

BUTTERFLY REPORT

Following the exceptionally warm and dry summer of 2003, which produced large numbers of butterflies throughout the season, 2004 represented a return to more normal conditions. Not only was the weather less favourable for butterflies, but also for observers with the result that fewer records were received.

Nevertheless there were some interesting sightings and some butterflies were seen in very high numbers, notably over wintering species such as Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell. Small Coppers, always a scarce butterfly at The Eyes, were seen in good numbers as were Speckled Wood. Sadly, there were no reports of Small Heath (after single sightings in the past two years), in spite of searching suitable habitat on No.1 bed.

The first report of the year was a Small Tortoiseshell on 17th March and there were March records of Peacock and Brimstone, another species that was seen in increased numbers in spring. Maximum numbers of Small Tortoiseshell occurred at the end of April with 100 on No.4 bed alone.

Summer saw a small influx of Painted Ladies and high numbers of Common Blue with 84 reported during hot weather at the beginning of June. Meadow Brown and Gatekeeper were plentiful although not in the same quantities as in 2003. Green-veined Whites were especially numerous and early August saw exceptional numbers of Peacock on the Reserve.

Late summer saw a possible reserve record of 42 Speckled Wood and although few butterflies were reported during the autumn an exceptionally late record of a Peacock on 28th November was noteworthy.

This report has been compiled from my own records together with those of other wardens and permit holders' entries in the logbook. Many thanks to all those who have taken the trouble to submit details of their sightings. As always the Cheshire and Wirral Butterfly Report provides a useful context in which to evaluate Woolston records.

Individual species reports are as follows:

Small Skipper

Thymelicus sylvestris

The first record was of one on No.4 bed on 14th June. Regular reports followed with a maximum of nine on 6th July and smaller numbers until the final sighting of the year on 12th August. Most reports were from Nos 1 and 4 beds where areas of rough grassland are found, with just two records from No.2 bed and none from No.3 where the habitat is unsuitable. Numbers were less than in 2003 but interestingly butterflies were in flight over a longer period.

Large Skipper

Ochlodes venata

Never seen in large numbers at Woolston, just five records of this species were received from 13th June to 5th July with a maximum of five on 14th June. Although less numerous than Small Skipper this species frequents a wider range of habitat and this is reflected in the fact that individuals were reported from all parts of the Reserve. There were three sightings from No.3 bed including two feeding on Thistle flowers.

Brimstone

Gonepteryx rhamni

There was an encouraging increase in the number of records of this attractive butterfly following a single sighting in 2003. On a very warm 31st March two were seen at Woolston Weir with further sightings on No.3 bed on 13th and 24th April. The following day a total of four was seen with one on the South bank of No.3 bed and three (two males and a female) on No.4. There were no further sightings.

Large White

Pieris brassicae

Never plentiful at Woolston, only seven records were received, from all areas of the Reserve. Three sightings were of single butterflies, with two recorded on four occasions. The first was reported on 7th May and sightings continued intermittently until 24th August.

Small White

Pieris rapae

The first report of the year was of five on 24th April. Small numbers were seen throughout the summer months. Large numbers of "whites" were reported on 7th May and 5th August but it is likely that the vast majority of these were Green-veined rather than Small Whites. In fact this species appears to have been less prevalent than in 2003 with the maximum positively identified being 14 on 3rd September. This proved to be the final report of the year.

Green-veined White

Pieris napi

A single butterfly on 25th April was the first of the year and this species seems to have been particularly plentiful this year. Precise numbers are always difficult to ascertain because of the likelihood of confusion with Small White and other species unless close views are obtained. Of 35 "whites" seen on 7th May, 18 were positively identified as Green-veined and none of any other species. It seems likely therefore that the vast majority, if not all, were of this species. On 5th August only ten of a total of 80 "whites" were positively identified of which seven were green-veined and three were Small Whites. This would indicate a possible maximum of about 50 Green-veined Whites, which could be a record figure for Woolston. Butterflies were reported from all areas of the Reserve and a pair was seen mating on the Canal Track on 12th August. The final record was a single on 9th September.

Orange Tip

Anthocharis cardamines

The first sighting was on the late date of 23rd April when five were seen across the Reserve. Regular reports followed until 24th May. Butterflies of this species are often seen into June but that was not the case this year. The maximum recorded was eight on 25th April with six on No.3 bed and two in the copse in the South West corner of No.2 bed. On 14th May a pair was seen mating on Birds Foot Trefoil on the Canal Track. The reports would indicate an average year for this species in spite of the short flight season.

Small Copper

Lycaena phlaeas

The increase in sightings noted in 2003 continued with six records submitted. The first was on 24th May when one was on Brambles in the copse area of No.2 bed with a further report from the same bed on 7th June. The next record was of six butterflies on 5th August of which five were at the east end of No.1 bed and the sixth on Brambles on the South bank of No.2 bed. Singles were seen on two further dates in August with the final report of the year on 3rd September.

Common Blue

Polyommatus icarus

The first sighting was of a single on No.2 bed on 24th May following which numbers increased rapidly. On 7th June, a hot day, 84 were counted along the Canal Track alone. This proved to be the maximum for the year by far with the next highest count being 24 on 5th August. Thereafter numbers declined until the last record of two on 3rd September. The June count was the highest for many years at Woolston and hopefully this attractive butterfly will continue to increase in numbers.

Red Admiral

Vanessa atalanta

There were no spring reports of this butterfly this year and the first sighting was of four on No.3 bed on 11th June. A similar number was recorded three days later and, surprisingly, this proved to be the maximum reported for the year. Singles were noted throughout the summer with just two reports of two butterflies in August. The final sighting was on 19th September. This normally common migrant fared badly throughout Cheshire with low numbers reported from most areas.

Painted Lady

Cynthia cardui

This summer migrant was less prevalent than in 2003 and, as with Red Admiral, numbers peaked in mid June. The first report was of three on 8th June and the year maximum was twelve on the Loop of No.4 bed the following day. There were no reports at all during July and just three in August. The last record was of three on 26th August.

Small Tortoiseshell

Aglais urticae

Following the excellent showing in 2003, large numbers of this species were present during the spring of 2004. The first sighting was on the 17th March and by the end of that month particularly warm conditions resulted in a count of 50 around the West Bank of No.2 bed. April produced much lower numbers but by the end of the month huge numbers were on the Reserve. On 30th April 100 were counted on No.4 bed alone, the majority feeding on Dandelions. Surveys of the rest of the Reserve on 2nd and 7th May produced totals of 65 and 82 respectively so it seems likely that over 150 were present at this time. Butterflies seen at this time of year have spent the winter in hibernation so the high numbers no doubt relate to the excellent showing during the hot summer of 2003. Numbers then declined and none were recorded from 21st May until an emergence at the beginning of July. Small numbers were recorded throughout the month with a maximum of 19 on 20th July. There were very few reports during August and September and the final report of the year was of three on the South Bank of No.3 bed on the late date of 24th October.

Peacock

Inachis io

The first record of the year was of four on 30th March, somewhat later than normal. Small numbers were regularly reported until 23rd April when 43 were seen on the Reserve. Fifty-six were noted on 2nd May and 48 on 5th May following which only small numbers were seen during the remainder of that month. As in 2003 there were no further sightings until 20th July, which signalled the start of a major emergence. A survey of the whole Reserve on 5th August produced the remarkable total of 121, which was the highest number recorded anywhere in Cheshire this year. Thereafter no more than two butterflies were recorded until what appeared to be the final report of the year on 3rd September. It was a pleasant surprise therefore when members of a working party found a single butterfly on the South Bank of No.3 bed on 28th November.

Comma

Polygonia c-album

Following the record numbers seen in 2003 it was disappointing that very few butterflies of this species were seen this year. The first sighting was on 30th April, one of only two spring records. The July emergence produced a large number of sightings but most were of single butterflies with a year maximum of three on No.3 bed on 23rd July. Reports continued until 6th August with the final records of the year on 9th September and 6th and 24th October.

Speckled Wood

Pararge aegeria

A single on 13th April was the first of the year and eight were present on 30th of the month. Single figure counts continued until 14th June when 21 were on the Reserve. Low numbers were noted until early August when 21 were present on the 5th. Maximum numbers occurred at the end of August with a possible record total of 42 on

26th followed by a count of 31 on 3rd September. The last report was of two on 9th September. Whilst this species is found in all areas of the Reserve it is relatively scarce on No.1 bed where there is little suitable habitat.

Gatekeeper

Pyronia tithonus

In spite of its short flight period, which is limited to July and August, this butterfly is found in very large numbers. First recorded at Woolston only 15 years ago this species has expanded its range northwards in recent years. It is found across the reserve but appears particularly plentiful on the banks of No.4 bed, where it is often seen on Ragwort and Bramble. The first sighting was of four on 4th July, increasing rapidly to a peak of 319 on 20th July and 478 on 5th August. There followed an equally rapid decline with only 12 on No.4 bed on 17th August and the final report of the year on 26th August. Numbers were down compared with a maximum of 821 in 2003 but the more "normal" weather conditions resulted in a slightly longer flight period.

Meadow Brown

Maniola jurtina

A report of eight on 14th June was the first of the year with no major increase in numbers until early July when 80 were seen, of which 45 were on No.4 bed. The highest total for the year was 101 on 5th August. It is of interest that maximum numbers of both Meadow Brown and Gatekeeper were markedly lower than in 2003 and occurred about two weeks later. A decline in numbers followed until the final report of the year when five were noted on 3rd September.

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