent blog reports, if not quite every week, but I hope that slightly fewer reports overall (which will also include out of area excursions and longer trips) should be compensated by greater variety.

21 March 2008 - First Reconnaissance Of Spring

I took an early afternoon stroll in my local woodland of Whiteley Pastures today, hoping that the official arrival of Spring would be enough to tempt a few hibernators from their roosts. Sadly I was wrong on that score, the cool, breezy and even wintry conditions putting pay to that. Nevertheless it was pleasant enough to re-acquaint myself with this forestry commission woodland after the Winter absence. The Forestry Commission have been busy too, clearing scrub from the margins of the main track and creating a 15m wide clear swathe along its route as far as the ridge. The margins of the track were becoming overgrown and this action should provide payback in a year or two. For this year however, the nectar larder along here will be a little bare until the new growth becomes established. I must also admit to being slightly saddened on seeing a large area of brambles, particularly favoured by White Admirals, now reduced to stubble!

So whilst there were no butterflies to be seen, there were plenty of signs of Spring, with trees and bushes well in leaf-bud or blossom and primroses adding a splash of colour along the way. A diminutive Muntjac deer foraging beside the track, scurried back into the wood as I approached – only the second Muntjac I have seen in several years.

It looks as though the Easter weekend is set to be rather more wintry than spring-like, but if it means that this year's seasons follow a more conventional profile (unlike last year) I can't say I will be disappointed. I am not sure if some of our butterfly colonies will survive another year of extremes like last year, recalling the very early, warm Spring which led to such an abysmal Summer. We will soon be able to ascertain the consequences of last year's poor summer on this year's butterfly numbers.

7 March 2008 - Butterfly "Code Of Practice"

Motivated by increasing concern over the deterioration in the butterfly habitat at a few fragile butterfly sites caused by large numbers of visitors (e.g. trampling damage), a number of butterfly enthusiasts, including myself have been working on a Code of Practice. The code aims to encourage a responsible approach to visiting butterfly sites and a responsible approach to the publication of information in the public domain on sensitive species and fragile sites (including websites like this one). Whilst much of the information in the public domain has a positive effect in encouraging interest in butterflies and their conservation, the availability on the internet of very specific location data and near real time sightings data on locally sensitive species and fragile sites is considered to be acting as an inadvertent catalyst, thus worsening the problem. If left unchecked, there is a risk that some of our most

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

vulnerable species could become very scarce or even locally extinct within a few years. The code also addresses topics such as collecting, rearing in captivity and a reminder of those butterfly species protected by law.

In addition to the useful advice it provides, the benefits of the code should be compounded, simply by its effect in raising awareness of these issues.

You may recall last year (in line with the policy adopted on sensitive species by the branch website), I did not report sightings of Marsh Fritillary in Hampshire until after the flight period, bearing in mind this is considered a sensitive (and hence vulnerable) species in the county. As a consequence of the code of practice, I intend to extend this policy to sightings of Glanville Fritillary in Hampshire, for the same reason. I have also made location data within Hampshire for these species a little less specific but do not intend to remove it, since the intention is not to make it difficult for enthusiasts to see them – indeed nothing could be further from the truth. What is requested however, is that visitors take special care when visiting their Hampshire locations. Another way to help take pressure of these populations, is perhaps to complement a visit to a Hampshire site with one to a neighbouring locality (like Dorset or IoW respectively for these species) where populations and habitats are much less vulnerable.

The code of practice has a dedicated webpage which can be accessed from the main menu. Please help safeguard our butterfly populations and fragile habitats by following the code.

22 February 2008 - February Sunshine Results In Early Appearance Of Several Species

Only one week of February to go (not forgetting the leap day) and already the generally mild Winter and early February sunshine have tempted in a few non-hibernating butterfly species to make early appearances in Hampshire. Early sightings include **Large White** (Gosport, 12 Feb), **Small White** (Southampton, 8 Feb) and **Holly Blue** (also Gosport, 9 Feb). The Large and Small Whites are believed to be the earliest ever records for the county, and the Holly Blue sighting is at least the earliest in recent years for the county, beating even last year by almost 1 month. So it should be worth the effort on a decent sunny day in late February or early March to see what's about in your area, bearing in mind hibernators such as Brimstone, Peacock, Red Admiral, Comma, Painted Lady and Small Tortoiseshell have already all been reported from Hampshire this year. A Speckled Wood has also been reported from Devon and is another species which could be making an early appearance here.

8 February 2008 - Enjoy a Visit To A Good Butterfly Site - By Public Transport! - Part 3

For the final instalment in this mini-series on good butterfly sites which can be visited by public transport, I have selected 7 sites in Southern Britain, excluding Hampshire (which was covered in the posting of 25 January). At each site, at least one of our less common species can be found.

East Blean Wood, Kent. This wood is a National Nature Reserve managed by Kent Wildlife Trust and forming part of the Blean woodland complex. It is a key site for Heath Fritillary in SE England. Parts of the wood are coppiced to maintain open areas and encourage the growth of common cow wheat, the larval foodplant of the Heath Fritillary. The nearest railway station is Sturry located just under 3 miles south west of the entrance to the wood and served by direct services from London Charing Cross. So it's a longish walk, but can be completed within one hour. From the station, which you can see by navigating 3 times SW from the previous map window, walk east along the A28 for almost a mile, then bear left along a minor road towards Hoath for a further 1½ miles. Turn left again at Knave's Ash along another minor road to reach the car park and entrance to the wood after a few hundred yards. A good strategy here is to follow the transect route which can be found on the UK Butterfly Monitoring scheme website (link to site provided on links page) starting from the car park, perhaps missing the section to the south of the minor road if time is limited. The best time to visit for Heath Fritillary is usually the middle part of June.

Hog Cliff Bottom, Dorset. After the lengthy walk to the previous site from the nearest rail station, this one is much closer. The site is Hog Cliff Bottom which is another National Nature Reserve, this time located in Dorset and a good site for Marsh Fritillary and Adonis Blue. Other downland species such a Grizzled, Dingy skipper and Green Hairstreak are also present. The nearest station is Maiden Newton on the Bristol/Bath to Weymouth line. To reach the reserve, from Maiden Newton, just follow the A35 south for about 1 mile. The entrance to the reserve is on the left (under railway bridge). Explore the valley bottom and chalk downland slopes both of the

main valley and also those at the head of the valley. A good time to visit for both Marsh Fritillary and Adonis Blue is 3rd or 4th week in May.

Malling Down, East Sussex. Malling Down overlooks the historic town of Lewes in East Sussex and is a good site for Silver-Spotted Skipper, Chalkhill Blue and Adonis Blue. The down is easily accessed from Lewes. There is a small entrance from Wheatsheaf Gardens, just half mile from Lewes Station. This entrance leads into "the coombe", which is one of the best areas of Malling Down for butterflies, and particularly the south facing slope. It's just as well to be on foot here since there is no parking at this entrance! A good time to visit for Silver-spotted skipper, Chalkhill Blue and Adonis Blue would be around the 3rd or 4th weeks in August, including the August Bank Holiday weekend.

Strumpshaw Fen, Norfolk. Strumpshaw Fen is an RSPB reserve in the heart of the Norfolk Broads. The fenland habitat consisting not only of reedbeds but also woodlands and orchid-rich meadows provides a home to Bitterns, Marsh Harriers and Cetti's Warbler, but its inclusion here is of course because of the magnificent Swallowtail butterfly, our largest indigenous species. You can explore the reserve on foot via a number of nature trails and can ask for advice on good places to see the Swallowtails at the RSPB information centre. To get you started, a good place, actually just outside the reserve, is in the garden of Marsh Cottage, accessed along a lane leading west just before the entrance to the reserve car park. The reserve is just over 1 mile from Brundall station which is on the Norwich to Great Yarmouth line. Note that there is an entrance charge to the reserve for non RSPB members. A good time to visit for Swallowtails are the first 3 weeks in June.

Durlston County Park, Dorset. This site, located just one mile from Swanage town centre, is home to one of our most localised butterfly species – the Lulworth Skipper. Durlston County Park is located close to the eastern end of Dorset's Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. The park boasts stunning coastal scenery, but also limestone downland, haymeadows, hedgerows and woodland – as well as a working lighthouse at Anvil Point. There are also good visitor facilities, including an information centre and a café. For butterflies, it is recommended to use the transect route for Durlston County Park West (link to UK BMS site on links page), not necessarily following it rigorously, since the Lulworth Skippers and other common species are not confined to a specific area. Look for skippers on south facing slopes amongst long grass or feeding on flowers such as knapweed, thistles, brambles or marjoram, but ensure you leave time to enjoy the other attractions of the park. You can reach Swanage by regular Wilts & Dorset bus service from Wareham Rail Station, connecting there with trains on the London to Weymouth line. A good time to visit for skippers is the second half of July and early August.

Dunsford Meadow, Devon. Dunsford Meadow lies within the Dunsford Nature Reserve managed by Devon Wildlife Trust. It is one of few sites now in the south west where High Brown Fritillary can still be found. In addition to this rare fritillary, 4 other fritillaries are also found there (Dark Green Silver-washed, Pearl-bordered and Small Pearl-bordered). The Dunsford reserve follows the beautiful Teign Valley straddling both sides of the river. is [Dunsford Meadow](#) and can be accessed by following the footpath from Steps Bridge entrance on the N side of the river. The significance of Steps Bridge is that it is a bus stop on the Exeter-Moretonhampstead service 359 via Dunsford, operated by Stagecoach Devon which runs every two hours from Exeter bus station. Exeter has direct rail services to many parts of the country - but if you go from Hampshire using the SW trains service from Waterloo, alight at Exeter Central station (instead of St David's). You then have the option of the 10 minute walk to the bus station or joining the bus when it stops a few minutes later at the rail station (personally I would recommend going to the bus station if you have time).

Monkwood, Worcestershire. Monkwood is a nature reserve located a few miles from the city of Worcester in the West Midlands, and not to be confused with Monk's Wood located in Cambridgeshire. This reserve is a stronghold of the delicate Wood White in Worcestershire. It is essentially a large mixed broad-leaved plantation on an ancient woodland site, jointly managed by the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust and Butterfly Conservation, who maintain the open rides and coppiced areas to the benefit of the butterflies. In addition to Wood White, other woodland species include White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary. The area has some nostalgic value for me – having lived in Worcestershire for several years, it was the county where I saw my first Wood White, not in Monkwood itself but fluttering along a country lane near Suckley, a few miles to the south.

Monkwood is not directly accessible by public transport, but its proximity to the Worcester - Kidderminster bus route (service 294/295 via Hallow operated by First Group) results in a 2 mile walk from Hallow Post Office to the entrance of the wood along minor roads. You can connect with the national rail network at Worcester Foregate Street Station, in the city centre, or indeed at Kidderminster. The Kidderminster bus service using this route runs

every two hours, however Hallow is just 1 mile from Henwick Park on the edge of the city. Henwick Park is the terminus of a local bus (Service 31 also operated by First Group) runs every 15 minutes from the city centre and also provides a link to Worcester's other rail station at Shrub Hill. The downside is that from the Henwick Park bus terminus, it's now a 3 mile walk via Hallow to Monkwood. A good time to visit Monkwood for Wood Whites would be the last 3 weeks in May or early June, just too early for the White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillaries. I notice from the UK BMS records, that numbers of Wood Whites seem to have dipped recently, but you should see a few, and hopefully the recent downturn is just a blip.

2 February 2008 - Enjoy a Visit To A Good Butterfly Site - By Public Transport! - Part 2

My first posting on this theme (about a week ago) was targeted naturally enough at Hampshire butterfly sites which can be visited by public transport. This instalment focuses on 4 sites in Northern Britain which make great destinations for a visit by train, in one case supplemented by local bus services. Sounds dull? – well think again – if Mountain Ringlet, High Brown Fritillary, Scotch Argus, Northern Brown Argus and even Chequered Skipper aren't enough to tempt you, how about some of the finest scenery the British Isles has to offer! The first two sites are even amenable to a day trip (early start and late return) from Southern England if time is at a premium, using virgin west coast mainline or cross country rail services to Lancaster.

I have provided links to some bus/train timetables but it is recommended you check with the operators just before travel as amendments are issued periodically.

Arnside Knott, Cumbria. Key species include High Brown Fritillary (also many Dark Greens) Scotch Argus and Northern Brown Argus but also a good variety of commoner species. Arnside Knott, owned by the National Trust, is a limestone hill at the southern end of the Lake District providing fine views over Morecambe Bay. Its slopes consist of a patchwork of limestone grassland, pasture, bracken and woodland providing a rich and diverse habitat. Arnside Knott can be reached on foot in about half an hour from Arnside Railway Station. Arnside is on the Lancaster–Barrow-in-Furness line. Lancaster is on the West Coast main line with fast services to the Midlands, London and the South. When you reach the "Knott", the limestone grassland and bracken clad north facing slopes just below the summit are good for all the target species, but the more mobile large fritillaries are much more widespread. A visit at end of June/early July should be good for the High Brown/Dark Green Fritillaries and Northern Brown Argus, whereas late July is best for Scotch Argus. I did this as a day trip from the south coast by train in 2005, and had a respectable 4 hours at Arnside (~3 hours on the Knott).

Gait Barrows, Lancashire. Another gem in NW England and an excellent site for High Brown Fritillary (commoner than Dark Greens here). Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Duke of Burgundy are also present, the latter at one of its most northerly outposts. Gait Barrows is a National Nature Reserve, containing unique limestone pavement, yew woodland, fen and reedbed. Whilst a permit is required to visit parts of the reserve, it is not required if one keeps to the waymarked trails marked out by Natural England (formerly English Nature). A downloadable leaflet is available from Natural England on the Limestone and Yew Trails which is quite informative, providing a summary route map of each trail and an indication of places to look for butterflies such as "the dukes estate" (Duke of Burgundy) and "open rides" (for High Brown Fritillaries).

If you would like a permit allowing less constrained access, you can apply to the north-west branch of Natural England. Access is necessarily restricted, not only because of the sensitivity of the site, but also because some parts of it are hazardous. To reach Gait Barrows, Arnside Station can also be used which is 1½ miles to the NW. In this case rail travel logistics will be identical to Arnside Knott. Alternatively Silverdale (on the same line as Arnside) is slightly closer to the reserve, but beware not all trains using this route call at Silverdale. The entrance to the reserve, representing the starting point for the two trails (limestone and yew) are described in the leaflet. The emergence of spring species can be quite variable, but around mid-May will typically be a good time for Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Duke of Burgundy, whereas end of June/early July is usually best for High Brown Fritillary.

Spean Bridge, Highland. For a Southern England dweller like me, as if NW England wasn't far enough for a visit to a butterfly site by train – try this one. The village of Spean Bridge is a few miles NE of Fort William in the Highlands of Scotland. A small but notable butterfly site to the east of the village is home to the only British Butterfly which has turned its back on England (at least since the 1970s) and is now only to be found in the West Highlands. It's the Chequered Skipper. The better known sites for this species such as Glasdrum Wood and Allt

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

Mhuic really require a car, but Spean Bridge has a stop on the Glasgow/Fort William/Mallaig railway - and even the London to Fort William sleeper service makes a morning call there, if you are so inclined. The West Highland line from Glasgow to Mallaig is considered to be one of the great train journeys of the world, passing through magnificent scenery, but the train timetable was clearly not created with Chequered Skipper observers high on the priority list, with only 4 trains per day in each direction.

The Chequered Skipper site is beside the River Spean and is located about 1½ miles east of Spean Bridge Station along a minor road. The skippers can be found in the rough ground close to the river or even just beside the minor road where there is a pull-in for 3 or 4 cars. Best time to visit is late May or early June and with luck you may also see Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Green Hairstreak at the same location. Although the skippers are well established at the site, their appearance is very much weather dependent, and this area has a good share of rain!

If you are travelling by train all the way from Southern England (~11 hours to Fort William) realistically two overnight stays are involved, although you could take the overnight sleeper in one or even both directions. So it's just as well that the railway provides good possibilities to spend a few days in the area without a car, based at Fort William in the Lochaber district of the Highlands. A reasonable itinerary would be to make the long journey to Fort William on the first day, spend the next morning in the town (located in the shadow of Ben Nevis) and take the late morning train to Spean Bridge, returning to Fort William late afternoon. You could of course return south later that day using the overnight sleeper. However, for an extended stay, the railway continues west from Fort William, to Glenfinnan (monument) and Mallaig (ferries to Isle of Sky). For something really different, another ferry service links Mallaig with Inverie on the Knoydart peninsula, which is actually part of the Scottish mainland, yet isolated from it by road. Southbound from Fort William the railway passes the shores of Loch Lomond and Loch Long (alight Arrochar and Tarbet station for both lochs) and then Gareloch (alight Garelochhead Station) on its journey to Glasgow.

Lochaber district is also served by a good bus network, with many services operated by Rapsons, including bus services between Fort William and Spean Bridge, enhancing travel flexibility (service 41 to Roy Bridge calls at Spean Bridge and also the Fort William to Inverness services). The bus timetable for Lochaber district can be downloaded from Rapsons website.

Fleetwith, Cumbria. This site, close to the Honister Pass is one of the most user friendly locations for Mountain Ringlet in Cumbria. With a little determination, it is also accessible by public transport - in this case two bus journeys through beautiful Lake District scenery. The last part of the journey, on foot, is a fairly steep ascent of more than 200 metres on rugged Lakeland tracks (well actually an old tramway), so you need to be reasonably fit and kitted out for the terrain.

The real starting point for this trip and convenient location for an overnight stop is Keswick. My preferred route (and usually quickest) by public transport is to travel by train to Penrith (west coast mainline) and catch the Penrith-Keswick-Workington bus (Stagecoach service X4/X5) to Keswick, reached in ~40 minutes. This service runs hourly and stops at Penrith rail station. From Keswick bus station (the next morning) there is a choice of bus services - the Honister Rambler (Stagecoach service 77/77A) which runs 4 services per day in each direction of a circular route or the Borrowdale Rambler which runs hourly to Seatoller (Stagecoach service 79). One way or another, you need to get to the Honister Slate Mine, which is a popular visitor location in itself. The Honister Rambler stops at the mine, however if you need to use the Seatoller bus, a walk of just over 1 mile west along the Honister Pass road will be required from Seatoller to reach the mine.

From the Honister Slate Mine, take the quarry road westwards which, after the cutting sheds, brings you to the route of the old tramway signed as a footpath to Great Gable, Black Sail & Dubs. Continue along the old tramway route for several hundred metres, looking out for Mountain Ringlet in flight in the rough, damp grassland on either side. If you don't see any by the time you are nearing the summit plateau area, bear left when you reach the foundations of the drum house, and explore the large grassy area to the south of the tramway. Mountain Ringlet have a short flight period, typically from mid June to mid July, but in hot years it can tail off very quickly in early July. A visit in late June would therefore be my recommendation. They generally only fly in sunshine from mid morning until mid afternoon and are difficult to photograph, flying almost incessantly in the sunshine, but dropping deep amongst the grass stems when a cloud passes.

Alan Thornbury's Hampshire Butterflies

The possibility of combining a visit to Fleetwith for Mountain Ringlet with Arnside Knott or Gait Barrows for High Brown Fritillary is perfectly practicable, albeit on different days, in this case using the Keswick-Lancaster bus service (Stagecoach service 555/556) or vice versa to aid the switch of locations. End of June/beginning of July would be a good time, reliably within the flight periods of both species. A longer stay, taking in other delights of the area, and using the Lake District's good bus network is even better and allows flexibility to accommodate the odd day of less than perfect butterfly weather! Another good tip if you are making good use of the bus network, is to buy an explorer ticket which enables unlimited travel on stagecoach services in the North-West and they don't need to be bought in advance - just buy on the bus. For example a one day explorer ticket costs £9, but they are also available for 4 or 7 days.

I will post the last instalment of butterfly sites accessible by public transport in about a week, focusing on Southern Britain, excluding Hampshire. By the way, I'm pretty good with bus and rail timetables and journey planners on the internet, so don't mind providing a little assistance, if anyone is seriously interested in making one of these trips. Just contact me via the contacts page. I am not expecting to be deluged!

25 January 2008 - Enjoy a Visit To A Good Butterfly Site - By Public Transport!

Over the past few years I have visited a few butterfly sites, both locally in Hampshire and further afield using a combination of public transport and "shank's pony" (see footnote if you don't know what it means!). I have generally found the experience of leaving the car at home a positive one, doing my bit for global warming and helping me to keep fit, since inevitably some additional walking is involved. Of course, you need to choose viable sites, being ones which are within reach of a rail station or on a regular bus route, ruling out many which are simply too remote.

Nevertheless, just considering the butterfly sites in Hampshire which are listed on the butterfly sites page, six of them are within a couple of miles of a rail station and several more could be added which are close to small towns or large villages reasonably well served by bus. I list the six which can be accessed by train below, having confirmed viability using the National Rail journey planner:

Alice Holt Forest Species include Silver-washed Fritillary, White Admiral. The Lodge Inclosure is a few minutes walk from Bentley Rail Station (London – Alton line).

Bentley Station Meadow Species include Silver-washed Fritillary and a good variety of commoner species. Site is adjoining Bentley Rail Station (London – Alton line). Visit can be combined with Alice Holt Forest – Lodge Inclosure.

Pignal Inclosure (New Forest) Species include Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Pignal is approximately 1½ miles north from Brockenhurst Rail Station (London to Bournemouth/Weymouth line).

Bentley Wood Species include Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Small-pearl-bordered Fritillary, Marsh Fritillary, Purple Emperor, White Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary, although not all are on the wing at the same time! The Tytherley entrance to Bentley Wood is about 1½ miles north from Dean (Wilts) Rail Station on the Southampton – Salisbury line. The service stopping at Dean is not frequent (typically every 2 hours) but adequate for a carefully planned visit.

Lymington-Keyhaven Species include Wall Brown. The eastern end of the reserve is about 1 mile from Lymington Town Rail Station (branch line from Brockenhurst).

Portsdown Hill Species include Chalkhill Blue and Small Blue. The central part of the hill, which is probably the best for butterflies is about 1 mile north of Portchester Rail Station (Southampton – Portsmouth line).

During the next couple of weeks I will create a complementary blog entry on sites further afield, which are quite practical to visit by public transport and almost exclusively by train, which can compete quite well with car journey times. I will also focus on the less common species, such as Swallowtail, High Brown Fritillary, Heath Fritillary, Marsh Fritillary, Scotch Argus, Silver-spotted Skipper and even Chequered Skipper!

* Shank's pony is local slang meaning "to walk"

11 January 2008 - UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme

New Year has arrived, and thoughts are just beginning to turn to the butterfly season which awaits us. 2007 almost certainly created a few records, not only for the dreadful summer flight season suffered by many species, but also for the mild autumn which resulted in the appearance in flight of some none hibernating species, long after they should have been confined to their normal overwintering stage. The latest, and perhaps most extreme example of this phenomenon I am aware of, was recorded here in Hampshire and reported on the branch website – **two small whites seen on 8th December** in a Gosport garden – just amazing!

The variability and unpredictability of our seasons more than ever illustrates the importance of monitoring our butterflies, not only to determine trends in butterfly populations on both local and national scales, but also to provide important indicators of the environment, allowing us to assess the impacts of climate change or the progress of initiatives relating to conservation and biodiversity. It is well known that butterflies are important indicators of the health of our environment, being highly sensitive to environmental changes.

Thus, if you are not already aware, I bring your attention to the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (UKBMS - link provided on the links page). The scheme is supported by Butterfly Conservation and was formed in 2006 by the merger of two previous, independent monitoring schemes. The UKBMS website contains much useful information (some of which is well buried!) ranging from how to get involved in butterfly monitoring, to information on the butterfly sites used in the scheme, with species lists and summary transect data.

Nationally there are many sites listed in the scheme (including some in Hampshire), so I will use the data provided on the BC reserve at Magdalen Hill Down as an example. Here you will find a reserve map including transect route (not available for all sites), together with brief details of the site including a grid reference. There are expandable sections containing a species list for the site and species status, as well as datasets containing records from the last few years. These datasets are particularly useful for planning visits to sites, since they show the flight season profile in each year. It is necessary to compare a few years of course, and to bear in mind seasons are becoming increasingly variable.

Finally, please note that there seems to be no indication on the UKBMS website of access restrictions or public rights of way for the various sites. So if you are planning to visit any of them, please check this out beforehand. Happy browsing!