

BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION UPPER THAMES BRANCH

Green Hairstreak Report 2010

Dave Turnbull

Our first UTB sighting for the Green Hairstreak was at Grangelands on the 17th April which, when compared to the first sightings of the last five years, is about an average date. Nationally the first seen this year was in Hampshire on the 6th April.

After two weeks of steady sightings the weather turned cold and overcast and not surprisingly no records were received from 2nd May until the 13th when one was seen on the railings at Chinnor Station by Bob Ellisdon (I don't know whether this is a new way of extending its range as it's unclear as to whether it boarded the next train!).

On 17th May another interesting record came in when our intrepid butterfly wanderer, Wendy Wilson, found a colony in a 10k square at Denham in Bucks, where I understand it hadn't been recorded for fifty or so years.

Apart from Wendy's report of eleven at Denham, the reports over the next week were in single figures but nonetheless, widespread.



Photo © Dave Turnbull

This was to change very significantly and in dramatic fashion when, on the 23rd May, Mike and Gillian Taylor visited the Devil's Punchbowl area on the Lambourn Downs and reported an amazing 500+. Similarly I received a record from Wendy and Mick Campbell just two days later and from the same area, who gave up counting at 200, but thought that 500 or more would have been a reasonable assumption on the number they had seen too. Apparently a shortage of scrub meant that Green Hairstreaks were adorning grass stems, stinging nettles and flowers in what must have been an astonishing and memorable sight.

Why they were in such large numbers is not known. Perhaps the ants, that are thought to assist during their pupation, had a very good year in 2009 in that area, or they just benefited in some way from the harsh winter. It will be interesting to see what happens there in 2011.

This was some peak in our records. Just three weeks later we received our last record of the year which was on 16th June at Sands Bank.



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Having a diverse range of habitats from coastal margins, downland, moorland and heathland to open woodland and with a wide range of food plants, the status of this butterfly will always be difficult to quantify. Because of this compared to our other Hairstreaks it is certainly the least threatened and although not often seen in large numbers it is nonetheless widespread throughout the country.

Emerging most years in mid April they often have to endure overnight frosts and cold spells so in spite of their diminutive size they are hardy individuals. At this time of year they tend to be late risers as in my experience they are difficult to find much before mid to late morning. With closed wings displaying their striking emerald green colouration they lean, positioning their wings at ninety degrees to the sun, to gain maximum warmth. When temperatures reach double figures they become far more active and quarrelsome, defending their favourite perching positions and spiralling into the air with rival males. In flight they are difficult to follow as their brown upper wings give them good camouflage, as does their underwing when at rest against green foliage. Because of this it is probably frequently overlooked and there is often an element of surprise when one flies up in front you, often in places where you haven't noticed them before.

Being a great favourite of mine, I am glad to report that this stunning little butterfly appears to have had a good year and would like to thank all those who have helped this conclusion by sending in their records.

Dave Turnbull
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