

Butterflies not!

It seems to have been a dreadful year for butterflies. There was one week in July when our Buddleia looked how it ought to look – covered in Peacocks, Red Admirals, Small Tortoiseshells and a few Painted Ladies. But for the rest of the year the garden has been sadly lacking in butterflies, with one notable exception – the Large White. In a “normal” year we only see a few of these butterflies in our garden and they usually seem to be passing through – the most frequent white by far is the Green-Veined White (the common white in damp pastures) followed by the Small White, and the Large White trailing a poor third. This year it has been completely reversed – hardly a Green-veined White to be seen, but a few Small Whites and lots and lots of Large Whites. Luckily we don't grow cabbages!



As I write this in mid -September there are quite a few Small Tortoiseshells and Red Admirals about which is good – Butterfly Conservation gets very agitated about Small Tortoiseshells as I believe they are doing very badly in the heavily populated SE of England – however they seem to do alright here. There is a theory that they are badly affected by a parasitic wasp, which results in a cyclic population – this is a natural cycle (like lemmings and Snowy Owls – but I digress) and does not require squeals of anguish every time a population drop occurs (I have no time for conservationists who believe that the world should stay exactly the same as when they first became aware of it!)

Perhaps more worrying is the lack of butterflies on our local grasslands this year. Common Blues have definitely been in short supply as have Small Coppers, though I remember that in 2013 Small Coppers were abundant. In a Big Butterfly Count survey on Skokholm on 28th July 2013 Small Copper was the commonest butterfly, beating even Meadow Brown into second place.

There are theories about all this, maybe it was the mild winter, the cool spring, the wet and cold June and the damp August – but in reality butterflies which choose the UK as their home have to be used to unpredictable weather! Or maybe it's all due to Nicotinoids – but locally at least I don't believe this should be a problem as we don't have large acreages of seed-treated rape. Perhaps more of a problem is that these short term variations tend to mask any real long term trends which we should actually be worried about.

And as a footnote, it has been a really odd year for moths – in the early part of the summer, the number of moths caught in moth traps were about half that expected for the time of year. It has settled to a more normal level now but there was definitely something odd going on. It is one of the “joys” of watching wildlife in a temperate climate like ours – you just never know what to expect!

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