

# BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION UPPER THAMES BRANCH

## Small Blue Report 2010

Dave Turnbull

**With the very cold and prolonged winter pushing back the Spring it seemed unlikely that the Small Blue was going to be seen in the Upper Thames region before the end of April, as it was in 2009.** Indeed we had to wait until May 15th when two were seen at Pitstone (Bucks) and one at Lardon Chase (Berks), although the first National record was in Somerset on April 18th. Apart from the Pitstone area, records and numbers for the year were very sparse with generally ones and twos being seen, with a total of just 31 in the UTB area. Bradenham (Bucks) was the only site where numbers were slightly higher with four seen on the 2nd June and eight on the 18th.



Small Blue  
*Photo © Dave Turnbull*

This highlights the importance of the Pitstone site where they can be seen in large numbers, so at the beginning of June I asked a friend, Brian Jessop, to do a transect for me and in just over an hour his count for Small Blues numbered 416.

Where they do occur in large numbers they seem to radiate out, as at Pitstone they were seen on the roadside verges not only just outside the site, but several hundred yards away towards Aldbury Nowers. Almost certainly, the Small Blues found at Aldbury Nowers that caused a degree of excitement with the Herts group emanated from the Pitstone site, a distance of less than a mile. With the new scrapes and if they plant Kidney Vetch, there is a good chance that a new colony will be formed on this much improved Reserve.

A lot can be learnt from sites on the Herts, Bucks and Beds borders where the Small Blues show that, with the right conditions, they can and do occur in large numbers and possibly spread to form new colonies.

About three weeks after their main flight period a small second brood occurs at Pitstone where, on a set walk, I counted 45 compared to the 30 or so last year but conditions were more favourable. Records for Small Blues in the UTB region rarely go into August, but this year I found a male in good condition on August 24th, very late indeed.



Small Blues  
*Photo © Dave Turnbull*

I have rarely noticed this butterfly much above a metre from the ground. It thrives in warm sheltered situations and is to be found out of the wind where they can bask lazily in the sun. Males enjoy perching on tall grass stems and low scrub waiting for females to briefly court. Large areas of Kidney Vetch are often devoid of Small Blues until the females return after mating to lay their eggs at the base of the florets, most noticeably in the latter part of the flight period.

With its small size and insignificant colouring the Small Blue is easily overlooked and therefore almost certainly under recorded and in flight can be mistaken for the Brown Argus. Records show that this charming butterfly is declining in numbers. With only one known larval food plant, Kidney Vetch, and a sedentary nature contributing to its vulnerability, action is needed if we are to carry on enjoying the sight of our smallest native butterfly.

Sadly the Pitstone site, which lies just inside Butterfly Conservation's Upper Thames region, is afforded virtually no protection from a change in land use and management and that could happen at any time.