

BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION UPPER THAMES BRANCH

Dingy Skipper Report 2011 & 2012

Dave Wilton



Dingy Skipper basking in typical brown-field habitat
along the disused railway line at Westcott, Bucks
(All photos © Dave Wilton)

The Dingy Skipper in the Upper Thames region fits the typical population structure, colonies being fairly small but with others quite close by with which they can interact. As can be seen from the ten-year map at the end of this report, the butterfly is still noticeably quite widespread on the calcareous grassland of the Chiltern Hills and Berkshire Downs, with a few more colonies to be found on the heaths of the Berkshire/Hampshire border. Elsewhere, the butterfly is reliant for the most part on brown-field sites which are often transitory in nature. Those in the area around Hook Norton in north Oxfordshire and in the Bernwood and Milton Keynes areas of north Buckinghamshire are mostly associated with old quarries, disused railway lines or redundant Ministry of Defence land. Illustrated below are two disused railway cuttings which currently have Dingy Skipper colonies. On the left (orientated north-south, photo taken during March 2007) is the cutting near Westcott, Bucks which looks very much the same today. On the right (orientated east-west, photo taken during June 2012) is the cutting near Salden Wood, Bucks which is becoming more and more overgrown.



Disused railway cutting near Westcott, Bucks



Disused railway cutting near Salden Wood, Bucks

The butterfly seems relatively stable throughout the Upper Thames area at the moment but some colonies are under threat from development, particularly from HS2 and from the planned East-West rail link between Bicester and Milton Keynes. While it is possible for butterflies such as Dingy and Grizzled Skipper to exist along normal active railway lines, HS2 will be a different matter because it seems that the immediate trackside areas will be given over entirely to concrete. Looking on the positive side, in another ten years time the Salden cutting, pictured above, will probably have completely scrubbed over so the re-opening of the line under the East-West link could conceivably be the saviour of the Dingy colony there if mitigation measures can be built into the project.

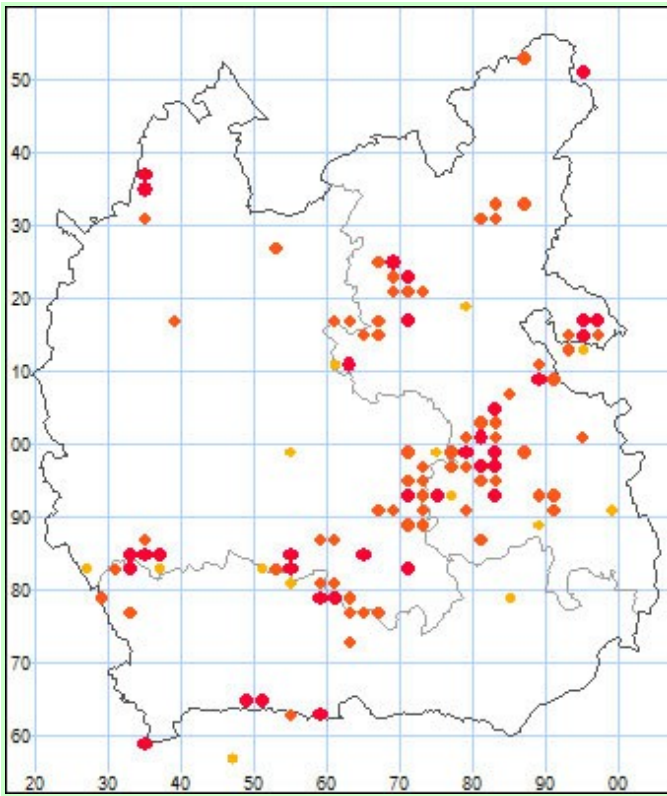
It is possible that we may have unrecorded populations on Network Rail land because of the difficulties associated with surveying. The two pictures below were taken in 2011 during a pre-arranged visit to the slopes of a cutting (part of an SSSI) on the busy Marylebone to Birmingham line, which is home to a small Dingy Skipper colony. It took months to organise. Health and Safety requirements dictated that high-visibility clothing was worn and we were outnumbered by Network Rail staff. Even though a stock-proof fence has now been erected along the base of the slopes to allow the site to be grazed, surveying is not permitted without the presence of these "minders"!



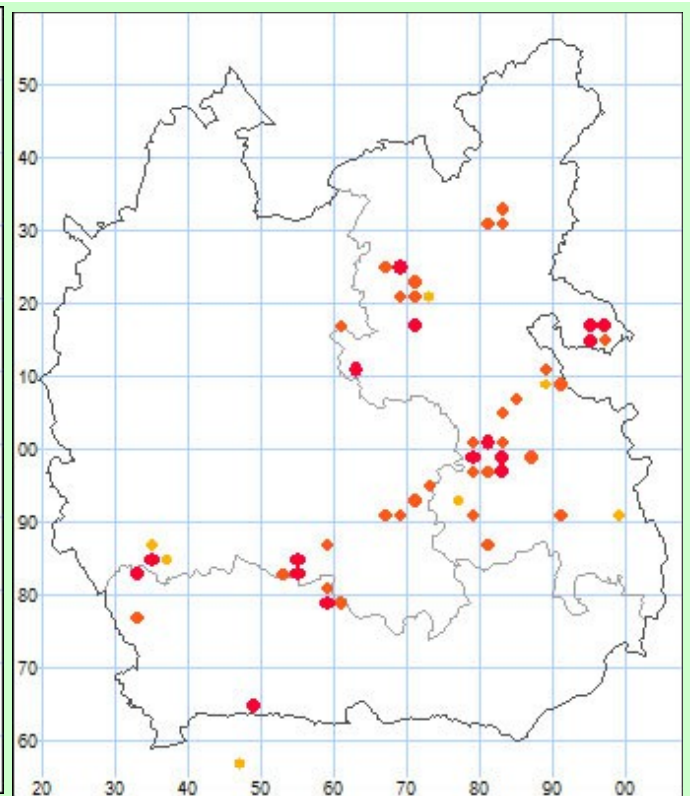
At least one small colony still survives in a block of deciduous woodland in north Bucks but for the most part the Dingy Skipper has become extinct locally from this habitat type as ride management has deteriorated. Bernwood Forest is an interesting case, where the butterfly has moved out of the woodland into suitable territory around the edge. Over the past decade there have been occasional sightings in Bernwood Meadows, while at the opposite end of the site the M40 Compensation Area (right next to the motorway) has seen the species take up residence over the last five years. The Compensation Area transect records show a singleton recorded there in 2009 then numbers slowly rising to 24 seen in 2012. Both sites offer plenty of the larval foodplant (Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*), although the required bare ground is in short supply. In the case of the Compensation Area it could perhaps be the case that the shelter provided by the woodland to the west and the complicated pattern of blackthorn and privet hedges within the site itself (...and maybe also the incessant passage of internal combustion engines immediately to the east!) are sufficient to offer the butterfly a slightly warmer micro-climate than is available elsewhere. There may eventually be potential for the butterfly to move back into the Forest because a large cleared area within Oakley Wood could quite easily become suitable for the species.

Perhaps because it is visited more frequently than other sites, the disused railway cutting near Westcott, Bucks consistently produces the highest adult totals in our Branch area. During 2011 and 2012 around 50 individuals were seen there during single visits at peak season. With only a few notable exceptions, most other sites (even those on the chalk) tend to produce counts in single digits for any one visit.

The branch database currently shows 125 Dingy Skipper records for 2011 (circa 600 individual butterflies) but as yet only 69 records for 2012. Hopefully there will still be more to come, especially for 2012 because the weather for the majority of the butterfly's flight season was actually quite acceptable, if not as brilliant as that of the previous year. The first sighting locally in 2011 was on 19th April at BBOWT's Hartslock nature reserve near Goring in Oxon. The first in 2012 was a week earlier, on 11th April at Sands Bank local nature reserve in High Wycombe, Bucks, although it seemed to take the butterfly longer to get going in any numbers than it had in 2011. Sightings in both years continued until mid-June, but in 2011 there was the added bonus of a good second brood with at least ten individuals reported to us between 22nd July and 22nd August. As usual these were restricted to the warmer downland sites (Yoesden Bank, Sands Bank, Buttler's Hangings, the Chequers Estate & Pitstone in the Bucks Chilterns and on the Ridgeway near Wantage, Oxon). No second brood sightings have been reported to us for 2012.



DINGY SKIPPER in Berks, Bucks & Oxon
(years 2003 to 2012 inclusive: 111 tetrads)



DINGY SKIPPER in Berks, Bucks & Oxon
(records to date, years 2011 and 2012 only: 52 tetrads)

Dave Wilton
February 2013