

Whitchurch Nature Notes (5) Butterflies in Spring

Life at the moment is not much different for someone who lives alone and works 'at home' – 'home' being my lovely piece of land at Chalkhills. So, I get a long nature walk every day, when I am checking the livestock here, or actually doing some farm work! I feel quite guilty about those of you in house lockdown, though in this village, nearly everyone is lucky enough to have a garden.

The first butterflies we probably all see every year are **Brimstones** and then **Orange Tips**; not counting the **Peacock** which may have been hibernating in your shed or lobby. When you come across it suddenly, it might start noisily vibrating its wings to warn you off.



Brimstones are our longest visible butterflies – often flying for 10 months of the year. The numbers I see do not change from year to year but I am always puzzled that I do not see many females (pictured here). Perhaps because they are not so bright a yellow and they don't catch my eye.

I did once watch a female Brimstone laying her eggs on the Buckthorn at the front of the Chalkhills yard. Sitting on a leaf, she carefully curved her abdomen so that the eggs were laid on the underside. The caterpillars **ONLY** feed on Buckthorn, which is poisonous to livestock, and in fact also to the caterpillars as the leaves mature. The female lays her spindle shaped turquoise eggs in small groups on a young leaf, often just one batch on each buckthorn tree, so that there is enough food before it becomes poisonous to the caterpillars.

Orange Tips (on right) are another butterfly that seems to have lots of males flying around and not many females, which lack the orange tips on the forewings, though the underside of their wings are beautifully spotted – I think they look like soldiers' desert camouflage uniforms. They are not confined to using one species of plant for the caterpillars, using a small range of crucifers, but they do prefer Jack-by-the-Hedge (aka Garlic Mustard). The caterpillars are cannibalistic – so the female lays only one egg on each plant or group of plants.



In mid-April, I saw a blue coloured butterfly in my yard and again at the rear of my house, but could not tell if it was a Common Blue (it was too early for the Adonis Blue or Chalkhill Blue) or a **Holly Blue** (left). I actually rarely see Holly Blues on my farm, but Sally Woolhouse, my neighbour, sees them most years in her garden (this photo was taken by Sally).



On 23rd April, I went into one of my woods – the Skippetts - to cut some Hazel binders for a short section of blackthorn hedge I have laid along the Hardwick Road frontage. I passed by an old (much loved) big English Oak that uprooted itself in January. Here I made my first sightings of the year for **three** species, within a few minutes, while standing in one spot.

A **Red Admiral**, sunning itself on the massive trunk;



a pair of **Speckled Wood** males rising up into the sunny glade together - and scrapping – they are very territorial; (Speckled Woods mostly feed on tree aphids' honey-dew, rather than flowers, which explains why you tend to see them only in woods or at woodland edges);



and a **Green-veined White**. This photo (on left) does not show the pretty lined underwings – it was too busy soaking up the sun and sucking nectar to give me more than a flash which I did not capture in my picture.

The next day when I was checking the sheep in a field next to the Skippetts wood I made two more 'first sightings' of the year – lots of **Dingy Skipper** (on right) and one **Small Heath**. Though both are small, they are fast in flight, and love to hide on fallen beech leaves, bare soil, or rabbit droppings, when they are basking or resting.

Dingy Skippers are difficult to photograph as they seem especially sensitive to being crept up on, even if you carefully avoid letting your shadow fall on them.





A **Small Heath**, a small orange butterfly that likes to hide and camouflage itself when the sun is dull and it needs to rest. It always feeds and rests with its wings folded.



I made a last butterfly walk round on the 7th May, hoping to see a Common Blue or an Adonis, but no success. There were many more Dingy Skippers and Small Heaths around by then. However, I did get my first sighting of my favourite butterfly, a **Small Copper** (on right). The caterpillars feed on Sorrel and Docks. I haven't yet seen a Grizzled Skipper, another early butterfly.

Some of the next butterflies to be seen, as well as the gardener's bane the Cabbage Whites, will be the Blues, the Dark green Fritillary, Ringlet, Meadow Brown, Marbled White, Small Tortoiseshell, the bright orange Skippers (Small and Large), and the Gatekeeper.

Many of these are only seen around here because they are chalk downland butterflies, and live on the Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) here at Chalkhills, on the hill at the Alpaca Farm, and on the Hardwick Estate.



This beautiful **Horseshoe Vetch** grows in the south part of the Local Wildlife Site at Chalkhills. It is the **ONLY** food source for both Adonis and Chalkhill Blue butterflies.

It is similar to the much commoner Birds foot Trefoil, but the flower heads are in a neater circle, a more bronzy yellow, and the pea pods are not straight, and when ripe, they break up into little one-seeded horseshoe shaped sections.



And finally, for those of you who are now keen to do some butterfly spotting of your own, here is a puzzle for you!

No prizes, but can you spot the **Dingy Skipper**?

These small brown butterflies are very aptly named and are difficult to spot and of course to photograph too.

POSTSCRIPT 19th May

I have this week seen some Common Blues, and I think a Brown Argus (which I don't usually see until August); however, it could have been a female Common Blue.

Editor's note: 'Chalkhills' is an area of approximately 70 acres, situated to the north of Hardwick Road. It is made up of a variety of habitats, comprising woodland, steep chalk grassland and flower-rich fields. It contains a 22 acre LWS including chalk downland and other unimproved flower-rich permanent pastures

LWS are special places recognised by BBOWT for having high wildlife value or containing rare or threatened habitats and species.

*Pictured on the right is **Chalk Milkwort** which is a delightful dainty flower growing in abundance on the chalky slopes at Chalkhills and flowering in May.*



Written by **Sandra Parkinson** & illustrated with her own photographs and with a few additional photos by Sally Woolhouse

19th May 2020