



Butterflies in Decline



Recent reports make it clear that butterflies are in decline both in numbers and distribution, but how are we faring locally? A comparison of this year, with its splendid weather in June and July, and the fine summer of 1996 is revealing. The range of species is similar, some 25 in 1996 and 23 so far in 2006, and numbers have held steady for a few species but the majority are fewer in number and at least one, possibly two, now locally extinct.

The species which seem to have maintained numbers are, as you might expect, the three common Whites - the Small, the Green-veined and the Large, and, at least around the Abbey, also the Brimstone. The Browns also seem to be doing well; that is, the Meadow Brown, the Ringlet, the Speckled Wood and the Gatekeeper - especially in Abbey Park. Of the more spectacular Nymphalidae the variety is much the same but numbers are down in almost every case including even the Painted Lady despite the large influx this year. So there have been Small Tortiseshells, Red Admirals, Commas, Peacocks and Painted Ladies on many days but rarely in double figures. Both Peacocks and Painted Ladies, for example, peaked at 12 on any one day whereas in 1996 over 120 of the former and 170 of the latter were present on one day near Odell.

Of the less common butterflies White-letter Hairstreaks had their best showing since 1997 and the Brown Argus equalled the two sightings of 1996. Holly Blues were only seen twice in May this year but were exceptionally abundant in 1996. This is a species subject to wild fluctuations, however, and this may also be true of the Small Copper none of which have appeared so far this year but were plentiful in 1996. One butterfly which has almost certainly become extinct locally is the Wall, seen in only two places in 1996 and last seen in 1997. The Small Heath may be another species in trouble now as it was found in several tetrads in 1996 but in only one so far this

year. Of the remaining species it's been difficult to discern a trend - largely through my not being in the right place at the right time in both years. One species which was increasing in 1996 and may still be doing so, is the beautiful Marbled White. Several other species may be remaining stable; these are the Orange Tip, the Large and the Small Skippers, and the Common Blue, though none of them in any great number. Two species seen in 1996 but not this year were the Essex Skipper and the Purple Hairstreak, but since the former requires a view of the underside of the antennae to be identified, and the latter long periods of staring at the tops of Oak trees, they were almost certainly overlooked. Two other species are known to occur locally but were not seen in either year; these are the White Admiral and the Grizzled Skipper and both were present last year in traditional sites.



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