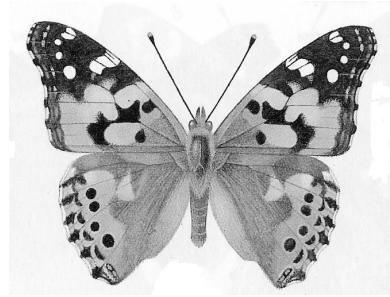


The Fluttering Invasion

Without a doubt, the wildlife highlight of the year so far has been the great invasion of the Painted Ladies. They arrived in their thousands, probably millions, on a gentle southerly breeze over the May Bank Holiday weekend. Some stayed to bask on paths, many sipped from thrift and campion whilst others laid eggs on handy nettles. But the majority just kept on flying north.



These vast numbers of Painted Ladies are the result of an excellent breeding season in Morocco, where good rains have meant an abundance of the caterpillars' food plants. When numbers build up, the butterflies head north and each year some reach the UK. Numbers were low last year but 2009 marks the largest influx seen for many years. Of course, the eggs on the nettles will hatch and by August we can expect another explosion of Painted Ladies, but this time home grown.

If you are not sure about identifying a Painted Lady, then look for salmon wings with a dappled pattern, and a distinctive black and white chequered area at the front corner of the forewing. They often look "faded" even when fresh – I personally feel they should be called Faded Ladies! Many of those which arrived in May looked very tatty, as befits a survivor of such a long journey, but many were surprisingly fresh – perhaps a result of second breeding cycle en route.

Rosemary Royle