

BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION UPPER THAMES BRANCH

Chalkhill Blue Report 2014

Nick Bowles

Early in 2014 warmer weather (compared with 2013), led me to hope for an improvement in numbers of Chalkhill Blue (*Polyommatus coridon*) across the northern part of the butterfly's range in the Chilterns. Populations in the southern Chilterns and Oxfordshire around the Thames and on the Berkshire Downs were large, or very large, in 2013 (following a national trend that the northern Chiltern's populations missed out on).

Right across our region most colonies hosted the expected numbers of this species. Unlike the previous year, no sites produced reports of huge numbers (and none abysmal numbers). However I know that at some sites there was an improvement in numbers and also a return to the site adjacent to Dancers End (Bucks) which had been abandoned about a decade back when grazing ceased. Grazing has been restored and although there have been issues with fencing, sufficient control of rank grass seems to have been established. Two females were seen here on 30th July, which strongly suggests breeding - though no egg laying was witnessed in approx 4 hours of observation.



One of 2 females seen at the site near Dancers End for the first time in over ten years.

Vagrancy away from the sites where the species breeds was probably quite frequent with reports in unsuitable areas such as from Bernwood Forest (Bucks), Charlbury (Oxon), Yardley Chase (Northants) and even in my own garden (Tring, Herts).



The flight period lasted from a first sighting on 28th June (Lardon Chase, Oxon) until the final report, 7th September (Coombe Hill, Wendover, Bucks).

The tatty 'last' male of 2014 is pictured left.

It is very likely that a female (normally the last of each brood) flew somewhere after this date.

The species was recorded at all the sites with known, persistent colonies, including the UTB reserve at Holtspur Bottom, where relatively small areas of Horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa* seem to maintain a tiny population. Seeds of Horseshoe vetch were collected at Holtspur Bottom and many hundreds of seedlings grown to try to increase the area for breeding on the reserve (once the seedlings establish).

A study at Pitstone Hill (Bucks) repeated one made in 2009 and showed that the species had still not returned to the larger part of the hill, from which it was lost approximately 21 years ago, though it has now spread some way from the one small gully on the hillside which held it in 2009, as its sole foodplant, Horseshoe vetch, has become far more prevalent again.

Nick Bowles
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