

## Upper Thames Branch Chalk Hill Blue report      2016

I would like to thank the various persons supplying reports this year; probably the year with most reports, despite (or because of?) the small numbers of butterflies. I had reports of both 'no sighting' and numbers of Chalk Hill Blue from right across the UTB region. Both these types of record are very helpful in building a picture of the butterfly's fortunes; The first report (of 143) was from The Devils Punchbowl (Oxon., 3rd July) and the last from Ivinghoe's Inchcombe Hole (Bucks., 28th September). This year the only long distance vagrant was at Cock Marsh near Maidenhead.

All known sites within the Buckinghamshire Chilterns were checked and populations generally found to be stable, though weaker (again) than in previous years. Unfortunately, despite volunteer scything and raking, on a private site near Tring, a lack of grazing and a warm damp spring, led to very long grass. Sightings of male and female Chalk Hill Blue here last year (2015), gave hope that this site was being re-colonised. Sadly, there were no female sightings in 2016. Equally, there was very little evidence of any but male Chalk Hill Blue at Baccombe Hill, near Wendover, and Brush Hill near Princes Risborough which has Chalk Hill blue in better years failed to return any positive results.

Similarly, a meadow near The Holies, which might simply host Chalk Hill Blue wandering in from the adjacent site and staying to nectar, was reported to have none. However, all the remaining sites seemed to be maintaining a breeding population. Reports from Oxfordshire and Berkshire (where most colonies had at least one visit) suggest a similar pattern, of most colonies persisting but in reduced numbers. The only report from Swyncombe Down was of no Chalk Hill Blue. With only one known visit, it is impossible to say how the species fared. Throughout our region, the best numbers were on the steeper south facing slopes (e.g. at The Holies) which were often noticeably more productive than adjacent slopes with more northerly aspects.

There were no reports of 'new' colonies, though there were positive signs at BBOWT's College Lake that a small population has established with females present for the third year. The odd male at any site near known colonies, is as likely to be a vagrant as it is evidence of a breeding colony. Repeat sightings of females, even in small numbers, is a more reliable indication of a colony.

We have referred previously to areas of Horseshoe Vetch within Wendover Woods, which seemed to have great potential when new habitat appeared after clearance work in 2003; but the vegetation continues to grow denser and once again there was no sighting of Chalk Hill Blue, despite this site's proximity to the colonies at Aston Clinton Ragpits and Chiltern Forest Golf Club. Obviously the plant is able to persist in conditions that the butterfly can not.

At our Holtspur Bottom reserve, the area of planted Horseshoe Vetch continues to expand and in time should make the continued presence of the small colony here a certainty. This year (2016) only two reports of females were received; which is obviously worrying, but transect numbers (of males) were similar to those of previous years.. Further planting of Horseshoe Vetch will take place this winter and it is hoped that 2017 will provide a better breeding opportunity.

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