

Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation

Chair's Report AGM 2022

Welcome to our first real AGM since the arrival of Covid, I hope that, like me, you are all feeling hugely relieved to be able to take part in a real meeting!

Our branch has over 1000 members and benefits in many ways from the positive energy of our wonderful volunteers. I should like to thank all of them for their hard work - the Committee, the people helping at this AGM, those who undertake conservation work, analyse butterfly sightings, run events, handle the website and social media, keep the administrative and financial work up to date and much more. Also, of course, all those who go out and count butterflies and let us know their results. A big thankyou to you all.

It has been another strange year of mixed fortunes! The headline from Butterfly Conservation following this year's Big Butterfly Count suggested that it had been the lowest count ever – possibly due to the very hot dry spell in July and August. We won't know until next season what the full consequences will be to our butterflies of this summer's dessication of their larval foodplants and the drying up of their nectar sources but it will be interesting to see the full analysis of this season's transect results when they are produced – and some of these will have been affected by last year's conditions so the picture is complex. We have over 80 different transect walks in Dorset with around 250 volunteers involved, a fantastic effort. In addition we have the Wider Countryside surveys, the Garden Butterfly counts and the phenomenal number of sightings sent in to our website each year (more than 80,000!), and to other recording sites. All this year's results will be available for analysis and discussion at the regional meetings our branch holds in the early months of each year – they are well worth attending. All the data makes a very valuable contribution to our understanding of the conservation requirements of butterflies and moths.

The changes we are witnessing are not all negative – the rapid movement northwards of species like the Comma, Speckled Wood and Ringlet prove this. The successful reintroduction of the Large Blue in several southern counties and the re-establishment in England of the Chequered Skipper are hugely exciting. This summer in Dorset we have recorded several butterfly species spreading up from mainland Europe, admittedly in small numbers. Queen of Spain Fritillary, Scarce Swallowtail and the continental Swallowtail are examples, and the influx of Clouded Yellows with a few Painted Ladies in the latter part of this summer was noticed by many people, as were the Red Admirals arriving well into November. Some of these may well survive the winter if it is not too cold.

The southerly and easterly airstreams in the late summer provided great excitement for the moth fraternity with stunning species like the Orache, Striped Hawk-moth, Convolvulus Hawk-moth and the delightful Humming-bird Hawk-moths which many members of the public enjoyed seeing and sent in photographs to our gallery page. And the end of October saw the arrival of many immigrant Crimson Speckled moths, a beautiful species which up to recently has been a rare arrival to the UK.

These immigrant arrivals and the northward movement of relatively common species are dramatic and headline grabbing, but our main concern must be for our more sedentary species that have very specific ecological requirements which tend to restrict their distribution to localised pockets on vulnerable sites. Our conservation attention should continue to be focussed on species like the Marsh Fritillary, Duke of Burgundy and Wood White which seem to respond well to carefully targeted habitat management and which have flourished on some of their Dorset locations in recent years.

One of Dorset's many special places for butterflies is Ryewater Nursery, Clive Farrell's famous 100 acres of mixed habitats just south of Sherborne, and we are very fortunate to have Wren Franklin with us this afternoon to tell us about the development of the site from the intensively farmed land that Clive took over to the natural gem that Ryewater is today.