

Adastra Report 2017

2017: Apocalypse Postponed 2016 had been a terrible year for our butterflies. The unprecedented mild winter of 2015/16 and the cold spring had a devastating effect on our county's butterfly populations and resulted in UK butterflies' 'fourth worst year on record' according to the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (UKBMS) which has been studying our butterfly populations since 1976. You may recall my thoroughly depressing article in last year's Adastra review where I reported that 2016 was 'a new kind of hell' – a warm summer under blue skies with hardly any butterflies.

However in the winter of 2016/17 I did find some solace while scraping my windscreen and cursing the cold that these chilly conditions are just what our butterflies need to help them get through the British winter. And it certainly worked. 2017 was a more a 'normal' year weather-wise. It was cold when it should be cold, warm when it should be warm and our butterflies returned to our downs, meadows and woodlands.

Throughout 2017 we were treated to a great year for butterflies with most species recovering well after the doom and gloom of 2016. One species which had been noticeably absent from transect surveys in 2017 was the **Small Copper**. Most people had to wait until the autumn's final brood to see this usually widespread and common butterfly. On the first warm days of spring 2017 however this butterfly was back out in force proving the ability that these tenacious little insects have for recovering their populations. From his transect survey at High and Over near Seaford Bob Eade reported "Small Coppers are already having a far better time this year than in the horrendous spring of 2016. On Greenway Bank on 21 April five were recorded. This is a 500% improvement on the entire first brood sightings from last year". And this thankfully applied to many other species too which managed to rebuild populations and regain ground in 2017 thanks to suitable weather conditions at every stage of their life cycle. Our butterfly recorders were reinvigorated too as throughout a warm summer they were treated to an abundance of butterflies on their surveys.

We are blessed in Sussex with an active wildlife recording community as the annual biological recorders' seminar proves. Aside from casual records, Sussex Butterfly Conservation also receives records from established butterfly recording initiatives. Butterfly transect surveys (or 'Pollard Walks') have been a standard means of surveying butterflies all across the globe since Ernie Pollard and colleagues designed and piloted the methodology in the 1970s. In the UK a fixed route is walked each week during a 26-week period between 1 April and 29 September every year. In Sussex we have over 50 dedicated transect walkers. No matter the distance, the efforts put in by our transect walkers each week are remarkable and the data generated plays a vital role in understanding butterfly population ecology, informs conservation and acts as an indicator of environmental change. For the transect walkers themselves the commitment and pleasure are found from monitoring a familiar butterfly site as it changes through the seasons.

In 2009 another less intensive monitoring scheme was launched to contribute to the UKBMS. The Wider Countryside Butterfly Scheme (WCBS) surveyed butterflies in randomly chosen 1km squares across Britain. These squares only require 2-4 annual visits. If you are interesting in establishing a transect survey in an area of your choice or finding your nearest WCBS square then please contact transect@sussex-butterflies.org.uk or wcbs@sussex-butterflies.org.uk

Of course, surveying butterflies in the countryside each week is also great for your physical and mental health (and I'm sure explains the amazing longevity and youthful good looks of our senior surveyors). Not only that – it increases the chance of making some surprising discoveries. Dave Harris

has been undertaking a transect survey of Halcombe Farm near Peacehaven and one sunny day in 2017... well, I'll hand over to Dave so he can tell his story....

*"One of the joys of doing transect walks is that you never know what is going to turn up. Here on the coastal fringes of Sussex it is quite possible this may occasionally be one of our rarer migrants. And so it was on 26 August 2017, at the tail end of a regular 'modified Pollard' route in a field numbered 3003 on the rural land register that a rather pleasurable surprise awaited. Up until that point everything had been rather unremarkable. A few **Adonis** and **Chalk Hill Blues**, a **Silver-spotted Skipper**, a couple of **Clouded Yellow** and considerably more **Small Whites** and **Small Heath** than usual, but nothing really out of the ordinary. Then suddenly an orange – brown butterfly about 20 yards in the distance caught the eye. It was obviously a **Wall Brown**, or at least it seemed to move like it, but something didn't seem quite right. The finger and pen was still hovering over number 94 for **Wall** when the beast fluttered onto another hardhead flower to nectar. **Wall** was immediately replaced by thoughts of either a late **Dark Green Fritillary** (the last of which had been seen here over a month earlier) or else a rather small **Silver-washed**. That would have been nice as it has never been observed here in nearly 10 years of recording, but fate had other plans in store. With curiosity aroused and gathering pace to nudge closer the butterfly rose and flew further ahead, as they do! And so the chase began. Closer then further, further then closer, behind then ahead. Up, down, over and around. But the overall pattern suggested the butterfly was settled and rather more interested in finding flowers than evading a pursuer. Luck was holding. A casual sideways glance was the first hint as the butterfly once again catapulted ahead, but by now the game was almost up. Creeping closer, this time to almost 3 yards, the penny finally dropped. Square wings, square spots, the hint of a 'cheetah - like' triangle. It could only mean one thing – royalty was in the meadow that day! It was a **Queen of Spain Fritillary**! The rest that followed is now well documented, and thanks to Colin Appleton – a very tolerant and obliging landowner indeed - many people enjoyed a very pleasant moment or two in this lovely dry valley. I never did get to see first-hand those pearls under the wings which prompted the name **Queen of Spain**, but by way of compensation some two months later on a warm and sunny day at the end of October her majesty came to say farewell for the season. This time **Bristly Oxtongue**, **Cat's-ear** and **Hawkbit** was on the menu. Perhaps she may return some time soon. Thanks for the memory, ma'am. Your subjects salute you!"*

Elsewhere in the county in 2017 there were sightings of **Large Tortoiseshells** under the elms in North Stoke in March; a tantalising hint that this butterfly which vanished from Sussex in the 1980s was attempting to return. A Continental **Swallowtail** emerged after being found as a caterpillar on a parsley plant purchased in Brighton's Infinity Foods giving us a clue to the artificial origins of some of our migrant visitors. Butterfly Conservation's 'Fritillaries for the Future' project continued to create fantastic habitat for **Pearl-bordered Fritillaries** across Sussex and the project re-introduced the **Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary** to the rides of Rowland Wood near Laughton. Elsewhere Butterfly Conservation staff and volunteers created more butterfly habitats (and hopefully more butterflies) at Rewell Wood, Clapham, Small Dole, Angmering, Graffham, Heyshott, Bevendean, Broadbridge Heath, Burgess Hill, Brighton and Storrington.

Of course, the main highlight of 2017 was the publication of the long-awaited '**The Butterflies of Sussex**' – the result of almost a decade of hard work by a small army of Butterfly Conservation volunteers. Thank you to everyone who purchased the book and for the amazing comments and reviews we received. It was good to know we got it right. We had a wonderful launch event at The Booth Museum of Natural History with our surveyors, sparkling wine and a stuffed warthog. The

book is available to purchase here at today's conference or online at
www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/shop

Reference: Blencowe, M. & Hulme, N. 2017 The Butterflies of Sussex Pisces Publications

Michael Blencowe, Sussex Butterfly Conservation