



My Blog

July - December 2009

19 December 2009 - Cherry Blossom And Snowdrops In December - An Early Spring Beckons?

We may be experiencing a "cold snap" at present, but it was only last week that I was looking somewhat dumbfounded at the sight of cherry blossom in a South Hampshire garden. I have also heard more than one report of snowdrops bursting into flower already. So whilst the world's leaders try their best to sound optimistic about the outcome of the Copenhagen summit to tackle climate change, I think we butterfly enthusiasts best concentrate on preparing for an early Spring!

On second thoughts, maybe we just have time to enjoy Christmas before that. **Happy Christmas to all readers!**

31 October 2009 - Time To Submit Those Records

I have been taking a break from my end of season website tidy-up in order to collate my butterfly records for the 2009 season and will shortly be submitting them via the branch website to the branch recorder. It is important that all butterfly records are submitted, since they provide vital data on local populations and trends and help to target vital conservation efforts. They also find their way into the BC national butterfly records database and will contribute to the next major report on the State of Butterflies in Britain and Ireland (due in late 2010).

20 October 2009 - Spanish Queen Breeding In W.Sussex!

Those of you maintaining a keen interest in events during the "tail end" of the 2009 butterfly season will have noted that a local nature reserve in West Sussex with historical associations to smuggling has been the focus of much attention. A wandering Spanish Queen seen there during midsummer this year has now produced offspring.

I refer to Brandy Hole Copse near Chichester and the wandering Queen was a Queen Of Spain Fritillary reported in July. Several of these handsome butterflies, including a mating pair, have now been seen since late September and are almost certainly the progeny of the migrant female. The discovery of wild pansy, a preferred foodplant of the Q of S larvae has been discovered around a field margin closeby and would seem to complete the jigsaw.

Sightings of Queen of Spain Fritillaries in Southern England and also East Anglia, whilst uncommon, are not that unusual - several individual sightings were recorded in 2007 in Hampshire and Sussex, including one at Old Winchester Hill. The butterfly has compulsive migration tendencies from its strongholds around the Mediterranean, reaching the Normandy and Dutch Coasts every year, with individuals occasionally crossing the Channel/N Sea to reach the UK. Breeding here is not unprecedented either - a small colony is believed to have survived for several years in Suffolk during the nineties until, presumably, a cold winter ended it.

However, with global warming, the Queen of Spain Fritillary, along with Large Tortoiseshell and Clouded Yellow (which is already arguably a UK resident) could be welcome additions to the UK residents list in the coming years.

25 September 2009 - Glorious Weather But No Indian Summer For Wall Brown At Lymington!

Exploring the Lymington-Keyhaven coastal nature reserve seemed an appropriate way to end this years main butterfly outings. Whilst the coastal tracks and inland lanes were teaming with ripe blackberries and the lagoons full of bird life, the picture wasn't quite so productive on the butterfly front. Nevertheless a respectable 7 butterfly species were seen in small numbers, namely Small Copper (3), Speckled Wood (4), Peacock (3), Painted Lady (2), Red Admiral (2), Small White (4) and Small Heath (1).

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I also had a glimpse of a medium sized golden brown butterfly in an out of bounds area in the Keyhaven marshes which could have been a 3rd brood Wall Brown, but I couldn't be certain. So it seems this species is keeping a low profile here despite having been reported a week or so ago from Sussex. The Lymington-Keyhaven nature reserve is also very large with no obvious focus for the Wall (unlike a quarry site for instance) and in the case of the small 3rd brood, it can seem like finding a needle in a haystack! No photos to post today.

22 September 2009 - Review And Update Of Butterfly Sites List And Site Features

During the next month I shall be reviewing and updating the Hampshire Butterfly sites page and the site feature pages. One objective will be to maintain accuracy, particularly relating to the key species found at each site, taking account of the fortunes of the 2009 butterfly season and trends in recent years. However, having recently added two more site features (Broughton Down and Wootton Coppice), I am conscious also of a need to review the sites I include, perhaps with a view to some rationalisation.

I will use the following criteria as a guide - sites included in the site list should have a strong colony of at least one priority species (as categorised for Central Southern England) and sites with a feature should have strong colonies of at least two priority species. The distribution of sites will also be taken into account, for instance avoiding duplication of two similar sites in close proximity. I do not rule out a few exceptions to these guidelines where there are mitigating reasons, such as retaining a feature on a site which contains by far the strongest (or only) colony in the county of a particular species.

I have started this review process already and as a result have added Roydon Woods to the list of sites (site for Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary). It is with a twinge of regret however that the first site feature I created (Whiteley Pastures) no longer qualifies for site feature status, but remains as an entry in the site list, having a strong colony of only one priority species (White Admiral). Despite that, it's still a lovely wood to visit, but for butterflies, there are better woodlands such as Bentley Wood, Alice Holt Forest and some New Forest Inclosures. We also lose Botley Wood as a site, because of its proximity and similarity to Whiteley Pastures - and its Grizzled Skipper presence is now is very weak.

12 September 2009 - White-letter Hairstreak More Widely Distributed Than Expected?

2009 is the final year of the White-letter Hairstreak Recording Project embarked in 2007 by Butterfly Conservation. The project was initiated for a number of reasons, including indications of a downward trend in numbers of White-letter Hairstreaks at sites in the Butterfly Monitoring Scheme, perhaps linked to the loss of many Elms to Dutch Elm disease. It is also recognised however, that traditional transect methods of monitoring are not fully effective for this elusive tree-top species and that the butterfly might actually be significantly under-recorded.

Perhaps encouraged by the White-letter Hairstreak Project, a number of new colonies have been located this year in my own area in South Hampshire, particularly in the Portsmouth and Gosport areas. There are at least 9 colonies to my knowledge in these areas and it is remarkable that this resilient little butterfly can survive in some cases on a single isolated Elm tree, but more often on a group of a few Elms. Locations are also sometimes surprising and include Elms in urban areas or beside major roads. Trials with disease resistant Elm are also helping these butterflies in Hampshire - and they have even colonised a Japanese Elm at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens, near Romsey.

During the last couple of weeks, I have visited a few of the locations where White-letter Hairstreaks have been reported in South Hampshire in recent years, and I am both surprised and encouraged by the amount of Elm still surviving - for instance in the East Gosport area. I will certainly be visiting a few of these sites next year during the White-letter Hairstreak flight period, in the hope also of obtaining a decent close range photo of this species which has eluded me for several years. The photo below is the best I managed this year, taken from long range at Peartree Green in Southampton in early July. This has one of the largest White-letter Hairstreak colonies in the county, just 1km as the crow flies, from the St Mary's football stadium!

(Note: An interesting anecdote to the above is that during Wimbledon fortnight this year, the cameras zoomed in on a little butterfly during a Venus Williams match - the little butterfly was a White-letter Hairstreak! The match commentators did not recognise the significance but butterfly observers did - you can read the posting for June 25th on the White-letter Hairstreak Recording Project diary for 2009, accessed via the link above)



29 August 2009 - Another Season On The Wane As Autumn Beckons, But Still Fresh Specimens To Be Seen

My brief reconnaissance visits today around some local sites indeed confirmed that the 2009 season is waning rapidly, with a dramatic fall in the number of butterflies on the wing compared to three or four weeks ago. Nectar sources are becoming more limited as flowers become seed heads or turn to berries and the lush greens of summer give way to the browner shades of autumn.

Whilst my visits produced nothing spectacular to report, there are still butterflies to be found in very good condition, including fresh specimens of Speckled Wood and Green veined White seen today. A few priority species will also still be on the wing, including Silver-spotted Skipper and Brown Hairstreak. In the case of the latter, patience and luck are needed as usual, but egg-laying activity should continue for a couple of weeks yet.

September should also bring the possibility of some 3rd broods including Small Copper, Wall and more Whites. Vanessids, such as Comma and Red Admiral should also be conspicuous, bearing in mind they enjoy feeding on overripe fruit, although Red Admirals seem to have had a rather poor season so far.

2 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery (Speckled Wood and Green-veined White).



21 August 2009 - Adonis Gone AWOL At Old Winchester Hill?

I returned to Old Winchester Hill this afternoon for a short visit (between the showers!) in the hope of confirming that Adonis Blue are still present, bearing in mind their numbers had declined significantly during the previous two wet summers. Sadly none to be seen again today, this time on the south facing slope close to the fort (the original reintroduction site). There is a real possibility we may be losing them from Old Winchester Hill. This could not be in greater contrast to Chalkhill Blues, which were present in good numbers today, although much reduced from a few years ago. There were even a few quite fresh males, which is remarkable considering the Chalkhill flight period began in early July. Several Silver-spotted Skippers were also present on the slope and amongst the shorter scrub. Overall, despite the possible loss of Adonis, this area of Old Winchester Hill is still a good butterfly location, bearing in mind Brown Argus and Green Hairstreak are also found there, in addition to common species.

18 August 2009 - Courting Clouded Yellows On Old Winchester Hill

Clouded Yellows were definitely the most conspicuous butterflies at the bottom of the car park slope on Old Winchester Hill late this afternoon. I counted 6 of them, all active in the late sunshine flying around the lower slopes and the scrub area, occasionally pausing to feed or engaging in short chases. Indeed, there was potentially a more significant event afoot with a courting pair. The male at one point was walking on the open wings of the female (a rare sight in itself), but alas no happy ending on this occasion, as the male eventually flew off.

10 Silver-spotted Skippers were also seen occupying the more heavily grazed scrub areas, but no Adonis Blue. 4 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery, including 3 of Clouded Yellows.



14 August 2009 - Mating Adonis Blues Gatecrash At Hampshire's Plum Pudding!

A brief visit to Broughton Down, late yesterday afternoon, had been closely following expectations for the most part. There were decent numbers of Silver-spotted Skippers on the central part of the down (around 12 seen) which was my main objective of the visit, and other species included Brown Argus (4), Chalkhill Blue (6) including mating pair, Small Tortoiseshell (2), Small Heath (3) and Gatekeeper (8). There were also many Common Blues, Meadow Browns, Painted Ladies and whites. However shortly after passing the prominent tumulus locally known as the "Plum Pudding", expectations were well and truly gate-crashed when a mating pair of Adonis Blues were disturbed from the slope leading into the gully at the far western end of the reserve. A further male was also seen in the same area. Broughton Down is one of the few locations in Hampshire where Adonis are seen in modest numbers in most years with Martin Down having the largest and most reliable colony in the county.



So far I have not included Broughton Down in my list of butterfly sites, due to the similarity of its species list to Stockbridge down and Old Winchester Hill. I have to admit also that a first visit there several years ago left me with less than totally pleasant memories, having slipped and ended on my backside whilst going down the steep path into the ravine which divides the site!. However, I have forgiven it now and will be adding it to my site list and creating a site feature.

Earlier in the day I had also seen Silver-spotted Skippers on Stockbridge Down (8 seen on the main part of the down, at widely spaced intervals) and I also managed some time at Shipton Bellinger. There is plenty of Brown

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Hairstreak activity in the various ash trees along the track running from the village, including the prominent one at the T junction at its far end. Most seem to be males (including some worn ones) but several females were also evident and in very good condition. The nearest I got to a close encounter was when a pristine female was seen flitting around the lower branches of this tree, descending to bask on dogwood for a few seconds with part open wings before returning to the tree. For those hoping for close up photos of Brown Hairstreak, it was generally a frustrating day, however one person (on their first visit to the site!) had a female feeding on bramble along the western boundary.

Another notable plus for the day is the increase in Small Tortoiseshell numbers, with the small count at Broughton Down being supplemented by a further 4 at Shipton Bellinger. It seems their fortunes are changing for the better at last, perhaps helped by a more normal cold winter.

5 photos including mating Adonis and Chalkhill Blues posted to recent photos gallery.

7 August 2009 - Brown Hairstreaks Can't Hide Forever!

There have been few sightings of Brown Hairstreak reported from Hampshire so far this season despite their season being well into its second week (judging from reports from elsewhere). So after my own unsuccessful visits to both Noar Hill and Shipton Bellinger, I was beginning to think this little butterfly was going to prove a real challenge this year. Well thankfully they can't keep out of sight forever, as my return visit to Shipton Bellinger this afternoon proved!

Encouraged by 3 definite Brown Hairstreak sightings in the Ash trees along the track running due west of the village (2 male and one female), I set about searching single-mindedly the scrub area at its far end, scouring especially the bramble flowers for feeding hairstreaks. I was almost on the point of giving up with every small brown butterfly turning out to be a Gatekeeper, when my eyes suddenly locked on the target - the silhouette of male Brown Hairstreak, feeding in a large patch of brambles at the western edge of the scrub. I watched for several minutes as it fed voraciously, sometimes spending several minutes on each flower head, occasionally flitting between them but never needing to fly more than a few inches. I made another detour of the area without further success, so returned to the spot half an hour later - and yes he was still there on another flower head close to where I had left him!

4 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



31 July 2009 - Noar Hill Heaving With Butterflies (Except Brown Hairstreak That Is!)

I visited Noar Hill this afternoon on what turned out to be a lovely day (all too infrequent this summer). The place is absolutely thronging with butterflies at present, flying, feeding, courting and mating with abundant sources of nourishment in the form of marjoram, knapweed, hemp agrimony, bramble flowers and thistles (not to mention the odd pile of dung from the roaming cattle!). Most conspicuous were the whites (all three main species, but especially Large Whites) with numbers of the latter in many scores, probably hundreds - they were everywhere. Painted Ladies were also present in very large numbers and adorning many a flower-head.

Talking of scores my species count today was in fact 20, listed as follows in approximate order of abundance and observed during three circuits of the reserve - it even includes a rare species - Small Tortoiseshell!:

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- *Abundant: Large White, Green-veined White, Small White, Painted Lady, Peacock, Gatekeeper.*
- *Common: Comma, Silver-washed Fritillary, Meadow Brown.*
- *Relatively easy to find but not common: Brimstone, Red Admiral, Common Blue, Brown Argus, Small Skipper, Speckled Wood, Ringlet.*
- *Scarce: Small Tortoiseshell, Small Copper, Marbled White, Small Heath (1 of each seen)*

You will notice one species is missing - Brown Hairstreak. My prediction is they are going to be difficult this year at Noar Hill, but I'm not one for spending ages looking for them up in the ash trees using binoculars - I didn't have the patience for that when so much else was going on!

During my visit I witnessed a couple of rather unusual sights, for UK at least, but consistent with the large numbers of whites - a "mini-cloud" of Large Whites, mostly males. It's not unusual to see 2, 3 or even 4 butterflies sparring in flight, but at one point there were 8 in this group! There was also another cloud, this time of the Green-veined variety - up to 9 feeding at once on a fresh cow-pat! I have seen this with Chalkhill Blues but never with so many whites before.

So, consistent with a bumper number of butterflies seen today, there is a bumper number of photos - 6 in total posted to the Recent Photos Gallery. (Note that the Peacock photo was taken on a late afternoon stop there yesterday, but better than the ones I took today).



25 July 2009 - Summer Painted Lady Event Gathering Speed

A butterfly unrelated visit to Andover this afternoon allowed me to call in to Shipton Bellinger - the slight chance of seeing an early Brown Hairstreak was justification enough. However, a short exploration of the tracks west of the village and areas of blackthorn scrub followed by patient observation of a few Ash trees didn't provide any evidence that Shipton's hairstreaks have started to emerge.

What is evident however, is that the summer generation of Painted Ladies - offspring from the late May influx has most certainly begun. They were flashing past at regular intervals both along the tracks and in the scrub areas, occasionally stopping to sunbathe on the ground or feeding on brambles. It is estimated that up to 1 billion Painted Ladies could be emerging across the country over the next weeks. Typically such events, when Painted Ladies arrive on our shores in vast numbers, for their offspring to grace our countryside and gardens in the summer, occurs only about once per decade. The inspiration provided by their beauty and life (which involves a migration in the spring from North Africa) was even the subject of "thought for the day" on radio 4 this morning. - so make the most of it! 3 photos posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



24 July 2009 - Summer Brood Wall Brown Just Emerging At Keyhaven

A bracing visit to the Lymington-Keyhaven reserve this afternoon produced two male Wall Browns, heralding the start of their summer flight period. My usual triangular walk around the old tip and along the sea wall produced none, however it was very windy in these exposed areas with even the lower path by the lagoons offering little shelter from the wind.

However, suspecting that Wall Brown were to be found somewhere (already reported from Sussex), an excursion along the lane between Keyhaven and Lower Pennington Lane produced the two sightings, albeit brief ones. Unfortunately only a blurry photo of one was obtained as it took off to fly over the fence into an out-of-bounds area, so no photos to post on this occasion. Many Gatekeepers were present around the brambles along the tracks, with the odd Peacock and Comma adding a dash of speed to the proceedings.

19 July 2009 - Late July - Plenty Of Butterflies On The Wing

As I have just returned from a short break cut off from the virtual world (i.e. the internet), I thought I had better check out what's been going on during the last week on the butterfly front in southern England.

This exercise was not without its surprises including reports (albeit singletons) of both Brown Hairstreak and Silver-spotted Skipper from Sussex and a Queen of Spain Fritillary, believed to be a genuine migrant, also from that county. Although not quite so high up the rarity table as Queen of Spain Fritillary, migrant sightings are also reported from Hampshire with Clouded Yellow reported from two different locations. Also related to migrants, but perhaps more predictable, Painted Ladies are being reported in increasing numbers from around the county - the offspring from the continental influx which occurred in late May. As an example 330 Painted Ladies were reported from Magdalen Hill Down earlier in the week. If this continues, 2009 may well go down as a 'Painted Lady Year'.

So late July should be a good time to get out and about, with plenty of butterflies on the wing at different phases of their flight period, including the beginning of the summer broods for several species including Brown Argus, Small Blue and Wall Brown. There is always the chance of seeing something even more unusual, such as an aberration (this seems to have been a good year for them), a rare migrant or spotting a species which is rare or even new to a particular location. This year for example Purple Emperors have been seen at a few new locations around the county, and I have a report of Silver-washed Fritillaries close to Rownhams services on the M27! Don't forget to start looking for Brown Hairstreak and Silver-spotted Skipper too - the last two species to emerge in Hampshire's butterfly year and first reports from the county are likely in the next days.

10 July 2009 - A Good Day For Blues On Portsdown Hill

A lunchtime visit to two areas of Portsdown Hill produced a combination of the predictable and the not so predictable. On the main section of the hill between the two main quarries, Chalkhill Blue numbers are building nicely - in a small section of the lower slopes there were around 15 - all males, flitting around, feeding on the abundant nectar supplies or basking on low vegetation. A short detour the scrub at the base of the main Paulsgrove quarry produced the less predictable result - two second brood Small Blues - the earliest I have ever seen them.

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It's a good time to visit the lower slopes of the hill at the moment - in addition to the above, there are Marbled Whites in the areas of taller vegetation, Gatekeepers around the brambles and occasional Small Skippers and well as common species, all enjoying this time of plenty in terms of wild flowers and nectar. All too soon now we will be reminded that midsummer is turning to late summer as the blooms gradually fade and the luxuriant summer foliage begins to turn brown.

After a hectic couple of weeks trying to keep the blog up to date, I will now be taking a break for a week or so before the final phase of the season, with Brown Hairstreaks, Silver-spotted Skippers and several summer brood butterflies to keep me busy during late July and August.

4 photos of Chalkhill Blue, Small Blue and Gatekeeper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.



8 July 2009 - Celebrating Midsummer With A Bonus!

The Midsummer period at the end of June and into early July represents one of the best times of the butterfly year, with our woodlands especially graced by some of our largest, most iconic species and all in their best early season finery - White Admirals, Silver-washed Fritillary and of course Purple Emperor. All these species seem to be having a good season with interest even increased compared to normal by the unusually large number of aberrations which are being reported, such as almost completely black white admirals (ab *obliterae*), Silver-washed Fritillaries with dots merging to become lines (ab *confluens*) and a Purple Emperor missing almost all of its white markings (ab *iole*).

To celebrate this special (and hectic!) time of year, I have created an additional photo gallery called "Midsummer Bonus", accessed as a sub-page of the Recent Photos Gallery. It contains 8 additional photos of the above 3 woodland species (no aberrations but they are just great in their normal attire!) and also 2 photos of an iconic downland species, the Dark Green Fritillary. All photos were taken within the last couple of weeks.



3 July 2009 - Sunny Butterfly Walk Along The Solent At Browndown South

I made a late afternoon stop on the Solent today in glorious sunshine (and for once in pleasant temperatures rather than the sweltering heat of the last days). The ever reliable Grayling colony at the eastern end of Browndown South once again did not disappoint - at least 12 seen, mostly males. As usual though, whilst it's relatively easy obtaining photos of them with forewings tucked in, and with the butterfly in its own shadow (so as to become almost invisible), obtaining half decent photos was quite challenging. The walk along the landward side to and from the Grayling site also produced a respectable number of species, mainly in small numbers, including Small Copper, Small Heath, Gatekeeper, Marbled White, Small Skipper, Meadow Brown, Red Admiral and a single very faded Painted Lady. Photos of Grayling and Gatekeeper posted to Recent Photos Gallery.

