

## **DORSET BRANCH BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION AGM. 15<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2019**

### **REPORT FROM RECORDS OFFICER ON 2019**

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The making of the Dorset Butterfly Record Officer's Report is always a 'mission impossible'. This is because there can never be a time when all the data has been collected in, verified & analysed. These are the days of 'private enterprise' in Butterfly Recording where recorders have an increasing choice of what systems to use for entering their data. For this reason they may reach us from a wide variety of sources including: 'Living Records', 'iRecord', the UKBMS butterfly transect walking scheme, the Wider Countryside recording scheme, Butterfly Garden Records, the Dorset Butterfly Website, Dorset Environmental Record Office, the Big Butterfly Count, private individual data on standard sheets, private paper records & data sent in from outside Dorset by visitors. The Record Officer is very lucky to have a hard working team who help to verify data & enter it. Even so it is never possible to get all the data in, verified & analysed, for a February AGM. This year we have done quite well but have yet to receive Wider Countryside Records, DERC data or Garden Records. This means that we are not in a position to report on the new 2015-19 Dorset Butterfly Atlas & tell how many kilometre squares have been recorded for Dorset's butterflies & whether we have done better than other previous 5 year atlases. We believe that, thanks to the excellent 'white hole' reporting scheme devised by Dominic Greves & Lyn Pullen for our website, we might have recorded more Dorset kilometre squares than ever before but can't be certain. The Website reports for 2019 show big increases in butterflies recorded compared to previous years. The Transect walk data also shows a record count of butterflies counted on the walks & also in the average numbers of butterflies counted per site since 2006. It is possible that by the time of our 4 Butterfly Recorders' meetings at Toller Porcorum, Corfe Castle, Wimborne & East Stour there might be more news available so do please come to the one nearest to you.

The good news is that the 68 Dorset Transect Walks have all been verified & analysed. We have 3 walks entered for the first time at 'Weymouth Relief Road' [27 species], 'RSPB Chafey's Lake' [23 species] & 'RSPB |Coombe Heath, Arne' [20 species]. Crunching up the data for 2019 there were 11 species which attained 'winner status' & only 4 could be classified as 'losers'. Five

species, **Painted Lady**, **Dark Green Fritillary**, **Lulworth & Essex Skippers & Orange Tip** all attained Super League status with over 50% of the walks normally recording them & reporting over 50% increases both on 2018 & their annual average species counts since the walks began. Another species, **Holly Blue**, just recorded the over 50% target on its annual averages. Three others, **Red Admiral**, **Grayling**, & **Marbled White** secured the over 50% level on 2018. **Grizzled Skippers & Marsh Fritillaries** were ‘marginal winners’ because although they met the target of 50% increases on 2018 they were actually over 50% down on their annual averages. The 3 ‘losers’ for 2019, **Chalkhill Blue**, **Small Tortoiseshell & Clouded Yellow** were all over 50% down on their annual averages on over half of the walks recording them.

2019 has been quite a successful year for unusual migrants. Pride of place must be given to the **Long-tailed Blue**. There was a migration of this species on a wide front all along the south coast from Cornwall to Kent. For once rather more than usual were picked up by recorders in Dorset. The final total of 9 was probably the highest ever for Dorset & was dated between the 15<sup>th</sup> August & 19<sup>th</sup> September. From West to East the sightings were at Weymouth [3.8 Adrian Flynn & 1.9 David Gogh], Dorchester [13.8 Ashley Matthews], Alner’s Gorse [15.8 Mark Pike], Wareham Forest [20.8 Guy Freeman], Durlston [21.8 Mark Kincaid], Godlingston Heath [28.8 Simon Crampin], Parkstone [18.9 Clive Randall] & Stanpit [27.8 Paul Morrison]. The records included many photos & the first ever of eggs & caterpillars. These came from Neil Matthews. His son, Ashley had seen a Long-tailed Blue in the garden in Dorchester & Neil carried out a very full search of his Everlasting Sweet Peas. He was able to photograph the eggs & a tiny caterpillar observed as it was tunnelling into a seed pod. Thanks to Neil Hulme’s research paper on the Long-Tailed Blue migrations in Sussex & Kent, which he allowed me to circulate to anyone who was interested, Dorset was now aware of the importance of Everlasting Sweet Peas & that, if the weather allowed, there might be a 2<sup>nd</sup> brood of LTBs. Unfortunately the weather was not obliging & it is probable that only the Long Tailed Blue seen & photographed in a Parkstone garden on 18<sup>th</sup> September in perfect condition, was likely to have been a genuine Dorset 2<sup>nd</sup> brood. Hopefully we have now learned to understand what to look for & will be better prepared if another migration year comes along. So far it is thought that the English 2<sup>nd</sup> broods do not breed but actually ‘reverse migrate’ back across the Channel. It is a possibility that

eventually global warming may enable these butterflies to overwinter in England.

There were sightings of several other species which might or might not have been reaching Dorset under their own steam. A **Continental Swallowtail**, not to be confused with our native species, was seen & photographed by Peter Fitchett on 5<sup>th</sup> August around Hardy's Monument. Most of the Swallowtails seen in Dorset tend to be in the Poole & Bournemouth conurbation & are releases but it is possible that this one had made the crossing. Last year's **Queen of Spain Fritillary** was followed by another this year on 11<sup>th</sup> August which was seen & photographed by James Phillips on a private farm near Horton under the Countryside Stewardship scheme. This species has good colonies in the sand dunes on the Belgian & North West French coast & frequently makes the crossing to East Anglia. The larval food-plants are Wild & Field Pansies, which are unfortunately not common in southern England, so perhaps this explains why native colonies have not been established. On June 1<sup>st</sup> a **Glanville Fritillary** was seen & photographed by Suzie Hoare & Richard Woodhouse on Melbury Down & another on 6<sup>th</sup> June by Mark Pike nearby on Clubmens Down. Back in 2003 there had been similar sightings not only on Clubmens but also on several sites across the border in Wilts. It was thought that these were unofficial releases as the species was unlikely to have migrated from the Isle of Wight. Since then an inland colony has been set up in Surrey but it is equally unlikely that this year's Glanvilles could have come from there. So it is probable that these were also releases & the rumour grapevine suggests there is someone local who breeds Glanvilles. It is very unlikely that Glanville Fritillaries could breed successfully on the North Dorset chalk as on the Isle of Wight the caterpillars only survive below cliffs which are being continually eroded to provide large areas of bare ground where young plantains can grow in big numbers. However Global warming could gradually change things so it would be a good idea for people to investigate later this year to check whether any have survived! A **Monarch** was seen in the Lyme Regis garden of Philip White on the 15<sup>th</sup> October. This is the usual time when strays get carried on air currents across the Atlantic & there was another record from Devon at the same time so this may be a genuine migrant & not a release from a Butterfly Wedding.

County Record Officers have recently been asked to say whether **Large Tortoiseshells & Clouded Yellows** might now be 'native' English species managing to overwinter in some form. This is not an easy question to answer &

again this year Dorset had Large Tortoiseshell sightings. It is thought that at least 7 individuals were seen, the highest number since 2008. An early group of dates range from 27<sup>th</sup> January to 28<sup>th</sup> March. Most of these were seen & frequently photographed in Portland usually in the neighbourhood of Tout Quarry by around 17 different recorders. It is difficult to be sure of how many were of the same butterflies. There were two exceptions which turned up in outhouses one in Fortuneswell Portland & the other far to the west in Thorncombe by Graham Smith. There is the possibility that these had hibernated. There is hear-say evidence that some people living on Portland, who bred Large Tortoiseshells, were forced to leave home at very short notice & release their breeding stock. Later in the year on 30<sup>th</sup> June Large Tortoiseshells were again reported on Portland but this time in the south end near the Bird Observatory. A further less certain sighting, because there was no photograph, had come from Winspit by John & Sheila Acreman on 29<sup>th</sup> June. So it is still not clear whether Large Tortoiseshells are Dorset natives & will remain so until evidence of breeding & caterpillars can be found. The **Clouded Yellow** case has progressed further thanks to the careful research of Michael Skelton on the Bournemouth/Boscombe under-cliffs. Since 1998-99 he has regularly found the caterpillars hibernating & surviving to emerge as butterflies in April on the warm under-cliffs. It is probable that caterpillars may be surviving in other parts of Dorset but so far there has been no definitive evidence. Last year's total count of Clouded Yellows on Dorset's Transect walks was 133, the best since 2014 but very modest compared to the great year of 2000 when 1,035 were counted on fewer walks than we have today. Dorset's other regular migrant butterfly, the **Painted Lady**, had one of its 'big' years with a total count on Transect walks of 2,392. Strangely this did not rival the other peak years [5,035 in 2009, 3,123 in 2003 &, still the record, 18,311 in 1996]. Possibly this may be because none of last year's walks were 'hit' by one of the migrant streams like the 500 seen by David Wareham on 23<sup>rd</sup> August occupying a patch of ground roughly the size of a tennis court on Hengistbury Head.

Finally I conclude by thanking all those who saw butterflies & sent the records in for us. Also grateful thanks to Robin George, Arthur Bryant, Stephen Brown, Peter Carter & Jon Bell who enabled my staged retirement plan to get underway by taking over the organisation & presentation of the 4 regional meetings for butterfly recorders in 2018. Thanks to Robin George & the tutors the Butterfly Recording & Identification day went well at Cerne Abbas & this course continues to provide preliminary training for future recorders. Also a tribute to

Lyn Pullen for collecting all the 2018 information & putting it into a report soon to be distributed. A big thank you to Martin Raper who has continued to cope with the technical problems arising in the Transect Walker recording system which are usually well beyond my understanding; also to Nick Urch who keeps the verification system of web site records running smoothly. I am also very grateful to Adrian Neil, who, besides all the work he does as Secretary, has continued to coordinate the Garden & Wider Countryside Recording.

Unfortunately Jan Galley may be moving South-West this year. For as long as I can remember she has been walking & coordinating walks for the Branch.

Currently she has been coordinating all but one of the Powerstock Walks & all those at Kingcombe. We shall miss her very much. Finally I would like to pay tribute to John Tubb who sadly died earlier this year. His contribution to the Dorset Branch in those early days was enormous. The routes of many of the Transect Walks which we are doing today were devised by John. He played a leading part in the management of many reserves with annual targeted scrub clearances. Some may remember his 8mm Film on butterflies which amazed audiences in village halls all over Dorset & included some fine close up moving coverage of Purple Emperors probing for minerals on woodland tracks.