

## BUTTERFLY REPORT

In spite of almost continual wet weather during the summer months the year was not without its highlights, and favourable conditions during spring and autumn provided plenty of interest for observers. The highlights were record numbers of Small Copper, excellent counts of Peacock and Speckled Wood and the continued resurgence of Holly Blue.

Mild conditions during February resulted in exceptionally early sightings of Peacock and Red Admiral, with Small Tortoiseshell reported by early March. Prolonged warm and sunny weather during April favoured many species and a total of 91 Peacock was an excellent spring count. Common Blues emerged early and a sighting on 29<sup>th</sup> April is possibly the earliest ever for this species at Woolston.

Poor conditions throughout the summer were reflected in very low numbers of Gatekeeper and Meadow Brown but mild weather during the autumn produced a Small Copper in early November.

Sadly there was to be no repeat of last year's reappearance of Clouded Yellow and none were recorded anywhere in Cheshire this year.

The Butterfly Transect established in 2006 continued to be monitored regularly in spite of the often-unsuitable weather during the summer months. In fact, only two weeks were missed because of the weather although on occasions it was a race against time as cloud and rain approached! Thanks again to Dave Bowman and Les Jones for continuing to monitor the transect in my absence.

This report is as always based on my own records, those of fellow wardens and entries in the logbook without which there would be significant gaps in our knowledge of the distribution and prevalence of butterflies at Woolston. It is always helpful to consider sightings in a wider context and the Annual Report of the Cheshire and Peak District Branch of Butterfly Conservation enables this to be done.

Individual species reports are as follows;

### Small Skipper

*Thymelicus sylvestris*

Although there were early sightings with the first on 10<sup>th</sup> June and three the following day, Small Skippers were seen in below average numbers this year, a fact which was unsurprising considering the poor weather during the summer months. Four on Butchersfield Tip on 19<sup>th</sup> June were followed by the highest count of the year on 27<sup>th</sup> when a total of ten was located including eight on the canal track. The only other counts of any significance were eight, again on the canal track, on 9<sup>th</sup> July and six on 18<sup>th</sup> July. The final report was of one on 29<sup>th</sup> July. The canal track and No.1 bed are the favoured locations for this species with 90% of this year's records from these areas.

### Large Skipper

*Ochlodes venata*

As with the previous species this was a poor year and records were received for only five dates between 10<sup>th</sup> June and 18<sup>th</sup> July. Three on 19<sup>th</sup> June was the maximum noted. Large Skippers are found in a wider variety of habitat than Small Skippers and

this was reflected in the fact that they were seen in all areas of the Reserve except No.2 bed.

### **Brimstone**

*Gonepteryx rhamni*

Records were confined to April this year with the first on 4<sup>th</sup> April near the footbridge. Two were reported from the car park on 8<sup>th</sup> April and the remaining sightings were of singles on the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> and the final report on 26<sup>th</sup> April when one was on the canal track and a second on No.3 bed. This is about average for this species and last year's summer records were not repeated.

### **Large White**

*Pieris brassicae*

Although never plentiful at Woolston it was a disappointing year for this butterfly and none were recorded until 7<sup>th</sup> July when three were present. The year maximum was a mere five on 24<sup>th</sup> July and sightings continued intermittently until 10<sup>th</sup> September when two were found on No.3 bed.

### **Small White**

*Pieris rapae*

After last year's excellent showing, numbers were reduced dramatically although an early record on 4<sup>th</sup> April built to a total of 17 a week later of which 13 were on No.4 bed. There were counts of 13 and 10 in the first half of May but thereafter very few were seen until the emergence of the second brood at the end of June with four on the 29<sup>th</sup>. Numbers increased somewhat in the middle of July when a year maximum of between 30 and 40 was recorded. Occasional double figure counts during rare spells of sunny weather during August were followed by the final reports of the year on 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> September.

### **Green-veined White**

*Pieris napi*

This butterfly is reputed to thrive in damp conditions but numbers were still disappointing although less so than for the two previous species. The first report was on 15<sup>th</sup> April when up to 14 were on No.4 bed. This was probably the highest total of the year although there was a count of ten on 1<sup>st</sup> May. It is always difficult to obtain an accurate count of "white" butterflies due to difficulties in identification when butterflies are seen in flight and often at a distance. Small numbers were present throughout the summer with five positively identified on 19<sup>th</sup> June and 18<sup>th</sup> July. Sightings continued until the end of August with only one September record on the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month.

### **Orange Tip** *Anthocharis cardamines*

Fine weather produced an early sighting on 4<sup>th</sup> April on the east bank of No.2 bed. On 12<sup>th</sup> April three were present and small numbers were noted during the rest of the month. The year maximum was a disappointing eleven on 1<sup>st</sup> May and single figure numbers continued until the final record for the year on 23<sup>rd</sup> May. This year's figures were considerably less than the exceptional total of 29 recorded in 2006.

### **Small Copper** *Lycaena phlaeas*

This species benefitted from the excellent spring weather and was seen in record numbers for Woolston, which was one of only two sites in Cheshire to report a count in double figures. The first report was one on Butchersfield Tip on 25<sup>th</sup> April with a further record the following day on the canal track. It was a major surprise, however, when no less than 14 were found on 1<sup>st</sup> May of which seven were on No.1 bed, six on No.2 bed and one on the canal track. Four were still present on 5<sup>th</sup> May and a single frequented the canal track until 14<sup>th</sup> May. There were no further sightings until the emergence of the second brood on 9<sup>th</sup> July. Singles were found on the canal track and No.1 bed until the middle of August and a further individual was noted on the north east corner of No.2 bed. Two were on the canal track on 17<sup>th</sup> August and what appeared to be the final sighting of the year from the north east corner of No.2 bed on 12<sup>th</sup> September. There followed an extremely late record when on 1<sup>st</sup> November in warm but cloudy conditions one was found on No.1 bed.

### **Common Blue** *Polyommatus icarus*

An early record of one on the north bank of No.2 bed on 29<sup>th</sup> April was the earliest sighting of this species in recent years. On 14<sup>th</sup> May a total of 13 was recorded in less than ideal conditions. Of these, five were found resting on Bird's Foot Trefoil on Butchersfield Tip in overcast weather and seven were on the canal track. The next count of significance was 16 on 11<sup>th</sup> June and the last record of the spring brood was on 19<sup>th</sup> June when seven were present. The second brood emerged in mid-July with one on the 19<sup>th</sup> and numbers increased gradually until 8<sup>th</sup> August when 19 were found. This proved to be the highest count of the year and although the lowest in recent years, numbers were not too disappointing considering the prevailing weather conditions. The last report of the year was fairly typically on 4<sup>th</sup> September. Although numbers were down, butterflies were seen in many areas of the Reserve, which leads to optimism that better conditions will produce increased numbers in the future.

### **Holly Blue** *Celastrina argiolus*

The encouraging increase in sightings noted last year was maintained with reports on nine different dates relating to seven butterflies. There were two records of the spring brood, one from No.1 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> April and a second from No.3 bed on 7<sup>th</sup> May. On 24<sup>th</sup> July the first of the second generation was noted on the north bank of the river opposite No.2 bed and what may have been the same individual was seen on 30<sup>th</sup> July and 22<sup>nd</sup> August. The remaining sightings were from the copse on No.2 bed (27<sup>th</sup>

July), No.3 bed (29<sup>th</sup> July), Latchford Locks (8<sup>th</sup> August) and the canal track (13<sup>th</sup> August).

### **Red Admiral**

*Vanessa atalanta*

The exceptionally mild winter resulted in several very early sightings, which would indicate that this species is successfully overwintering at Woolston. The first was seen on Thelwall Lane on 5<sup>th</sup> February and there were further reports from No.3 bed on 18<sup>th</sup> February and No.1 bed on 27<sup>th</sup> March. The first migrant to arrive was on 28<sup>th</sup> May and four were present across the Reserve on 19<sup>th</sup> June. Numbers overall were low however, the highest being several counts of five in July culminating in the year maximum of seven on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> July. This species usually peaks in September but this year there were few records and four on 12<sup>th</sup> September was the best autumn count. The year concluded with three October records and the latest sightings on 3<sup>rd</sup> November when one was on No.1 bed and a second on No.3 bed.

### **Painted Lady**

*Cynthia cardui*

Unsurprisingly there were few reports of this attractive migrant and only eight records were received. The first was on 11<sup>th</sup> June and there were three further sightings that month including three on No.3 bed on the 20<sup>th</sup>, the only report of more than one butterfly this year. Two reports in late August and two in early September (4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>) completed a disappointing year.

### **Small Tortoiseshell**

*Aglais urticae*

This species has been in decline in recent years and, taking this and the poor weather into account, numbers for 2007 were not too disappointing with a year maximum of 29 compared to 31 in 2006. An early report of one on No.3 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> March was the first and six on 27<sup>th</sup> March increased to eight on 1<sup>st</sup> April. Fine weather at this time resulted in the peak count of 29 on 18<sup>th</sup> April. As conditions deteriorated so numbers decreased and there were only two counts in double figures for the rest of the year. Of the 16 found on 29<sup>th</sup> June 12 were on No.4 bed, and a detailed survey on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> July produced only 16 butterflies. There were no reports in August until the 22<sup>nd</sup> when six were present and early September saw a maximum of nine with few reports thereafter. The final records were of two on the Loop of No.4 bed on 18<sup>th</sup> October and one on No.3 bed on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

### **Peacock**

*Inachis io*

One of the few species to be recorded in good numbers this year, the Peacock was seen from 2<sup>nd</sup> February through to 23<sup>rd</sup> November. The first sighting was from No.3 bed on a warm sunny day but no more were noted until March with single butterflies present on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup>. Numbers began to increase by the end of the month and on 1<sup>st</sup> April ten were noted. This increase continued, and on 12<sup>th</sup> April 83 were found with a further eight on the river, an excellent spring total. High counts continued throughout April but after 1<sup>st</sup> May when 50 were present numbers declined



and only single figure counts were recorded until the last of the spring brood was seen on 19<sup>th</sup> June. The second emergence began on 17<sup>th</sup> July and by the end of the month a survey of the Reserve produced a total of 125 with a further 15 on the river. Whilst less than last year's record count of 223 this represents a very successful year for this species and was again the highest total for Cheshire. Further high counts of 84 on 8<sup>th</sup> August reducing to 28 by the 22<sup>nd</sup> were the last significant totals. Autumn produced three sightings in September, one in October and two late records on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> November.

### **Comma**

*Polygonia c-album*

The first record of the year was on 27<sup>th</sup> March, followed by regular sightings of one or two individuals during April and the last spring report on 1<sup>st</sup> May. The first summer sighting was a single on 17<sup>th</sup> June. By 29<sup>th</sup> June four were found on No.3 bed and numbers peaked during July when a survey of the whole Reserve on the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> resulted in a maximum for the year of 13 and one on the river. Although nowhere near last year's record total of 63 this was still an excellent showing for Woolston and the joint highest count in Cheshire. July saw further counts of eight, five and four but none were reported during August until one was found on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. There were four September records, the final sightings of the year being three on No.3 bed on the 16<sup>th</sup>.

### **Speckled Wood**

*Pararge aegeria*

This was one of the few species to be recorded in greater numbers than the previous year. An early report of two on 7<sup>th</sup> April was followed by nine on the 12<sup>th</sup> and a spring maximum of 14 on 1<sup>st</sup> May. Thereafter, very few were reported, possibly as a result of the unsuitable weather conditions and butterflies were recorded on only three dates from 1<sup>st</sup> May until 9<sup>th</sup> July. A survey of the whole Reserve on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> July produced only five but numbers then increased with 15 on 24<sup>th</sup> July and 22 by the month end. Reasonable numbers were present during August with a maximum of 20, and early September saw the highest total of the year when a detailed survey found a total of 60. This is slightly higher than the 2006 maximum of 56 and numbers of this species have been remarkably consistent over the past three years. Woolston is a major site for this species and again recorded the highest total in the county. By mid-September 22 were still present but thereafter only two records were received which were of singles on 6<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> October.

### **Gatekeeper**

*Pyronia tithon*

Unsuitable conditions during the summer months had a disastrous effect on this species, which had been recorded in record numbers in 2006. It was surprising therefore that the flight period was exceptionally long. The first sighting of three on No.4 bed on a cloudy 23<sup>rd</sup> June represented the earliest ever record at Woolston, as butterflies had never before been reported before July. By the end of the month seven were noted and following the usual pattern numbers increased rapidly during July. The year maximum was reached when a survey of the whole Reserve on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> July produced an extremely disappointing 247. Weather conditions were such that few counts were possible during the rest of July, the highest being 97 on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 72 on

the 29<sup>th</sup>. August produced only one total in double figures, 52 on the 8<sup>th</sup>. By the third week in August butterflies had all but disappeared and it was a surprise when one was discovered on No.4 bed on 6<sup>th</sup> September, the latest ever Woolston record by more than a week.

#### **Meadow Brown**

*Maniola jurtina*

This species also suffered as a result of the poor weather during its flight period and numbers were well down on recent years. The first record was of five on 10<sup>th</sup> June and a survey of the whole Reserve the following day produced a total of 42 of which 26 were on Butchersfield Tip. Numbers remained at about this level throughout the summer and the year maximum of 54 was reached in mid-July. By the end of August 40 were still present but thereafter there were only two further reports of eight on 4<sup>th</sup> September and three on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

#### **Dave Hackett**