

Dorset branch of Butterfly Conservation 2023 AGM and Members' afternoon

Saturday October 21st 2023

Chair's Report

It has been an extraordinary butterfly season with the numbers recorded (and the weather) swinging between extremes - this seems to be a pattern we are going to have to get accustomed to. The statistics from the website entries and the transect results show a 40% reduction in the number of spring butterflies like Orange-Tips, Red Admiral etc (see graphs) though the habitat specialists like the Duke of Burgundy and Grizzled Skipper did surprisingly well. It has been suggested that the drop in numbers might have been caused by the 2022 drought.

In contrast, August and September saw a 20% increase in the number of butterflies with the late summer species doing particularly well and numbers being boosted by enormous numbers of migrant species like Red Admirals. And the results of the Big Butterfly Count were up on all the previous 4 years:- Red Admirals were up 338%, with Gatekeeper having a superb season and coming in 2nd followed by the Large and Small Whites and the Holly Blue. In contrast the Green-veined Whites showed a serious downward trend.

It wasn't a good year for Painted Ladies or Clouded Yellows, though the numbers picked up in September and October with the influx of migrant species of butterflies and moths brought in by the S and SE winds. Especially notable was the dramatic invasion by Red Admirals in recent weeks followed by their southward migration back to the continent. The same weather systems brought in many rare moths and migrant butterfly species like Camberwell Beauty, Long-tailed Blue and Large Tortoiseshell and just recently Monarchs.

The records sent into the branch website have reached an amazing 80,689 so far with 50 species reported. Meadow Brown and Gatekeeper have had an enormous number of reports but the Brimstone has been reported in every week of the April to September transect period, with a total of 2633 records.

We are getting a consistent pattern of extreme weather conditions, drought, wet, cold, hot – with this week proving the point! And although weather factors must have an enormous influence on butterfly numbers, the main cause of the continuing decline of many butterfly species especially the habitat specialists is agricultural intensification, chemical use and habitat loss leading to the destruction of our biodiversity and causing our island to become one of the most nature-poor in Europe.

One species whose decline is particularly worrying as it is not a habitat specialist is the Small Tortoiseshell. It flies through most months of the year between March and October but only 428 reports were sent in to our website this year – compare that with the Silver-washed Fritillary which flies for 2-3 months of the year and had 521 records sent in. Chalkhill Blue remains worryingly few as well.

Many people will have watched the Wild Isles series in the spring which featured our reserve at Lankham Bottom and its phenomenal rabbit population (Simon King reports seeing 600 pairs of eyes with his night viewer!) The rabbit numbers may be good for our Buzzards, Red Kites and Stoats but they tend to eat all the grass thereby depriving the grazier of grass for his cattle. It may also be that the short sward caused by the combination of the recent droughts and the overpopulation of bunnies was the cause of the huge numbers and small size of the larval webs of the Marsh Fritillaries on the reserve this autumn. A record 504 webs were counted which is a staggering number (and a great achievement by the team who did the counting!).

Strategies are being developed to survey and conserve the populations of our important species like Duke of Burgundy, Marsh Fritillary, Wood White and Chalkhill Blue. A good start was made this

spring and thanks must go to all the recorders who helped with the surveys. We will be continuing with these in 2024 and if anyone can help, they would be very welcome. Please see Steve Brown.

As always, we had an extensive programme of events and guided walks through the summer with many thanks to Arthur Bryant for organising it. Some were poorly attended (have we any ideas why? It wasn't always the weather), but some were extremely well attended with 26 coming to the Ryewater moth and butterfly session in June and 27 joining in the activities at Alners Gorse on July 28th/29th. The Cerne Abbas butterfly id day in May was presented by Amber Rosenthal and Steve Brown and was a great success with 16 people taking part. The other one day training sessions held at Alners Gorse attracted between 6 and 12 people each time and altogether brought in nearly £400 for the branch. Many thanks to the leaders for giving their time so generously. We are going to repeat this idea next spring and summer.

The Lulworth Estate advertised butterfly walks for the public on three days this summer, one was rained off, the other two drew small groups of visitors and raised £22.50 for the branch as a donation from the Estate to us. Thanks to Steve Brown and Bernard Franklin for leading for us.

On our two reserves there has been the usual programme of maintenance work which includes scrub cutting and ragwort control. At Lankham there was (inexplicably) very little ragwort – even where there had been huge amounts left uncut last year and the year before, there were extremely few rosettes for 2024, let alone flower spikes for this year. As usual we cut the 50-100m swathe round the boundary of the reserve. Mike Roberts and his team felled 10 large and seriously diseased ash trees along the southern border of Lankham Bottom and more are going to have to go this winter.

A group of volunteers who help us at Alners Gorse each week come rain or shine, and often go unacknowledged, are the 7 pony lookers who walk down to the reserve one day a week to see that our ponies are well and happy. We are very grateful to you for your unwavering commitment!

Moths – we have held a number of mothing sessions this summer with a good degree of success. At the Alners meeting at the end of July, we managed to catch a record 9 Dingy Mochas and a Dark Crimson Underwing as well as several Light Crimson Underwings – a species we are sure is breeding in the area. Alners now has a moth species list of over 600 – largely thanks to Jack Oughton's excellent record keeping. Jack added several new species for the reserve at the July meeting. We tend not to focus too much on moths as we don't want to encroach on the territory of the Dorset Moth Group but we frequently get moth-oriented comments and enquiries to our website which Jack is always very happy to answer. We got a huge number of enquiries about Jersey Tigers in July and August (some of them from well away from Dorset, which must be a reflection of the high standard of our website). They are stunning moths and a species which is now well established in Dorset.

Georgie our treasurer will say more about the funds that our branch has received this season, the most notable of which must be the phenomenal sum of £4200 raised by Wren and Fred Franklin on their John O'Groats to Lands End cycle ride and the large sums collected by Ryewater Nursery for the guided walks they do there for clubs and other groups which visit them. We must also give a plug for the beautiful calendars Steve Brown has produced for the branch – last year's illustrated some of the famous late Ken Dolbear's photos and this year's has some of Ken's but mainly Mark Pike's amazing photos. They are for sale for £10; last year's raised around £700 for the branch.

As always, thanks must go to the branch committee who work tirelessly to support what must be one of the most active branches in the organisation – Jane Smith helps to produce the newsletters and annual butterfly report, Lyn Pullen not only works with Jane on the newsletters but is also responsible for our wonderful website, John East looks after the Gallery page of the website, Arthur organises the events programmes through the year, Adrian Neil is our ever patient secretary, Andy Martin is our membership secretary who reports that we now have 1063 members

in the Dorset branch (compare with last year when we reported 980, but this could have been inaccurate), Robin George is our records person who has an incredible depth of knowledge about records and trends in our county (and beyond) and who organises all the transects in Dorset – now over 80! Richard Norman is our stats person on the committee, collating all the activity statistics, as well as organising several transect walks. Steve Brown is involved in many of the surveying initiatives through the year, helped to run the Cerne ID day, produced the calendars for this year and last, and has recently set up a new conservation project in the woods on Monmouth Hill overlooking Milton Abbas where we shall be running workparties though this winter leading to the establishment of a new transect next year. And finally Georgie Laing our indefatigable treasurer has the challenge of looking after our accounts when the branch no longer has control of its bank account as it used to and sums of money seem to come and go with a worrying degree of randomness!

The final thank you must go to our members and volunteers for your support today. Where would our branch be with you!

Nigel Spring 21.10.23