

'You ask what is the use of Butterflies  
I reply to adorn the world  
And delight the eyes of men'

John Ray 1710

## 25 YEARS OF BUTTERFLY RECORDING 1984–2009 BY ASHLEY WHITLOCK

**M**y interest in Butterflies began in 1984 when I joined Butterfly Conservation, but I never thought 25 years later I would have seen so many species of Butterfly and Moths in my home county of Hampshire, the Isle of Wight and outlying counties in the south east corner of England. I have always loved photography, with ship's photographer being one of my many jobs whilst serving in the Royal Navy between 1972 and 1996. Much of my spare time between long voyages to exotic places was spent photographing insects. Butterflies would cut a very deep groove in my quest to conquer photographing insects in the wild, and opened a window into their secret world. I started in my Fathers back garden with the Small Tortoiseshell, [when they were very common!] on an old Buddleia bush.

I had bought the book 'Butterfly Watching' by Paul Whalley, which gave good tips of where to go and what to see, but looking at it now it certainly looks a bit, dated. Never the less it is a very important book for novices, like I was so many years ago.

Things have really moved on with the landmark publication 'The Millennium Atlas of Butterflies of Britain' published for 2000, which highlighted the difficulties many of our species were having over the country. This really paved the way for many other publications, none more so than Hampshire's flagship publication, 'The Butterflies of Hampshire', which was published for the millennium and highlighted the great enormity of the geology and wealth of Flora and Fauna in Hampshire which aided particular species to breed and survive.

Media coverage has expanded beyond all recognition, with Television, the Internet, and Newspaper and Magazine coverage being almost a weekly event during the main Butterfly season now. Twenty five years ago it was certainly a different story.

I remember a very good weekly television programme called 'The Living Isles', presented by Julian Pettifer, showing a high rise observation platform in the main ride of Pamber Forest, which was quite a revolutionary idea in an English wood at the time but now this sort of 'canopy' intrusion into the lives of butterflies is almost common place.

The programme quoted 'On top of the Oak canopy could be seen multitudes of Silver-Washed Fritillaries, White Admirals and Purple Emperors'. I seem to remember nobody batted an eyelid at this statement, at the time, however this would be a very welcome sight today.

Of course Sir David Attenborough, our patron, has done Butterfly Conservation a great service with his excellent programmes on wildlife especially those portraying butterflies, other associated insects and plants associated with these glorious insects.

**M**y career in the Royal Navy took me to many foreign places, far and wide, one of the highlights was Venezuela in South America. In 1990 I was part of a group from HMS Birmingham visiting Angel Falls, we all stayed at the site where the 'infamous' film Arachnophobia was filmed, fortunately I never saw any large spiders, but the butterflies were fantastic. Several Swallowtails and bird wings were seen flying around our huts in the very early morning light, and the visit to Angel Falls is one of my most treasured memories.

While serving on HMS Birmingham I visited Kenya in 1991, when I climbed Mount Kenya doing the 'Kip Kino' route which took three days. On the plateau of the Mountain there was plenty of wildlife, with many species of butterflies, I noted halfway up the Mountain the landscape and the vegetation looked very similar to Hampshire and I felt right at home. At the last camp before reaching the top, I saw the Milky Way in all its glory, which is a sight I've always thought as a highlight of my life, this together with the view of the sun rise over the Serengeti Plain from the top of Mount Kenya are unforgettable experiences.

In Florida, on another occasion, I saw many new species that I had never seen before and of course Monarch Butterflies, famous for flying in their multitudes, were everywhere.

In the West Indies I visited many of the Islands; the most notable for butterflies was Cuba which is one of the hottest places I've ever been to. I saw one day, just in the middle of an old dirt track, hundreds of Whites and Yellow Sulphurs mud puddling. As I walked through them, they flew around me like confetti then they just settled down to feed again.

In 1988 the Aircraft Carrier HMS Illustrious was anchored off the coast of Majorca, where at night I noticed large 'insects' flying around the upper deck lighting; at closer inspection they were hundreds of Painted Ladies. They were obviously on their long migration to Europe. I also saw them during the day feeding in puddles of salt water on the upper deck where I rescued many from a sailors' boot.

Since I left the Navy in 1996 I have visited several European countries such as Italy, France and Sicily, looking for their native species of Butterflies. I visited the Lake District in Italy, in the northern part of the country, where in 2001 there were good numbers of Rock Grayling, Meadow Fritillary, and Spotted Fritillary in the many wooded areas. However in the woodland rides a '*Valezina*' Silver-Washed Fritillary decided my leg was a tree trunk, where it laying many eggs from my walking boots upwards, she then duly flew off never to be seen again. I hasten to add that all the eggs must have perished the next day on a visit to the Matterhorn, due to the very cold temperatures.

I also had a wonderful experience with a Silver-Washed Fritillary, a few years later, a bit closer to home in Butterwood near Basingstoke. I encountered what is known as an *ab 'Nigrizina'*, a black female which flew around some Bramble like a bat. Although she never settled I was totally mesmerised by this wonderful spectacle, she promptly flew up into a nearby Oak tree where I could see her very clearly through binoculars in the glorious afternoon sunshine.

Several years ago, near Mount Blanc in France, I saw many species of Butterflies and Moths in the many meadows amassed with wild flowers. These glorious meadows remain as they were in the far off days as there is no crop spraying there. Here Marbled Fritillaries, Swallowtails and Black Veined Whites are very common, with

Field Pansies being one of the most common species of wildflower. At this altitude, amongst the frost and snowy conditions, the Queen of Spain Fritillary could be found. In milder conditions, in a park opposite our hotel, I found a female Map butterfly busying herself with laying her eggs in amongst a good stand of Nettle. She was completely oblivious to me as she went about her business, laying her 'strings of pearls' underneath a leaf. I went back the following day, to see how the eggs were getting on, only to be confronted with a park attendant with strimmer in hand 'tidying' up the park. I do wonder how long this delightful butterfly will take to naturally colonize this country, let's hope this specie can enhance Britain's flora and fauna very soon.

I took a more active part in Butterfly Conservation, when I became the Co-ordinator of the Duke of Burgundy Butterfly for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight in 1999. Straight away the task for this butterfly was enormous; records only came from a handful of sites, however over the years the butterfly has been noted far and wide over Hampshire, even though most of the colonies are very small, (between 2-10 individuals). The butterfly was recorded in 2009 at [20+] sites in Hampshire, but over the last decade there have been no record of sightings from at least five previous sites, and is probably extinct from the Isle of Wight. However Hampshire is blessed with some of the best sites in the country, particularly in the Meon Valley. The new '**South Downs National Park**' could and should enable a viable and detailed study of this butterfly, at its eleventh hour of need.

I became the Purple Emperor Coordinator for Hampshire in 2001, knowing this spectacular specie from Bentley Wood, Butterwood and particularly Botley Wood, my local woodland. Before the building of the village of Whiteley I used to see it on the ground on a regular basis. One particular day in July I had a very friendly male imbibing on my camera case for well over two hours. He was sucking up the 'mineral salts' which the males require during mating. The sight of a male 'wing waving' on the ground flashing its Purple Sheen and catching the sunlight on his fore-wings is the sort of experience which stays with you a very long time, and certainly gets you hooked.

In 2002 a study of the Purple Emperor was started in several areas in the country where this butterfly flies in good numbers. Where did it disappear to in the afternoons was often asked and the enigma of '**assembly points**' has answered this question, but like all the laws of nature, each year we learn more and more.

In 2005, a particular male Purple Emperor in Alice Holt Forest was christened 'Brian' after a butterfly friend of mine, and he was very spectacular, in despatching his adversaries trying to vie for some of his territories around his Oak stands. He was noted at this site between the 4<sup>th</sup> July and 31<sup>st</sup> July. He wasn't the only Emperor to have a name, as the Emperors at this site become a part of the scenery. Each has their own particular traits and characteristics, which makes identification easier for counting and studying how particular males and females behave around their assembly points.

One afternoon a 'wounded' female Emperor was brought to me, she had been found in a large wood near to the village of Denmead. It appeared she'd had a bird strike; she was in a cardboard box, unable to fly. She had a good left wing, but her right wing was all shot away. She lasted 16 days in this condition being and fed on sugar soaked cotton wool although she never took to the sprig of Sallow put in the box.

I hoped she had already laid her batch of eggs before this mishap had befallen her.

The butterfly was known from many sites in Hampshire, but since the study of its 'assembly points' the butterfly has taken on a new dimension. The Purple Emperor is now reported from far more sites than when I began coordinating this magnificent specie. Looking up into the heavens in the afternoon is a far better proposition now, to most Emperor Recorders. With the aid of binoculars and a deck chair, looking at butterflies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is now what it should be, why should 'twitchers' have all the fun?

2009 will go down as one of my best years for butterflies, I had travelled to Borneo and Singapore in June and encountered numerous tropical butterflies in, and around the resort we stayed at in Kota Kinabalu, also around Mt Kinabalu which is the highest Mountain in South East Asia. In Singapore I went to the local gardens just up from the hotel and the butterflies were everywhere, and the locals were fascinated by my camera technique!

Before I left for Borneo in May I did a full survey of the Butser Hill complex in Queen Elizabeth Country Park and the Duke of Burgundy is quite common there, probably making the site one of the largest in the country. I also had the privilege to venture onto MOD land known as Porton Down in May, visiting a site known as the Isle of Wight Hill, which had been 'under-surveyed' in the past. Here in beautiful Beech woodland, there were excellent counts of Duke of Burgundy, and good clumps of Primrose for their caterpillars to feed on, and the rarer Pearl-Bordered Fritillary, where there were good areas of Common Dog-Violet.

Of course the migrating Painted Lady numbers were breathtaking in May and June, and equally again in August, when the next generation hatched out. The Small Tortoiseshell managed to make-a-mends for several poor years. The Purple Emperor also had an excellent year, with good numbers flying in many woodlands, with the top prize going to Straits Enclosure, where males were 'playing' tag, flying in three's and fours up and down the main ride.

So what about the butterflies in Hampshire's future? I'm optimistic for some of the species which are on the *Priority species list*. The *Adonis Blue* has colonised several new sites since my inauguration into BBCS in 1984, although it is struggling to hold onto several sites, mainly due to weather factors I feel. The *Silver-Spotted Skipper* is holding its own, also colonising several new sites, and re-colonising old ones. The *Marsh Fritillary* unfortunately has not fared the same fate. In 1984 I could still find it in isolated colonies in and around Hook and Camberley in the northern part of Hampshire, only succumbing large concentrations of house building. However, it still crops up in several places year in year out, and hopefully these sites can survive, with the aid of proper management. The *Small Blue* is still quiet common on several downland sites I visit, along with the *Silver-Studded Blue* on the Heathland areas in Hampshire. The *Pearl-Bordered Fritillary* is holding its own in the New Forest, but I suspect being so isolated in other parts of the county, its very hard to keep the management right for such a species, having lost it over the last 25 years at Botley Wood, Crab Wood, Alice Holt Forest, and Spearywell Wood to name a few.

An ambitious project known as '*The Tytherley woods project*', aims to secure many of the woods in and around the Romsey and Winchester areas. Linking these with woods on the borders of Wiltshire and Dorset, and create natural corridors, with traditional management, which should in turn secure such species as the Duke of Burgundy, and the Pearl-Bordered Fritillary.

The *Small Pearl-Bordered Fritillary* has fared no better, with losses in Botley Wood, Alice Holt Forest, and last year in Pamber Forest in Northern Hampshire. The specie is just about hanging on in the New Forest. The *Wall Brown* butterfly has almost disappeared from the South- East coast of Hampshire except for around Hurst Castle, but most notably on Portsdown Hill, where 10 years ago it was fairly common.

I'm a great believer we can not and should not give up, our Flora and Fauna is a very important indicator of how well our landscape is adjusting to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. With the added pressures of Global Warming, A Population explosion, and the added pressures of more houses being built on our ever de-creasing Green Belt land.

Our precious Butterflies and Moths are the first indicators of how well the environment is doing, and it's important to understand that not only is the media coverage, important to gain 'recruits' to our cause. Landowners, and especially farmers, who own so much of the land, which borders our very isolated habitats, where most of our common and rarer species live.

Set aside land is definitely helping in the problems we now face, and most importantly to try and build corridors, with the help of woods, hedgerows and grassland for these important indicators, to move about and re-colonize other sites, so we can all enjoy these precious insects for ourselves and future generations to come.

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