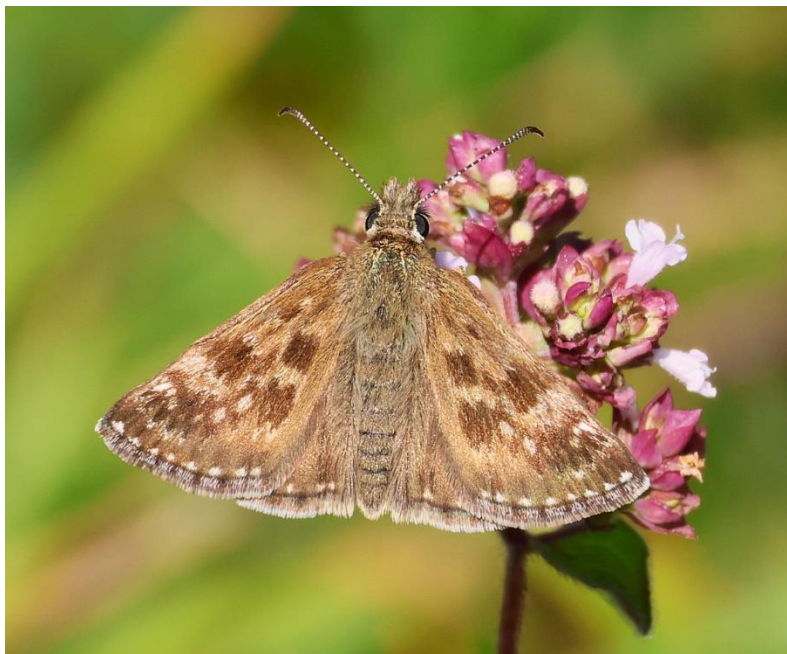


Second-brood Dingy Skippers in Sussex - 2025

Introduction

Whilst Dingy Skippers may be declining nationally, within these county boundaries this species continues to thrive, especially in its core area on the South Downs. On downland its larval foodplant is mostly Horseshoe Vetch, and since both Adonis Blue and Chalk Hill Blue also lay their eggs on this vetch species, where we find these blue butterflies, we should also find Dingy Skippers. Away from “the chalk” Dingy Skippers lay their eggs on Birdsfoot Trefoil, a very common wildflower of short grassland. This member of the “pea family” is ubiquitous in Sussex and can be found in 97% of tetrads (Flora of Sussex, 2018). Given the widespread distribution of Birdsfoot Trefoil, it is unsurprising that Dingy Skippers can be found over most of Sussex, although it is largely absent in the Coastal Plain. Most colonies away from the Downs are usually small or very small, and unless there is a very careful search for this skipper species, it is likely to go un-detected. It is a tiny butterfly with an explosive flight, and it can disappear from view, in a “blink of an eye”. It is a butterfly species that is very easily over-looked, and therefore most probably, under-recorded.



Dingy Skipper on 12/07/2025 (Steyning Downland Scheme) - photo by Paul Day

On downland we should search for Dingy Skippers on sheltered, sun-exposed slopes, wherever we can find chalk turf of reasonable quality. Horseshoe Vetch is more-or-less limited to south-facing downland slopes and only thrives where the sward is very short. Where conditions are ideal we are also likely to find Grizzled Skipper (another spread-wing skipper species), and then we can compare them, side-by-side. Birdsfoot Trefoil is rather “less fussy” in its requirements and grows well where the sward height is slightly taller. This rougher type of chalk grassland is also favoured by Duke of Burgundy, and on my local Storrington Downs, where I find one species, I usually find the other.

Sources of information

In Sussex, we are very fortunate to have many sources of information to assist us with research projects. All the available historical records have been meticulously summarised in “A Revised History of the Butterflies and Moths of Sussex”, by County Recorder, Colin Pratt. In more recent times we have the highly informative “The Butterflies of Sussex”, by Michael Blencowe and Neil Hulme. Last, but by no means least, is the wealth of information available on the Sussex BC website, which covers the years 2006-2025.

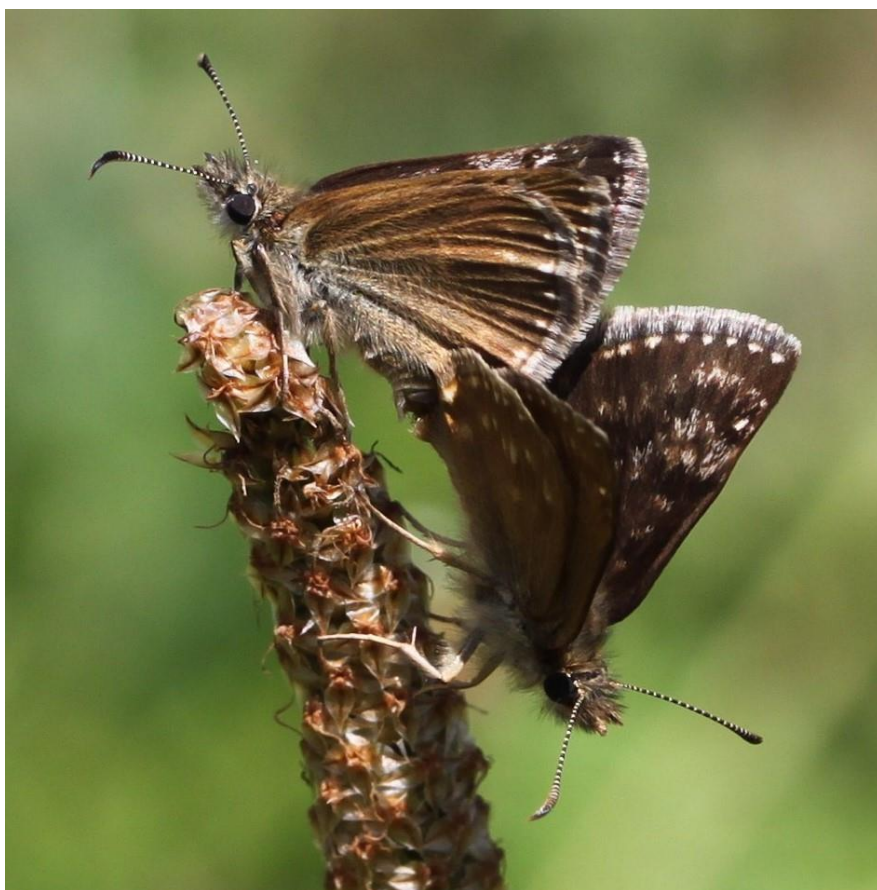
Looking at the past

Historically, second brood Dingy Skippers were very uncommon. In the latter half of the 20th century there were records for 1957, 1976, 1982, 1989, 1990, 1993 and then annually since 1997. The “bumper years” in the 21st century were 2011 (14 posts), 2018 (14 posts), 2020 (16 posts) and now 2025 (21 posts, which included 16 different locations). Although a second brood has been recorded every year since 1997, they have rarely been numerous and apart from the bumper years already mentioned the maximum number of posts for most years was less than six, and in 2006, 2016 and 2023 there was just a single record for each of those years. The majority of posts refer to just one or two individuals and so the annual total is usually very small, and in single figures.

When can we find the second brood?

If we wish to find a second brood Dingy Skipper, when should we go searching? The website records for 2006 – 2025 were carefully checked, and all the second brood reports were in July and August, with a spread of dates between July 8th and August 26th.

A total of 112 posts were found, with 93% of the records between mid-July and mid-August. If you wish to find a second brood Dingy Skipper, you are most likely to find one between July 18th and August 9th. That’s just 22 days, which is a very narrow window of opportunity.



A mating pair on 08/07/2025 (Amberley Downs) - photo by Martin Kalaher

The “bumper years” 2011, 2018, 2020 and 2025

The year 2011 – 14 posts, at 8 different locations.

The second brood season began on July 15th with a record on Malling Down and this was followed by reports from Mill Hill and Kithurst Meadow on the 22nd, and Swanborough Hill on the 24th. On the 28th, Neil Hulme made “A targeted search of the slope and upper glades of Mill Hill, producing 12 Dingy Skippers, this being by far the strongest second brood showing I have ever seen”. Not content with that count, Neil went back to Mill Hill on the 30th and counted 22 individuals. Bearing in mind that most reports are for 1-2 individuals, that was a huge total!

There were further 6+ counts at Mill Hill on July 31st and August 2nd. Also, on the 2nd there was a record of 5 individuals at High and Over, Seaford, a single at Swanborough Hill, and Dingy Skippers “all across the Downs” in the general area of Graffam Down. Five more were seen at Mill Hill on the 3rd and then there were singles at Bo Peep Bostal on the 10th and Woodmancote on the 19th.

The year 2018 – 14 posts, at 10 different locations

The first report was from Mill Hill on July 13th, with another on the 17th. This was followed by records from Castle Hill and Friston Gallops on the 18th, Windover Hill on the 19th, Castle Hill on the 21st and Mill Hill on the 23rd. There were further singles from Rowland Wood on the 23rd, and also Chantry Hill and Malling Down on the 24th. Newtimber Hill and Cissbury Ring had singles on the 25th and then there was quite a gap before further reports from Chantry Hill on August 5th and Beachy Head on August 12th.

The Rowland Wood report was very unusual, for (to my knowledge) it was the first time (in Sussex) a second brood Dingy Skipper was recorded in a woodland setting.

The year 2020 – 16 posts, at 13 locations.

The first report was from Devil's Dyke on July 20th, followed by singles at Blackcap and Lancing Ring, and two individuals at Mill Hill, all on the 22nd. There was one at Cissbury Ring on the 23rd, another at Deep Dean, Windover Hill on the 24th and another at St Leonard's Forest on the 26th. There were two at Goodwood on the 28th, two at Castle Hill on the 29th and six at Chantry Hill on the 30th. Moving into August there were two at Malling Down on the 3rd, with three individuals at both Goodwood and Cissbury Ring, on the 5th. Further singles were recorded at Kithurst Meadow on the 6th and Mill Hill on the 7th. The final report was at Seaford Head on the 18th.

The year 2025 – 21 posts, at 15 locations

There was an exceptionally early record of a mating pair on the Amberley Downs, on July 8th. At Malling Down on the 12th there were "at least eight" and on the same day at Steyning Downland Scheme there were two more. There was a further report at Malling Down on the 15th (no number specified) and a single at Deep dean, Windover Hill on the 16th. There were two on the Amberley Downs and a single at Kithurst Hill on the 17th, the Amberley Downs on the 18th, Chantry Hill (middle combe) on the 21st and North Lancing on the 23rd. There were six at Washington Chalk Pits on the 23rd and singles at Lancing Ring/Steep Down and Beachy Head (Belle Tout) on the 25th. There were further singles on the Amberley Downs on the 27th, Horseshoe Plantation on the 29th, and "small numbers" seen at Mill Hill on the 30th. In August there were six at Chantry Hill (west combe) on the 5th and a single at Malling Down on the 6th. A thorough survey of the Amberley Downs on the 7th produced a large total of eighteen individuals, of which many were very fresh. There were two at Hope Gap, Seaford on the 9th and a single at Warnham Butterfly Fields on the 10th. There was a long gap before the final one of the season in the Beachy Head area on the 25th.

Discussion

For butterfly enthusiasts, 2025 was a very special year. The spring was the warmest and sunniest since records began, and this fine weather continued throughout the whole of the summer. Many butterfly species responded favourably to these excellent breeding conditions and one of the clear beneficiaries was Dingy Skipper, the "little brown job" of the butterfly world.

For the website years 2006-2024 the “average first sighting date” for first brood Dingy Skipper was April 16th (range April 6th - May 6th). In 2025 the first sightings were at Malling Down and Castle Hill, on April 8th. The very warm spring encouraged an early emergence, and in this era, only 06/04/2012 was earlier, with 08/04/2017 the same April date. Many members reported good numbers of Dingy Skippers throughout April and May but very few precise figures were provided, with comments such as “many”, “plentiful”, and so forth. There was some very precise counting, such as the 21 found at Newtimber Hill and Devil’s Dyke on April 19th, the 22 recorded at Castle Hill on April 23rd and the 60 reported at Chantry Hill on May 1st.

An early emergence in the spring together with warm, sunny weather throughout April and May provided an excellent foundation for a possible “bumper” second brood. On a visit to Stoke Bottom (Amberley Downs) on July 8th I disturbed a territorial male Dingy Skipper, that was perched on the main track. I took a photograph and then carried on with my survey. I then spotted Patrick Moore, and we spent the next hour checking out this beautiful location. On the way back (along the main track) we re-located the Dingy Skipper, but now it was coupled with a female. I suspect this was the earliest-ever Sussex record for a mating pair of second brood Dingy Skippers.



Feeding on Marjoram on 05/08/2025 (Chantry Hill) - photo by Martin Kalaher

July 8th was an exceptionally early date. For the previous nineteen years there were only three records for the first two weeks of July, and they were 08/07/2013, 09/07/2017 and 13/07/2018.

The Beach Head record for August 25th was an exceptionally late record. For the previous nineteen years there was just one record later than August 19th, and that was 26/08/2006.

So, just to recap, for 2025 that’s 21 posts, at 16 different locations, over a total of seven weeks.

If we examine the “bumper years” of 2011, 2018, 2020 and 2025, there is a step-wise progression, showing a trend that is ever upwards, with Dingy Skippers found in an increasing number of locations: 2011 – 8 locations, 2018 – 10 locations, 2020 – 13 locations and now 2025 – 16 locations.

This is a retrospective study, and the data available, was carefully analysed. The main flaw with this type of study is the problem of “constant effort”, in other words, was the amount of fieldwork constant, over this period of time. Well, of course it wasn’t, and it is, after all, a niche area of research which will not appeal to everyone.

Conclusion

In Sussex, we have recorded second brood Dingy Skipper every year since 1997. There has been the occasional “bumper year” as in 2011, 2018, 2020 and 2025. A warm, sunny spring, in 2025, laid the foundation for a successful first breeding cycle. This led to a very early emergence of the second brood, which was found at 16 different locations in Sussex – a new county record.

Many of our butterfly species are moving towards a partial or regular extra brood. For now, Dingy Skipper has a well-established partial second brood, but this relies heavily on a warm spring to fully express itself.

Climate change is driving this evolving pattern of behaviour.