

**HAWRIDGE AND CHOLESBURY
COMMONS PRESERVATION SOCIETY**

Butterfly Walk 2009

Once again, we were very grateful to David Dennis, who led a walk on the Commons on Sunday 12 July to help us identify butterflies. It was very well attended and everyone appreciated the interesting afternoon – below is his account of our rather variable weather this summer.

The weather in this country often keeps us guessing until the last moment. So it was for this year's butterfly walk on the Commons. At midday on Saturday, I was thinking of calling it all off as the predicted overnight rain was due to give way merely to miserable clouds and strong winds.

However, shortly afterwards the forecasters relented and grudgingly admitted that it might be quite warm, with some sunshine, but that showers were still possible.

So we went ahead and luckily it was the right decision. About 15 walkers arrived, some with butterfly identification charts in hand from previous years, which was good to see. I make it a rule that we should always try to see at least as many species as there are people present. Now that's quite a tall order, when the complete British list only consists of 58 butterfly species, at any time of year and throughout the whole of the UK....we were setting out to see 15 in two hours on one Common!

In our favour was the excellent way in which the Commons are managed for many purposes, including wildlife. There is grassland, woodland and some excellent protected rides with a wide variety of flowers and this helps a lot.

Almost before we had started we were looking at three species of 'browns' - the Meadow Brown, the Ringlet, and the confusingly named Marbled White (which technically is a 'brown' - don't go there!). We had just about sorted these out when we had to distinguish between the Small Skipper and the Essex Skipper. This involves getting down on your hands and knees to look at the underneath of the ends of the antennae. Orange/brown equals Small Skipper, jet black equals Essex Skipper - except that by then it has normally flown away! Being a bit of a purist, I wasn't happy until I'd found that both were there and then we found a rather tired looking Large Skipper, near the end of its flight season now, so at least we had seen 6 species – over a third of the way there.

The next 'brown' to appear was the Gatekeeper. Unlike the others, this species had just emerged and we had lovely views of both males and females in pristine condition - bright orange and brown – really wonderful.

Shortly afterwards we saw the first of the traditional 'garden' butterflies - a Comma. These are having a particularly good year on the Commons and several more appeared as the walk continued. This was followed by a couple of Small Tortoiseshells, a Speckled Wood and a Red Admiral - always a delight with its red and white markings standing out against otherwise velvety-black wings.

Throughout the walk we were dive-bombed by various white butterflies, eventually identified as the Small, Large and Green-veined Whites - an easy way to chalk up another three species. With most of the common species seen we were into trickier waters, but Linden helped by pointing out a Small Copper that I had walked straight past without noticing!

The assembled company was probably rather surprised, and amused, when I suddenly ran up a hill shouting 'what was that?!' I had seen a silhouette high up in the trees that was small and fast-flying and that normally means 'Hairstreak'. The only member of this family that we regularly see on the Commons is the Purple Hairstreak, which spends most of its time high up in oak trees. Because of this behaviour, most people never see it, although it is one of the most common UK butterflies. Not only did we see several high up, but one

female came down, settled on a head-height oak leaf and opened its wings to show the wonderful pattern of black and purple which makes this insect so special.

Mathematicians amongst you will have calculated that this makes a total of 16 species - one more than the required amount! I have, as yet, made no mention of the rather alarming swarm of bees seen high up in an ash tree and the spectacular view that we had of a buzzard, flying low above us, its wings catching the sun. All this clearly needed celebrating, so a few hardy souls repaired to the Full Moon, where there were, sadly, not enough types of beer to match our butterfly total, but hey, life's like that. The various brews we did sample, more than lived up to expectations - as usual. Thank you Peter and Annie!

David Dennis