

SHIPTON BELLINGER
Hampshire

from www.discoverbutterflies.com the website
for the book *Discover Butterflies in Britain*
© D E Newland



Stonehenge from the north

Shipton Bellinger is a small village on the edge of Salisbury Plain. It is 8 miles north-east of Salisbury and 7 miles east of Stonehenge. As well as being a very good place to see Brown Hairstreaks, it is a gateway to the eastern side of Salisbury Plain.

Salisbury Plain has 50 sq miles of largely uncultivated chalk downland. Although much of it is used by the Ministry of Defence, a great deal is now open to the public except when needed for training exercises. The village of Shipton Bellinger is close to the Plain, with parking in the village or beside a minor road to its west.

TARGET SPECIES

Brown Hairstreak (end of July and August) plus many other species. They include, at the right season on Salisbury Plain, Adonis and Chalkhill Blues, Marsh and Dark Green Fritillary, Duke of Burgundy, Grayling, Green Hairstreak.

I first became aware of Shipton Bellinger when reading a report by Matthew Oates on Butterfly Conservation's Hants and Isle of White Branch "recent sightings" page. Among other things, Matthew is the National Trust's butterfly adviser. He gave the precise location of an ash tree on the edge of Shipton Bellinger where he had seen a significant colony of Brown Hairstreaks. A couple of weeks later, in mid-August, I found this tree and confirm Matthew's observations. My visit was on a fine Sunday morning when there were half-a-dozen of us present with cameras. There was visible activity in the crown of Matthew's ash tree (and other nearby ash trees) and, in the two hours I was there, at least 6 females descended to ground level on egg-laying runs in the

blackthorn scrub, of which there is plenty. Unlike my observations at Whitecross Green Wood in 2008, there was very little flowering bramble or angelica to attract them down from high level, but some good photographs of females laying eggs were taken by all those present. One observer even had a Brown Hairstreak land on his camera hand. It was an excellent opportunity for others to record this unique event, which I had never seen before.

Shipton Bellinger is at the eastern edge of Salisbury Plain. Matthew Oates' ash tree is at SU220457. You can either park near Shipton Bellinger village hall and walk in from the east side, or park off the South Tidworth to Bulford Camp road at SU217461 and walk in from the west side. This site is on MoD land but where there is open access. As well as being a good place to see Brown Hairstreaks (in late July/August) it also serves as a gateway to the vast open areas of the Plain. Part of this huge plateau was requisitioned for military use in 1897. Apart from grazing, it has not been used agriculturally since. Some areas are in strict military use and only rabbits can survive there. But, for much of the Plain, access is permitted most of the time and you can walk for miles in the vast downland landscape.

The whole of Salisbury Plain is a plateau of chalk with extensive flat areas except for dry river valleys. It divides naturally into eastern, central and western blocks. They are divided by the River Avon and by the Devizes to Salisbury A360 road. The middle of the central and western blocks have been ungrazed for many years (except by rabbits), whereas most of the eastern block and the outsides of the central and western blocks are managed for grazing pasture and hay-cutting. There are also small areas where the chalk is overlaid with a flinty-clay deposit. These variations make for a diversity of habitat types and there are many rare and uncommon plants and insects.

Grazing by sheep and cattle is organized so that the animals can be moved between paddocks to be kept out of harm's way. This grazing keeps the sward short enough for downland flowers to flourish. Also it helps to keep scrub ingress at bay. The result is that the Plain is home to many different species of wildlife. Adonis and Chalkhill Blue, Marsh Fritillary, Duke of Burgundy, Green Hairstreak, Grayling, and Dark Green Fritillary may all be found in season. And birders will be looking for stone curlew, quail, hobby, buzzard, barn and long-eared owls, nightingale, stonechat, whinchat, wheatear and corn bunting, which breed on the Plain.

Knowing where to look with such a wide, restricted area to search is not easy, but the Bulford Ranges on the east side, next to Shipton Bellinger, are a good place to start. The land here has open access unless red flags are flying on the many, prominent flagpoles. You can park on both sides of the minor road from Tidworth to Bulford Camp at SU217461 and walk in along the very clearly marked footpaths. There are also perimeter paths which allow public access round the western and central sections of the Plain and these can be accessed from many of the villages that surround the Plain. One area where Marsh Fritillaries have been found is Orcheston Down at SU072475 but this is inside the restricted area of the central block and not normally open to the public. Should you want to see Marsh Fritillaries near here, the best place to look would be just north of the Plain at Pewsey Downs NNR. It is not far from Shipton Bellinger (see the box for directions).

The prehistoric monument of Stonehenge is a World Heritage Site about 8 miles north of Salisbury and 7 miles west of Shipton Bellinger. Its origins and purpose remain subjects for debate, but it is generally believed that the standing stones we see today were erected about 2500 BC. They are surrounded by a circular earth bank and ditch which is earlier still and may date from 3100 BC when Stonehenge first became a burial site. Some of the stones are estimated to weigh 25 tons each and may have come from Marlborough Downs. At Fyfield Down NNR, 3 miles north-west of Marlborough, there are still 25,000 of these huge boulders resting in their natural setting on chalk downs. They are thought to have been dragged to their resting places by

ground movements 20 million years ago, and exposed when soft chalky material around them was washed away by streams. How some were transported to Stonehenge, 25 miles distant, and erected with the lintels being lifted some 4 metres, remain subjects for speculation.



Brown Hairstreak (f) on Martin King's camera hand



Brown Hairstreak (f) at Shipton Bellinger



Brown Hairstreak avenue at Shipton Bellinger, looking east. Several tall ash trees are behind the hedge, on the left



Shipton Bellinger, Matthew Oates' ash tree, behind blackthorn scrub



Shipton Bellinger, looking east, with Matthew Oates' ash tree and blackthorn scrub



Brown Hairstreak (f), Shipton Bellinger



Shipton Bellinger, prospecting Brown Hairstreak avenue



Brown Hairstreak (f) at Shipton Bellinger



St Pater's Church, Shipton Bellinger



Parking by the road from South Tidworth to Bulford Camp, west of Shipton Bellinger



Boot Inn, Shipton bellinger



Brown Hairstreak egg laying at Shipton Bellinger



Looking west across the vastness of Salisbury Plain



Bulford ranges, looking south



Bulford ranges, looking north



Looking south-east, across Bulford ranges



Salisbury Plain, eastern section, typical terrain



Salisbury Plain, flagpost for warning signals



Salisbury Plain, eastern section, looking south-west



Flowers at the edge of Salisbury Plain looking towards Bulford Down



MoD warning notice for the Bulford ranges



MoD notice about warning signals



Bulford Down from Bulford ranges



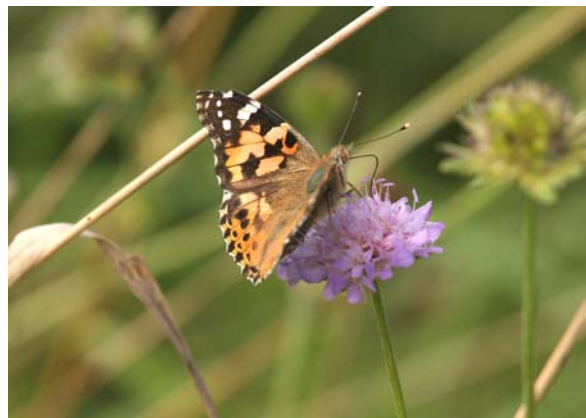
Brimstone (m), Salisbury Plain



Brown Argus, Salisbury Plain



Common Blue (f), Salisbury Plain



Painted Lady, Salisbury Plain



Small Tortoiseshell, Salisbury Plain

LOCATION

Explorer Map 184: Salisbury & The Plain
Landranger (pink) Map 131: Romsey, Andover &
Test Valley
Map 130: Salisbury & Stonehenge
Grid references: East car park (by Shipton Bellinger
Village Hall) SU229456
West car park (beside the Tidworth
to Bulford Camp road, for Salisbury
Plain and Shipton Bellinger)
SU217461
Brown Hairstreak master tree
SU220457
Salisbury Plain viewpoint SU213477

Shipton Bellinger is on the eastern edge of Salisbury Plain. It is about a mile north of the A303 Andover to Wincanton road, north-east of Salisbury and about 7 mile east of Stonehenge. For the Brown Hairstreak site close to Shipton Bellinger village, you can either park close to the Village Hall at SU229456 and walk west, or park off the minor road from South Tidworth to Bulford Camp at SU217461 and walk east. Starting from the Village Hall, after about 150 m the path divides and two parallel paths go west. Take the path on the south side because you will have a tangled, sunlit hedge of blackthorn scrub and brambles on your right and will find that there are several high ash trees close to this hedgerow. The tree identified by Matthew Oates is at SU220457, which is after the two parallel paths rejoin. As you walk further on, Salisbury Plain will be straight ahead.

Pewsey Down NNR is just to the north of Salisbury Plain on the southern edge of Marlborough Downs. It is on the minor road from East Everleigh (on the A342) to Pewsey (on the A345). From Shipton Bellinger follow the A338 north to the cross-roads with the A342. Turn left towards Devizes and look for the second right turn to Pewsey

There is no organized disabled access, but I think it would be possible to reach the Brown Hairstreak avenue with a wheelchair. Park near the village hall, and follow the path westwards. It may become impassable as you go further, but not until there is viewing of the flight territory. Alternatively footpath entrances on the west side, to both Shipton Bellinger and onto Salisbury Plain, may allow some wheelchairs or mobility scooters to be used comfortably.

Facilities and refreshments should be available at the Boot Inn in Shipton Bellinger.