

BUTTERFLY REPORT

For the second consecutive year the summer months were dominated by almost continual poor weather. In some respects 2008 was even worse than the previous year in that the spring was also cold with little sunshine. In view of this, although many species fared badly, it was surprising how well others performed, with Common Blue, Speckled Wood and Meadow Brown seen in excellent numbers. Speckled Wood were reported in record numbers and the maximum count of 93 exceeded the previous highest by 50%. Woolston Eyes continues to hold high populations of the more common species and this year produced the highest counts in Cheshire for Small White, Speckled Wood, Gatekeeper, and, more unusually, Meadow Brown and Common Blue.

The year started slowly and the first butterfly, a Peacock, was found on 19th March. There was little to report before April and species such as Brimstone and Orange Tip were scarce throughout the spring.

An encouraging feature was the appearance of high numbers of Common Blue in early June when an excellent count of 69 was the highest for some years. Continuing unsuitable conditions during the summer kept butterflies scarce and it was a pleasant surprise when a spell of warm and settled weather in mid-July produced a sudden increase in numbers. Amongst those species to benefit from this brief improvement in conditions were Small White, Meadow Brown and, to a lesser extent, Gatekeeper.

Autumn was notable for good numbers of Comma, which were present throughout October and the last butterfly of the year was of this species on 3rd November.

The Butterfly Transect established in 2006 continues to be walked on a weekly basis and given the often appalling weather it was remarkable that a survey was carried out every week between April and the end of September. As always, I am grateful to Dave Bowman and Les Jones for being prepared to monitor the transect in my absence.

One of the purposes of Butterfly Transects is to monitor populations over a period of years in the light of changes in climate and habitat. In recent years, habitat changes at Woolston have had a noticeable effect on some species of butterfly. With the maturing of woodland in various parts of the Reserve has come an increase in numbers of Speckled Wood, which has also spread northward as a result of climate change. The removal of wooded areas on the north bank of No.2 bed has led to colonisation by Bird's Foot Trefoil, the food plant of the Common Blue, which was recorded in this area this year. In the same area Buddleia has seeded itself and as the plants mature they are sure to attract butterflies such as Peacock and Red Admiral. Not all the changes have been beneficial however and on No.4 bed the paths have become overgrown, with an adverse effect on Gatekeeper and Meadow Brown.

Generally 2008 has been an encouraging year and hopefully (weather permitting!) the improvement in the fortunes of some of the species to be found at Woolston will continue in 2009.

As always, this report would not be possible without the records of my fellow wardens and permit holders whose entries in the logbook provide essential information. I am grateful to all who have contributed in this way. The Annual Report of the Cheshire and Peak District Branch of Butterfly Conservation provides the background against which the Woolston Records can be evaluated.

Individual species reports are as follows;

Small Skipper

Thymelicus sylvestris

Poor weather during the flight period for the second successive year was responsible for the low numbers recorded. The first was found on the early date of 4th June, the earliest sighting in Cheshire this year, but there was only one other June record when one was noted on the 30th. Butterflies were seen on four dates in July with a year maximum of eleven between the 21st and 25th. Of these, six were on No.1 bed, four on No.4 and one on the canal track. There were no further records.

Large Skipper

Ochlodes venata

As usual most records of this species were from No.1 bed and the canal track.

There was an early record of one on the 4th June and three were found on the 9th. One was noted on 10th July and four on the 21st. A survey of the whole Reserve between 24th and 28th July produced a total of eleven, which was surprisingly high considering the unsuitable conditions throughout the flight period. There were no further reports for what was a fairly typical year, although numbers seem to have held up well compared with other parts of Cheshire.

Brimstone

Gonepteryx rhamni

This was the worst year in recent times for this species with only one spring record when one was on No.3 bed on 14th May. The only other sighting was of one on No.2 bed on 6th September.

Large White

Pieris brassicae

There were two records of the spring brood on 13th and 22nd May when two and one respectively were found on the river to the north of the Reserve. No more were reported until 15th July when two were on No.2 bed. On 8th August the year maximum of eight was reached when five were on the canal track and three were attracted to Buddleia on No.3 bed. Early September produced a series of sightings including three on No.2 bed on the 3rd and four on Butchersfield Tip on the 6th. Thereafter only singles were reported with the final record for the year on the unusually late date of 8th October. Other than this late record, 2008 was an average year for this species.

Small White

Pieris rapae

Although there was an early sighting on 30th March no more were found until 23rd April when four were present of which three were on the river to the north of the Reserve. Single figure numbers continued to be recorded until 4th June. The first evidence of the second brood was on 13th July when two were seen. Only small numbers were present until the second half

of July when a rare spell of warm and sunny weather produced a dramatic increase. Between 24th and 28th July approximately a hundred Small Whites were on the Reserve, mostly on Nos. 1 and 2 beds. By mid-August however numbers were again down to single figures with a minimum of eight on the 24th and three on the 29th. Two records of singles on 4th and 13th September completed the year.

Green-veined White

Pieris napi

In common with the two previous species the first were found on the river to the north of the Reserve with two seen on 29th April. By 13th May about 20 were present of which eight were in the same area. Numbers declined thereafter and the last of the spring brood was noted on 9th June. Four on 15th July marked the beginning of the second emergence and numbers increased to a maximum of around 40 in the third week of July. The only significant counts thereafter were 12 on 8th August, of which eight were found on the very wet lower west bank of No.2 bed, and 13 on 14th August of which 11 were on No.4 bed. Surprisingly, these proved to be the last records for the year whereas normally sightings continue into September. The maximum of 40 was about average for recent years.

Orange Tip

Anthocharis cardamines

Cold, cloudy and wet conditions during the spring resulted in a very disappointing year for this attractive butterfly. The first appeared on 23rd April and was followed by regular reports during what little dry and sunny weather occurred. Numbers were extremely low however and there were only two records of more than two individuals. Four on 12th May and five the following day were the highest counts of the year and it seems that a maximum of six or seven was the best of a poor season. The final record was on 29th May.

Small Copper

Lycaena phlaeas

After the previous year's excellent showing when up to 14 were seen, this year proved to be extremely disappointing. The poor conditions prevalent during the spring resulted in only one record when one was found on No.1 bed on 13th May. It was not until 28th July that the next was seen, again on No.1 bed. Singles were on the canal track on 8th and 29th August and the following day a total of four (the highest of the year) was reported. The year ended with one on No.2 bed on 2nd September.

Common Blue

Polyommatus icarus

It is pleasing to report that this species enjoyed an excellent year. The first were recorded on 22nd May when two were present. Numbers increased to 20 on 29th May and 31 on 4th June before culminating in a maximum of 69 on 9th and 10th June. Of these the majority (51) were found on No.1 bed and Butchersfield Tip. This represents the highest count since 2004 when 84 were present. Only singles were then noted until seven were found on 1st August. The same number was present on 14th August, followed by eight on the 25th and 16 during cloudy conditions on the 29th. The final reports were of ten on 3rd September and three on the 6th.

It was encouraging to discover that butterflies appear to be colonizing new areas of the Reserve, in particular the area near the viaduct. Small numbers were found to the north and south of the river and on the canal, all within about 20 yards of the viaduct. The north bank of No.2 bed also attracted small numbers with the establishment of Bird's Foot Trefoil in this area following the disturbance caused by the reconstruction of the bank in 2005. The north-east corner of No.3 bed now boasts a large area of the food plant and although only two butterflies were found, there is potential for an increase in population. There was also some evidence that butterflies are re-establishing themselves on No.4 bed with three reports including one from the Sandpit Pond area. Hopefully, better conditions in 2009 could lead to a further expansion in numbers for this species.

Holly Blue

Celastrina argiolus

This is always an uncommon species at Woolston and given the generally unfavourable conditions the four reports relating to five or six butterflies constituted a reasonable performance. The first records were on 12th May when one was at Latchford Locks and a second on the canal track. These were the only spring sightings and none were then seen until 27th July when one was found on No.1 bed. The following day one was seen in a different area of No.1 bed and a second on Butchersfield Tip. The final record of the year was of one on the north bank of No.2 bed on 25th August.

Red Admiral

Vanessa atalanta

The first of the year was reported from No.3 bed on 24th April and singles were subsequently noted on seven dates to the end of July. On 8th August nine were present, including seven attracted to Buddleia on the south bank of No.3 bed and two on the canal track. Around the same time one was on No.2 bed and another on the Loop of No.4 bed making a year maximum of eleven. Smaller numbers were reported during the remainder of the summer and autumn with four found on the Butterfly Transect alone on 4th September, six on 8th October and four on 13th October. Thereafter there were two reports of singles on 16th and 24th October, which concluded a fairly typical year for this attractive migrant.

Painted Lady

Cynthia cardui

Unsuitable conditions for the second year in succession resulted in very few sightings of this migrant species. The first was on 8th June and was followed by three other reports on 8th and 20th August and 19th September. All related to single butterflies and all records were from No.3 bed. Butterflies were rare throughout Cheshire where it was the worst year for this species since 1993.

Small Tortoiseshell

Aglais urticae

The decline of this species has been well documented and is the subject of national research and speculation. It is widely believed that a parasitic fly whose range has expanded northwards as a result of climate change is a major factor. Whatever the cause the decline has been reflected in the numbers recorded at Woolston in recent years. None were seen this year

until 30th March and numbers peaked in the last two weeks of April. A series of visits between 21st and 29th April produced a total of 23 of which six were on the river to the north of Nos. 1 and 2 beds. This compares with maxima of 29 (2007), 31 (2006) and 51 in 2005, whilst in 2004 an estimated 150 were present. The only other count in double figures this year was of 12 on No.3 bed on 6th May. The summer months produced only three reports of singles (one in June, July and August) and it was a pleasant surprise to find one on the river on 16th October.

Peacock

Inachis io

Although numbers were less than in 2007, this common species fared reasonably well in spite of the poor weather conditions. The first was seen on 19th March and there was only one other March record. On 4th April nine were counted on the Butterfly Transect alone with a further four on the canal track. The spring brood peaked at the end of April when 55 were present on the 23rd and 63 on the 29th. The only other double figure count in the first half of the year was 21 on 13th May and the final spring record was on 9th June. The second brood was late to emerge with the first sighting on 28th July and the usual build-up did not materialise until 43 were found on 8th August. Maximum numbers occurred during the third week of August when a series of visits produced a Reserve total of 80, which compares unfavourably with the previous year's maximum of 140. Typically, numbers fell dramatically thereafter with 18 on 29th August the only other count of significance. September began with five on the 4th and further sightings on the 10th and the 13th. This proved to be the last confirmed record for the year although a butterfly glimpsed briefly on 24th October may have been of this species.

Comma

Polyommata c-album

Unfavourable conditions in early spring resulted in a late emergence and the first was not reported until 23rd April when one was on No.3 bed. Singles were noted on four subsequent dates between 1st and 13th May, with three records from No.3 bed and one from Butchersfield Tip. The second brood did not appear until 15th July when four were present and similar numbers were found on a number of dates until the end of September. Surprisingly, maximum counts occurred in October when a series of sightings between the 8th and the 13th totalled at least 12. Two late records on 24th October and 3rd November ended the year. This species has fared extremely well at Woolston in the past two years with maximum counts of 60 and 13 respectively and this year's figures are further evidence that this species continues to thrive.

Speckled Wood

Pararge aegeria

Woolston is one of the best sites in Cheshire for this species and this year was no exception with record numbers recorded. Low temperatures early in the year meant that none were seen until 21st April and the spring brood peaked at 23 on 13th May. Few were then reported until the end of July when 19 were found between the 24th and 28th. The beginning of August saw spectacular numbers and a series of visits produced the remarkable total of 93, which far exceeds the previous Woolston record of 62. Good numbers were found up to the middle of September and of particular interest are counts of 29 from Butchersfield Tip on the 6th and 25 from No.4 bed on the 14th. It may well be that a detailed survey of the whole Reserve at this

time would have equalled or even surpassed the August total but unfortunately this was not possible. An excellent year concluded with a report of four on 19th September.

Gatekeeper

Pyronia tithon

Following the previous year's disastrous showing, there was a revival in the fortunes of this butterfly of high summer. For the second successive year the first were found on 23rd June, the earliest ever date for Woolston. Only single figure numbers were reported until 15th July, when 53 were present. A brief spell of warm, sunny weather towards the end of the month resulted in a rapid increase and a series of visits between the 24th and 28th July produced a total of 700. Although this represents a welcome recovery from the 2007 maximum of 247, it is still way below the numbers seen in recent years. The decline appears to be due both to the poor weather conditions and the deterioration in habitat on the favoured No.4 bed where the paths around the bed have become increasingly overgrown with brambles and other vegetation. As some of this has now been cleared it will be interesting to monitor the effect on this species. Following the peak counts at the end of July numbers declined with only one other count into three figures when about a hundred were on Nos.2 and 3 beds on 8th August. After mid-August only single figures were reported and an encouraging year ended with sightings on the 1st and 3rd September.

Meadow Brown

Maniola jurtina

This species staged a dramatic recovery this year in spite of less than ideal conditions during the summer. The first appeared on 9th June and by the end of the month 23 were present. Few were found in early July, no doubt due to the poor weather conditions. However, a sudden improvement during the last week of the month produced exceptional and possibly record numbers for Woolston. Visits to all four beds between 24th and 28th July resulted in a total of 323, of which more than 200 were found on No.1 bed and Butchersfield Tip. Butterflies continued to be reported in reasonable numbers during August, and early September produced counts of 20 (3rd) and 16 on Butchersfield Tip alone on the 6th. A single on 19th September proved to be the last record of an excellent year.

Dave Hackett

Footnote

In order to monitor bird and butterfly numbers I usually walk around the whole Réserve once a week. Starting at Latchford Locks and including Butchersfield Tip and the river to the north of Nos.1 and 2 beds this is a distance of between 17 and 18 miles and takes between 7 and 8 hours allowing time for stops.

It is interesting to walk the same route at all times of the year as each season has its own charm including the varied delights of the British weather! In winter the large flocks of duck are a major attraction and this year the highlights were counts of over 600 Tufted Duck at both ends of the year.

Spring brings the arrival of migrants and around the first week in April a survey of the whole Reserve usually produces the maximum count for Chiffchaff, which this year was 60 singing males with a further seven heard outside the Reserve boundaries.

In summer I monitor the various species of butterfly and (weather permitting!) incorporate the Butterfly Transect into my weekly walk.

It has also been fascinating to observe the Peregrines on the viaduct including two brief sightings of what could have been the first young to have been produced at Woolston.

I calculate that in total I walked more than 1000 miles on the Reserve during 2008!

Dave Hackett