

DISCOVERING BUTTERFLIES - for *Butterfly*, Spring issue

I began my book *Discover Butterflies in Britain* with a quotation by the 17th century naturalist John Ray. 'Butterflies adorn the world and delight the eyes'. I love that quote. Evolution is not always just practical. Survival is not its only objective. Beauty comes in somewhere. And if butterflies adorn our world, we only need to look for them to experience the same enjoyment that John Ray experienced.

Ten years ago I realised that, although I had been a butterfly enthusiast all my life, including breeding butterflies and moths with supplies bought from the late L Hugh Newman, I had never seen all our British species in the wild. I had seen them pinned out in museum collections, but not flying wild in their natural environment. And there is a world of difference. The first sight of a new species, like a Chequered Skipper basking in spring sunlight, is an unforgettable experience for any lover of nature's beauty. The sudden appearance of a male Purple Emperor, circling your head before landing on the ground in front of you to remain with its purple iridescence flashing for several minutes is a truly marvelous sight. And with its spectacularly brilliant bright-blue wings making an Adonis Blue stand out amongst clouds of other downland butterflies, this is just something that every butterfly lover should see.

But where do you go? When I decided to try and find all our different species for myself, I found that it wasn't always easy to decide where to look. And even if you knew in general terms, very often much more precise information, not only about location, but about preferred habitat and behavioural patterns, is necessary to be sure of success. The Mountain Ringlet is a good example. Its flight period lasts for only a couple of weeks, and you have to search at higher altitude later in the season. A couple of years ago, six of us combed the fells around the drum house at Honister where we had been told that a colony had been seen some days before. But we had no success. The next day I went higher. About 200 m higher up, there was a flourishing colony occupying a sheltered corrie on the approach to Grey Knotts and with breathtaking views over Buttermere.

That's what led me to write *Discover Butterflies* and to set up its website www.discoverbutterflies.com. At the time that I was working on my book, Robin Page was completing his "all the species in one year" adventure with his enthusiastic adjudicator Sarah, and he published his tale in 2003. So far as I know, Robin was the first to complete the task in a year and write about it in his entertaining book. This really set me off with renewed determination. Others have followed in his footsteps, Michael McCarthy writing up his odyssey and encouraging others in *The Independent* in 2009, and Patrick Barkham of *The Guardian* for his book published this year. My own objective was to photograph as well as just see butterflies and I took longer than any of these three, but I'm sure we all shared the same sense of discovery and excitement.

The enjoyment and positive contribution to preserving these fragile creatures for future generations really only begins when you take time not only to see our butterflies in the wild, but also to consider why they are there at all, what environmental features are essential, how weather affects what you see, what characteristics a successful habitat must have, how the whole life-cycle of the

butterfly is supported, where the caterpillars feed, how all three immature stages survive the multitude of natural predators that threaten them. The Butterfly Monitoring Scheme administers an essential scientific process to record the abundance of adult butterflies, and now the Wider Countryside Scheme takes this recording from favoured butterfly sites out into the general countryside. There is information on both at www.ukbms.org. Participating in these schemes make a real contribution because there is still much to learn about the ecology of many species.

For example, one of the great mysteries is why the Chequered Skipper became extinct in 1976 in the English Midlands, thought then to be its main territory, but has since flourished naturally in the Western Highlands of Scotland. We still don't know. This year I really enjoyed spending time around Fort William searching for colonies of Chequered Skippers with the advice of many local experts. An account of what we found will be published in *British Wildlife* in April.

Butterfly Conservation now owns or manages 33 butterfly nature reserves around the country. Details are on the website www.butterfly-conservation.org and they are great places to start looking for our rarer species. Some of them I have chosen in the 66 sites described in *Discover Butterflies in Britain*. And to add to the sites in the book, another 40 or so, including more of the BC reserves, are described in detail on the website www.discoverbutterflies.com.

From of all these, my No. 1 is Noar Hill, Hampshire for the Duke of Burgundy on its cowslip-jewelled grassy slopes (from late April to early June). There's the 18th century house of Gilbert White round the corner. He wrote *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* here in 1789. Many of the things he wrote about nature still ring true today. Then there's the beautiful downland habitat of Compton Bay on the south shore of the Isle of Wight, just along from Tennyson Down and the Needles. Lots of butterflies fly here but particularly the Glanville Fritillary (in mid-May to the end of June). If you go to Scotland, try to be there in late May or early June for the Chequered Skippers at Glasdrum Wood NNR on the north shore of Loch Creran, not far from Oban. In Northern Ireland, there are Marsh Fritillaries and Réal's Wood Whites on the wing in June at the spectacularly beautiful Murlough NNR in County Down, just north of the Mountains of Mourne. And in Wales, the rocky slopes of the Great Orme's Head are home for the beautiful Silver-studded Blue (from mid-June through July). These are all my favourites, and there are so many more described in the book and on the web.

If you need help identifying the species (and, even with good photographs, some of them are very hard to identify for certain) there is Peter Eeles' splendid website www.ukbutterflies.com and various field guides. Our own *Britain's Butterflies* (2nd Edition), WildGuides 2010 has new photographs and tries to be as helpful as possible. And, for both its butterfly books, WildGuides contributes a proportion of its profit to Butterfly Conservation.

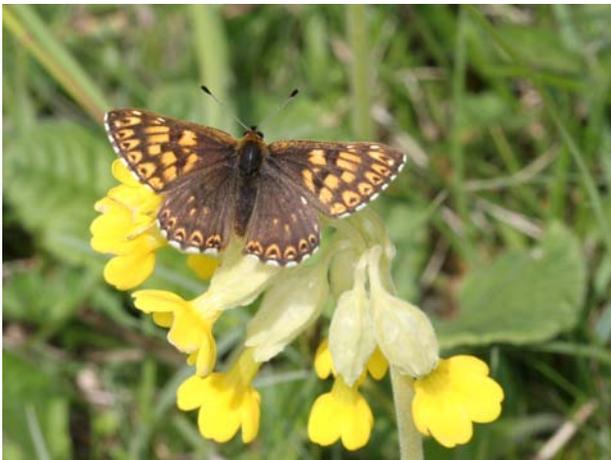
Butterflies adorn the world, sometimes in the most unpromising places. But they cannot delight your eyes unless you see them. So do take time to look. You don't have to be visiting a nature reserve. Discover butterflies wherever you are!



Noar Hill, Hampshire



Noar Hill, Hampshire



Duke of Burgundy (m) at Noar Hill



Cowslips at Noar Hill



Duke of Burgundy (m) at Noar Hill



Glanville Fritillary (m) at Compton Bay



Compton Bay from Tennyson Down



Glanville Fritillary (f) roosting at Compton Bay



Glanville Fritillary (f) roosting at Compton Bay



Glasdrum Wood, charcoal burner glade



Chequered Skipper (f) at Glasdrum Wood



Chequered Skipper (m) at Glasdrum Wood



Marsh Fritillary (m) at Murlough NNR



Murlough NNR, County Down



Réal's Wood White (m) at Murlough NNR



Silver-studded Blue (m)



Great Orme's Head, Conway



Silver-studded Blue (m)

Photos of Noar Hill, Compton Bay, Glasdrum Wood NNR, Murlough NNR, Gt Orme's Head + images of Duke of Burgundy, Glanville Fritillary, Chequered Skipper, Real's Wood White, Silver-studded Blue at these sites if space permits.