

HONISTER AND GREY KNOTTS
Cumbria

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Foundations of the old Honister drum house with Grey Knotts in the background

<p>The surroundings of Grey Knotts, stretching down to the Honister Pass and across to Fleetwith Pike, are a reliable place to look for Mountain Ringlets.</p>	<p>Green slate is still mined at Honister and there is ample parking alongside the mine's visitor centre at the entrance to Honister pass. Where to look for Mountain Ringlets will be affected by the date, but the area around the drum house and the path towards Great Gable is a good place to start.</p>	<p>TARGET SPECIES Mountain Ringlet (mid-June to early July)</p>
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Honister pass joins the valleys of Borrowdale and Buttermere in the Lake District. Fleetwith Pike, south of the pass, is a rich depository of Westmorland green slate and this has been mined here since medieval times. In the late 1800s, a tramway brought slate down from an old mine, high in the fells, and the foundations of the tramway's winding house, called the drum house (which has long since disappeared), provide a reference point on OS maps. The grasslands around the drum house are now a good place to look for Mountain Ringlets at the end of June and into early July.

I went there on 30 June 2008 on a sunny, but windy day. By coincidence, five other butterfly seekers arrived, so there were six of us scouring the fells for a wide area around the drum house. We had been told that Mountain Ringlets had been seen in the vicinity of the standing stones (about 200m to the north, see photo) only a week earlier, but nothing was found although we covered a wide area between us. The next day, I tried again, with sunshine and less wind so that it felt warmer. Again nothing, but this time I ventured higher, following the footpath south from the drum house towards Brandreth and in the direction of Grey Gable. About 1 km south of the drum house (slightly further than I had ventured the day before and with the drum house now out of sight), and about 150 m higher than the drum house, I came across a flourishing colony. There were often 3 or 4 in sight at a time and during an hour I saw at least 10 different butterflies. They were in a sheltered coombe on the side of Grey Knotts with a fine view overlooking Buttermere. The elevation was 618m and their grid reference NY 213125

The lesson is that Mountain Ringlets only fly for a very short period (perhaps two weeks maximum) and you have to act promptly on intelligence about where they may be found. Go higher as the season progresses. Here I was at 618m. At Langdale Pike I saw a very fresh specimen on 23 June 2005 at a slightly lower altitude, and I have been told that at Irton Fell, which is only 200 m high, these butterflies emerge even earlier in the season, some years as early as the third week in May. It is generally thought that Mountain Ringlets favour wet areas and boggy hollows, and numbers are usually higher there. But they also fly over drier ground and I found that the Grey Knotts corrie was quite dry when I was there.

The history of Honister slate mine is interesting because the mine became uneconomic and mining ceased in the mid 1980s. However, extensive quantities of good-quality slate remained to be extracted, and demand for crushed slate for garden paths and features found a market for the massive piles of slate waste that remained here. This led to the mine passing to new ownership some ten years after it had closed. The use of modern equipment has transformed it, and the mine was formally reopened by the Duke of Edinburgh in August 2001. The demand for high-quality roofing slates, floor tiles, polished kitchen worktops and crushed slate for gardens has ensured the continuation of a traditional Lakeland industry. Long may it flourish.



Standing stones on the mine road near the drum house



Typical pose by a Mountain Ringlet perching on its caterpillar's foodplant, mat-grass



Mountain Ringlet habitat below Grey Knotts



Wider view of this sheltered grassy hollow



Mountain Ringlet basking on the stone footpath



This one conveniently settled on my finger



A darker than usual Mountain Ringlet



The small size of the Mountain Ringlet is apparent



View east from the tramway towards the mine's buildings and car park



View from Grey Knotts towards Buttermere



View from the drum house down the line of the old tramway, looking towards the mine buildings



Wrought iron relic at the drum house



Honister mine was reopened by the Duke of Edinburgh in 2001



Dry stone wall in Borrowdale with Honister slate courses

LOCATION

Parking (at Honister mine) NY 224136 OS (Landranger) Map: 89; OS Explorer: OL4 Honister is about 2 miles west of Seatoller which is at the southern end of Borrowdale and some 15 miles south of Keswick. Take the B5289 from Keswick through Rosthwaite and then Seatoller, following the road to Buttermere. The mine works is impossible to miss. Park here and walk to the drum house, taking either the path that follows the line of the old tramway or the zigzag path used by mine vehicles. The standing stones are an obvious landmark on the zigzag path, when the drum house (foundation) is about 200 m to the south. Look first around the drum house at NY 216135, concentrating on the boggy areas towards Fleetwith Pike to the west. If this is unsuccessful, try the footpath towards Grey Gable, searching sheltered corries around Grey Knotts. There are good facilities for visitors at the mine works, but remember that the weather can deteriorate very quickly in the Lake District. Also this site requires walking on uneven paths with significant gradients, so more than usual care is required.