

## Reserves News May 2011 Issue

### Top News!

Jayne Chapman has been appointed as Branch Reserves Officer to takeover when I retire at the end of September. She starts in post on 1<sup>st</sup> August for a two month handover period. She will be coming along to a few other events in June & July so you will start to have opportunities to all meet up soon.

### Butterflies at the Reserves

At the time of writing (8<sup>th</sup> June) Spring sunshine has turned into Summer rain! But lets not forget May has been an excellent month for butterflies. It is hard to pick on just one thing as a highlight at the reserves so I will mention some from each.

At Magdalen Hill Down top highlight has to be Green Hairstreaks! In 2010 we became aware of large numbers – up to 40 – congregating on the top hedge at the Extension. This year the same thing happened again but more individuals were obvious both here and in other parts of the reserve. On May Day bank holiday Monday Thelma Smalley counted a hundred and then gave up counting, estimating there were at least 200! Interestingly Patrick Fleet saw a female laying on Bird's-foot-trefoil. We usually assume they are breeding on Common Rockrose at MHD but the books do list a number of larval foodplants. Of course the species is very photogenic and the ease with which they could both be seen and photographed was a joy to visitors. Grizzled Skippers were seen both in greater numbers and in more parts of the reserve and it was pleasing that there were a number of sightings of Dingy Skipper.



On the public walk on 4<sup>th</sup> May the number of Six-spot Burnet moth caterpillars and pupa – papery cocoons decorating plant stems – was a major talking point. There were possibly 10,000 on the Extension. Does anyone fancy trying to count the moths now that they are flying!

At Yew Hill both Grizzled Skippers and Dingy Skippers were seen for the second year running, which is really good news.

And Bentley Station Meadow's highlight was the sighting I had on 3<sup>rd</sup> of May of a Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Patrick Fleet and Colin Beyer saw several on 6<sup>th</sup> May. Although there is a possibility that these had been released, we did enjoy seeing them. On the same day they found a Purple Hairstreak caterpillar that had fallen off an oak tree and landed in Colin's wheelbarrow. More exciting than that was the sighting of a Green Hairstreak – just very occasionally seen at the meadow. On the moth front that day they found larvae of nine species including Merveille du Jour. It has been a fantastic Spring for long-horn moths and Patrick and Colin saw three species that day. There were several sightings of Broad-bordered Bee Hawk Moth nectaring on Bugle.

### **Common Blue – a question answered.**

At one of the walks in May I was asked the question “Are ants associated with Common Blues? I did not know for sure but I know a man who does! I always turn to *The Butterflies of Britain and Ireland* by Jeremy Thomas to find the answers to those tricky questions on butterfly behaviour. In fact we find the book immensely useful in providing information on butterfly requirements for micro habitats,

Any here is what is written about Common Blues and ants. The caterpillars make a chirruping tuneless song, too soft for human ears. The sounds synchronise with the protrusion of its shiny black head as it walks and almost certainly attracts ants. Nevertheless although the caterpillar possesses the same organs of attraction as the Large Blue its powers of attraction are weak. Only 19 of the 25 caterpillars JT watched for long periods in the wild were attended by ants & in most cases it was just a solitary ant rather than the clusters that smother Adonis and Chalkhill Blue caterpillars. Anyway JT writes at length about this – well worth reading.

As I have said his observations do help to advise us on management but we feel there is still a lot to be seen and understood about butterflies and caterpillars so if you feel inspired by his writing then have a word and I can suggest some things to investigate.

### **Surveys and studies**

Various surveys and studies are ongoing at the reserves. Phil Budd is doing hoverflies and updating the botanical records at BSM. Theresa Paul is studying how habitat created for butterflies and moths is benefiting hoverflies at MHD.

And Rory O'Connor from CEH is studying Chalkhill Blue pathogens at MHD.

Eleanor Hewins is surveying the vegetation on MHD North roadside field as part of a Natural England nationwide survey on the grassland option for creating species rich semi-natural grassland.

### **TV**

If you saw the State of Farming on Monday 30<sup>th</sup> May you would have seen Chris Packham rolling in the cowslips, listening to the wonderful skylarks at MHD and he did mention the good work that Butterfly Conservation had done in creating such a wonderful reserve.

And on 11<sup>th</sup> May I was approached on MHD by a Swedish TV crew. They had been filming a piece in Winchester about Jane Austin and needed some shoots of fine English countryside so they chose MHD.

### **Conservation Management Work**

Patrick has been busy mainly at MHD controlling problem plants both by cutting (and in this task he is often assisted by regular volunteer Colin Beyer) and by spraying with Round-up. At MHD the main offender is wild clematis! At Bentley control of bracken is necessary. At all reserves some limited cutting of nettles is undertaken to provide fresh growth for second brood Small Tortoiseshells.

On 11<sup>th</sup> May Serco cut the paths through the tree and shrub areas on North, along the south side of part of hardened path and an area near the car park where a lot of wild clematis had grown.



The main aim of the cutting is both to provide attractive paths for visitors to walk on and good butterfly habitat in the cut areas. This works because the cut plants like Bird's-foot-trefoil and Kidney Vetch sprout fresh growth and flowers a bit later than non cut stuff. And that is ideal for second broods.

Serco use a cut & collect machine so that no arisings are left on the sward, which is very important. Only a relatively small percentage of the total is cut so that fits in with our conservation principles too. " Don't do the same thing to the whole of the site at the same time.

### **Branch Visit to Flower Farms Shalborne, Nr Marlborough.**

**Sunday 3 July, Visit to Flower Farms, Shalbourne, near Marlborough SN8 3PS. Leader:** Flower Farms staff. **Contact:** Alison Harper Tel 01962 882261 (mobile on the day 07510 534799). Charles Flower is the consultant who assisted with the restoration to flower-rich grassland of the Magdalen Hill Down Ext. His farm is a most interesting place with demonstrations, talks and tours guided by the staff. The guided tour last one-and-half hours but visitors are welcome to remain at the farm afterwards and explore. Bring a picnic! Entry charge £5.00 a head, payable on the day. **Names of those intending to come, and a contact tel.no or e-mail must be given to Alison AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. Meet:** at 11.20 am in the car park at Carvers Hill Farm, SN8 3PS, on the edge of Shalbourne village, below the Shalbourne/Great Bedwyn crossroads on the A338 four miles from Hungerford. For further information contact Alison.

### **MHD Flowers**



Just as the cowslips fade other flowers start to bloom. We were particularly pleased with how well the Horseshoe Vetch and Rockrose was flowering in the chalk scrapes. The picture opposite is on the Extension, but chalk corner on North was equally lovely.

## **Gardening for Butterflies and Big Butterfly Count**

The Plant For Butterflies Campaign started 4th April!

By the time you read this Butterfly Conservation will have launched this new campaign to both encourage people to support butterflies by the way they garden and also to attract butterflies to their garden and then take part in The Big Butterfly Count 16th to 31st July. [www.bigbutterflycount.org](http://www.bigbutterflycount.org)

The top five nectar plants Butterfly Conservation recommends are: Buddleia, Verbena bonariensis, the Perennial Wallflower (Bowles Mauve), Lavender and Marjoram (Oregano).

Of course for those of you who already have these plants there are others you can try. Red Valerian *Centranthus rubra* is great and it attracts moths too. Swallowtails nectaring on Sweet Williams in a garden near Strumpshaw Fen are an enduring memory of a visit to Norfolk.

Its important to think about nectar sources for late Summer and Autumn. Already we are aware that flowers like Bramble are blooming early. If we do get a hot dry summer butterflies could be seriously short of nectar in a few months time.

Think about planting some single dahlias – regularly dead-headed they will keep on flowering. That is important with buddleias too. For September the best flowers for butterflies are Ice Plant *Sedum spectabile* and Michelmas daisy.

Pick up news of Big Butterfly Count here

May Newsletter <http://dmtrk.net/t/DGT-F8K1-E03M8XL9CC/cr.aspx>

The methodology of a ten minute count described in this newsletter is a useful technique.

The June Newsletter is just available too.

<http://dmtrk.net:80/DGT-FYIP-E03M8XL9CC/cr.aspx>

Here's hoping that the weather improves and that you will all enjoy seeing lots of butterflies and moths.

Lynn Fomison  
Early June.