

UPPER THAMES BRANCH

# Hairstreak

ISSUE 124 | WINTER 2024/25



Winner of the 2024 Members' Day Photo Competition (Immature Stages category)



**Butterfly  
Conservation**

Saving butterflies, moths and our environment

**Upper Thames  
Branch**



[www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk](http://www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk)

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Cover images (clockwise from top left):

Striped Lychnis Larva, Millennium Field, Sonning Common (Berks), 7th August 2024 (©Chris Brown)

Comma, Aston Upthorpe Downs (Oxon), 15th February 2024 (©Mark Jones)

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# First Thoughts



**Season's greetings**, and a very warm welcome to this winter issue of *Hairstreak*.

**It is our intention to publish this newsletter before Christmas. If this has not materialised, it is due to circumstances beyond the branch's control.**

Many of us can't wait until winter is over... anticipating the sighting of a hibernator exercising its wings for the first time in some perhaps long-awaited weak sunshine. But it's during the winter months that most of the 'hard graft' is done to improve our species' habitats, which is why we aim to encourage our members to kick off their slippers, don some outdoor weather-proof gear, and join us on one of the many organised winter tasks (which are listed elsewhere in this newsletter). Without this work (and it needn't be hard graft!), we are all less likely to witness the sight of many of our threatened species in future years. Check out: [https://www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk/event\\_calendar](https://www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk/event_calendar)

We welcome Peter Philp as our new Chair and wish him every success in his new role. Our Treasurer, Chris Woodrow, also steps aside in the spring, and we will be welcoming Treve Willis as his replacement.

With Peter relinquishing some of his formal roles with the Branch, we are looking for one or more individuals to 'fill the gaps'... so, please check out our request for assistance on page 14.

Our Members' Day at Benson in October was – once again – a great success, and we feature some of its 'key moments' in this issue (including the winning photo competition entries).

I'm delighted that we have some new contributors for this issue, and can I remind everyone that – with less than 12 weeks to go until the next issue – the earlier you can get your contributions in, the better. Other than articles which have to be included in an issue (often because of their 'sensitivity' to the season), I will normally treat contributions on a first-come, first-served basis. Don't be disappointed by leaving it too late!

This time last year we featured some of your 'Me Moments' of 2023. If you have any such moments for 2024, we'd love to hear about them (via [newsletter-editor@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk](mailto:newsletter-editor@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk)) for potential inclusion in our spring 2025 issue.

Have a wonderful winter.

**Derek Haynes**  
Editor

Please send contributions for future issues of the newsletter to [newsletter-editor@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk](mailto:newsletter-editor@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk), with supporting images sent separately (or as attachments) in order to maintain quality. **NEXT COPY DEADLINE IS THURSDAY 6th MARCH 2025.**

# View from the Chairs

At the time of the last issue of *Hairstreak*, I (Nick) had envisaged that Grahame Hawker would be replacing me as Chair.

However, Grahame already had various commitments, and, despite endless enthusiasm, he was concerned that he could struggle to take on yet another role.

When Peter Philp (who was about to retire) learnt of Grahame's concerns, he (Peter, our Events Organiser and WCBS organiser) volunteered to stand in his place.

So, I have now passed the baton to Peter.

Grahame was relieved, and we have an excellent new Chair – one with passion, drive and optimism about the conservation of our butterflies and moths.

I would like to thank all members for their excellent support, and urge you, as strongly as I possibly can, please, to consider giving Peter and the Branch more support than ever.

Back all Branch conservation efforts so determinedly that we retain every one of the wild places in our area, with each in the best possible condition.

**Nick Bowles**

[Ed.]: Thanks, Nick. Now it's on to Peter's thoughts...

Hello! I am Peter Philp, your new Chair for the Upper Thames Branch of Butterfly Conservation. I have already met a number of you at various guided walks, work parties and, of course, the recent Members' Day.

Before I do anything else, I must say a massive Thank You to our retiring Chair, Nick Bowles. His enthusiasm, commitment and drive have been extraordinary, and, during his time at the helm, our Branch has been recognised as one of the most vibrant and productive across the country. Nick was recognised for his contribution at the recent Branch Chairs' Meeting. Thankfully, Nick will still be continuing with much of what he has always done but focussing a bit more on practical conservation, where his passion lies.

A little about me: I am single, retired and live near Abingdon in Oxfordshire. I am a professional ecologist with over 25 years of experience working in nature conservation in the UK. More than half of this was working with the RSPB as a Nature Reserve Warden at places such as Bempton Cliffs in Yorkshire; Old Hall Marshes in Essex; and Highnam Woods, Nagshead and Symonds Yat Rock in Gloucestershire.

I have also worked for four Wildlife Trusts, including spells as Reserves Manager, looking after the whole portfolio of Nature Reserves for the Gloucestershire and Norfolk Wildlife Trusts; periods at Cornwall Wildlife Trust; and some time with BBOWT back in its BBONT days!

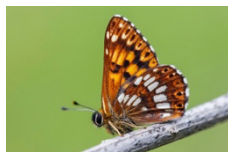
More recently, I taught Secondary Science at a High School in Norwich for nearly 15 years. Fortunately, I took early retirement just before the first 'lockdown', and moved back to Oxfordshire to help look after a poorly brother. Since then, I have spent much of my 'spare time' doing voluntary work for nature conservation: recording, surveying and monitoring; and work parties etc. for the likes of BTO, BBOWT, RSPB and UTB.

I have been a Committee member of our Branch for three years and have also taken on the roles of Guided Walks Organiser, Wider Countryside Butterfly Survey (WCBS) Champion, and Volunteer Coordinator.

I take up the reins as Chair at a challenging time for businesses, especially charities, many of which are having to lay off staff and reduce their outgoings to 'balance the books'. Butterfly Conservation is no exception to this. Branches will be working to a new funding model; however, this should not greatly affect what we do and should allow more effective and efficient use of our resources.

Most of you will have noticed what a disappointing season 2024 has been for many of our butterfly and moth species. This was amplified in the report of this year's Big Butterfly Count which revealed the lowest numbers on record, seven species having their worst summer in the Count's history, and 81% of species, that's over 4 out of 5, showing declines on 2023 numbers.

Butterfly Conservation has this year declared a national 'Butterfly Emergency' in light of the results of the Count.



Duke of Burgundy

species like the Duke of Burgundy and the Striped Lychnis moth, we can see good progress.



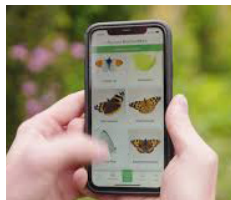
Striped Lychnis caterpillar on Dark Mullein

Winter work parties have stabilised several populations of the former and even allowed them to colonise new sites, whilst the planting of Dark Mullein has provided more food for the latter's caterpillars.

With your help, I believe we really can make a difference and work towards a countryside where our butterflies, moths and habitats not only survive, but thrive; and where all the people of our three counties can enjoy the delicate beauty of our Lepidoptera in tranquil, biodiverse habitats that adds to their peace and wellbeing.

However, your Committee cannot do it alone. If every single member of our Branch is committed to doing just one small thing, and encourages family, friends and neighbours to do one small thing, then we would see positive results... faster. And yes, there really are small things that virtually every one of us could do, which would help make a difference. I will suggest just two... for now.

**Record the butterflies and moths you see** in your day-to-day activities, and submit your records. For those of you with a smartphone, and confidence in using apps, this is not only a 'doddle' but can add to your enjoyment of your walks.



Simply download **iRecord Butterflies** (it's free and easy to use, and there is guidance on its use on our

website). Then, whenever you see a butterfly, choose its image from the pre-loaded selection or start typing its name, add the number you have seen, and the app will do the rest. Your phone's GPS will record the grid reference and its calendar will record the date. Hit the finish button and the record goes off to the national data base.

The app also gives you lots of help. It shows you what butterflies you are likely to see in your location at any particular time of the year. It gives basic identification features and flight periods, and, if you are still unsure, you can attach a photograph of the butterfly to your record.

Once you get used to this, you might be prepared to record in other areas near where you live and work, to help us fill gaps in our knowledge.

**Create a Wild Space!** We are not (necessarily) talking about 'rewilding' or creating your own nature reserve, but then again, if you have the land and resources...! A Wild Space is simply a place where butterflies and moths



can thrive throughout the year. It should provide nectar (an energy resource

for the adult insects), foodplants for the caterpillars (often species specific) and shelter (for all stages in their life cycle). This could be as simple as a few different plants in a tub or flower bed or the corner of your garden.

There is a lot of guidance and help on the Wild Spaces website (<https://wild-spaces.co.uk>) and lots of suggestions for species to plant on the UTB website gardening pages ([upperthames-butterflies.org.uk/gardening](http://upperthames-butterflies.org.uk/gardening)). Please do have a go; it doesn't take a great deal of effort or cost; it is great fun; and you will be rewarded by a greater number and variety of butterflies and moths. Please don't forget to register your Wild Space on the website.

In closing, I would like to commend all the past and present Committee members, helpers and volunteers who selflessly give of their time and expend effort to help Butterfly Conservation (equivalent to over 12 full-time staff!).

Finally, if I achieve half of what Nick Bowles has achieved, in my time as Chair, I will be a proud man.



**Peter Philp**

# A Day in the Life: Upper Thames Branch Members' Day 2024

Our Members' Day, held in Benson (Oxon) on 26th October and supported by around 100 attendees, was – as always – a most enjoyable event.



Our three guest speakers imparted their wisdom and knowledge with great enthusiasm, and proffered a degree of optimism for the future. (Our fourth speaker unfortunately had to pull out at relatively short notice.)

It was Nick Bowles's last formal stint as Chairman, and he was warmly presented with two books for myriad services rendered. The photo below shows Nick (right) being presented with his award by



our Vice-Chairman and Conservation & Recording Officer Grahame Hawker.

Our incoming Chairman, Peter Philp



Member Paul Huckle (alas, not present on the day) was the recipient of The Frank Banyard Conservation Award, his having been an 'ever present' at numerous conservation tasks over more than two decades. Paul was gifted a signed Richard Lewington (RL) print.

Chris Woodrow was honoured (in his absence), again with a signed RL print, for his 16-year stint as Branch Treasurer. We are most grateful to all award recipients for their hard work and unabating dedication to the cause.

Following our traditional updates on the status of the butterflies and moths in our region in the current year (by Nick

and Peter Cuss respectively), where the number of iRecord **reports** (not individual records) to 21st October 2024 were down 26% for butterflies (with Meadow Brown the most recorded species) and down 34% for moths, compared to 2023 (at the same stage); and following an update on our Holtspur Bottom reserve (also by Nick), it was time to welcome our first guest speaker, Mike Slater, Chair of BC's Warwickshire Branch, who gave a passionate talk entitled 'Conservation the Warwickshire Way'.



Mike (above) has researched and implemented myriad conservation methodologies over a 10-year period, working in partnership with over 300 public and private landowners (of which 70 were farmers), providing best-practice land management advice. And what success he and his Branch have had! (Regrettably, there's far too much detail to include here).

Mike's focus has been on partnerships, and he considers the most important thing in conservation to be the discovery of **potential** sites, where habitats are favourable... with recording at these sights essential to determine best land management advice. "When I look at a habitat, I look for how many egg-laying

opportunities there are for a particular species of butterfly." One of Warwickshire Branch's aims is to have Orange-tip, Green-veined White, Speckled Wood, Gatekeeper and Meadow Brown – plus 10 other species of butterfly – in each of its 620 tetrads (2km squares). "Over many years we've had 49 species [of butterfly] breeding in Warwickshire; we've now got 37, of which 23 are expanding their range, with just one – Small Heath – showing a decline. **Conservation works.**"

With co-Branch member Keith Warmington, Mike has recently written the book *Butterfly Conservation: the Warwickshire Approach*, assessed



by Peter Eeles (of [ukbutterflies.co.uk](http://ukbutterflies.co.uk) fame) as "an important book that raises the bar when it comes to understanding how to practically conserve our butterfly fauna", which is available to purchase from various outlets.

During the question session following Mike's talk, Nick explained that each county council must spell out (as part of the Government's local nature recovery strategy) exactly how it will reach its target of 30% of the countryside's being 'better for wildlife' by 2030.

During the lunch break, we had the opportunity to view the entries for this year's photo competition as a rolling





screen display, try out the quiz, and visit the stalls and many displays. Then, following the statutory Committee business, we welcomed Matt Pitts, our second guest speaker, onto the stage. Matt (above) is a grassland specialist at Plantlife ('the global voice for wild plants and fungi'), who talked of 'Restoring Juniper in Lowland England's Grasslands'.

Common Juniper (*Juniperus communis*) is one of three native conifers, but has declined dramatically due mainly to the change in landscapes from pastoral to arable (and rabbits have played their part, too!). It is a 'Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework'.

Juniper (whose needs are complex) supports over 50 insects, and is the sole larval foodplant of moths such as the Juniper Carpet. Juniper can live for upwards of 70 years, but has become susceptible to attack by the pathogen *Phytophthora austrocedri*, which will cause those affected to die.

Matt spoke about the ongoing efforts by Plantlife to restore juniper on chalk downland in the south of England, following trials (which began in 2009) aimed at allowing juniper to regenerate naturally over time from the sowing of seed from the berries of existing local populations of juniper on 'mechanically crafted' scrapes at selected sites (for example, at Aston Upthorpe in our region). Matt made it clear that Plantlife's piloting of a series of management techniques with project partners is very much an ongoing initiative – and one not without its challenges. Hopefully, as agreed during the session, there will be closer future collaboration between UTB and Plantlife.

[Plantlife has produced this booklet, 'Breaking new ground for juniper', available to view at: <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ManagingJuniper.pdf>]



Our final guest speaker was Martin Spray CBE, Chair of Butterfly Conservation, who spoke influentially about 'The Nature Crisis – a Role for BC'. Martin has an association with our Branch area, having been Chief Executive of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) for 12 years.



Martin (above) opened by telling us that the UK is the most biodiverse-depleted country in Europe, heavily influenced by the industrial and agricultural revolutions and massive ongoing development... and opined that, “We’d probably have nothing left if it wasn’t for the work of the voluntary sector.”

WWF and the Zoological Society of London have recently published their **2024 Living Planet Report**, available to view at [https://files.worldwildlife.org/wwfcmprod/files/Publication/file/5gc2qerb1v\\_2024\\_living\\_planet\\_report\\_a\\_system\\_in\\_peril.pdf](https://files.worldwildlife.org/wwfcmprod/files/Publication/file/5gc2qerb1v_2024_living_planet_report_a_system_in_peril.pdf) which declared an overall average decline (based on records for 7500 species in the period 1970-2020) of 73%.

Martin professed that, “Butterflies and moths are the ‘canary in the mine’ as indicators of change,” and adding, “They are loved by all age groups as they

capture the imagination. Catch a child at seven, and you’ve got them for life [Peter Scott].

“We have to plan well ahead, to mitigate future [influential] changes. BC needs to encourage inter-site connections (‘wildlife corridors’) through its collaboration with other organisations, using BC’s expertise in its role as conservator of butterflies and moths. BC can give solutions to people, but is not really in the market for buying up land [to address conservation issues].”

There were many comments and questions from the audience after Martin’s talk, and a small selection is included here:

(1) BC and Branches should be finding ways to better champion both national and local conservation successes; and it would furthermore be beneficial for BC’s website to host case studies of such initiatives [with Martin responding that he’d take this idea back to HQ].

(2) UTB’s Grahame Hawker suggested that it would be most useful if BC could host centrally gathered ‘intelligence’ on butterfly species [in respect of conservation management], accessible by Branches for discussions with landowners.

Before Nick’s closing comments, the results of the photo competition and quiz were announced by Peter Thompson and Grahame Hawker respectively. The winning entries from each photo competition category are revealed on page 12 (with the runners-up expected to feature in the next issue of *Hairstreak*).

A great day all round, with special thanks to each of our speakers and – without naming them all – the UTB community (including each of you who attended) for contributing, one way or another, to the success of the occasion.

Just one thing: as the ladies that very kindly gave of their time to provide refreshments pointed out, “Next year, it would be nice to see one or two men helping out with this role.” Chaps, take note!

Fingers crossed that at least some of the positivity generated on the day will lead to a healthier natural environment for all.

If any attendee at Members’ Day 2024 (or, indeed, any UTB member) would like an audio recording of any guest speaker’s presentation, I may be able to provide it subject to the nature of the request. Please email me at [newsletter-editor@upperthamesbutterflies.org.uk](mailto:newsletter-editor@upperthamesbutterflies.org.uk)

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### One week later:

We referred above to the gifting of The Frank Banyard Award for conservation to long-standing member Paul Huckle, who couldn’t make Members’ Day.

We are pleased to report that at a task at Holtspur Bottom on 3rd November, Nick was able to present Paul (above left) with his framed Richard Lewington print:



Paul responded, “All I had to do was 30 years of unpaid work!” Paul responded, “All I had to do was 30 years of unpaid work!”

**Derek Haynes**

First photo ©Linda Seward  
Last photo ©Nick Bowles  
All other photos ©Jim Asher



## Photo Competition: the results

At Members' Day, we had the opportunity to see some wonderful images that were submitted by our members. Here we feature the **winning entries**, with the runners-up featuring in the next edition of *Hairstreak*. Congratulations to all!

In the **UK Butterflies** category, Phil Tizzard was chosen as the winner with this beautiful, atmospheric photo of a Wood White:



On the next page: in the **UK Moths** category, Graham Breadmore gave us his stunning, front-on photo of a male Gypsy Moth; and, in the **Overseas Lepidoptera** category, Ben Paternoster's gorgeous image of a Black-veined White, taken in France.



Winner in the **Immature Stages** category was Chris Brown, whose striking photo of a Striped Lychnis caterpillar is featured on this issue's front cover.

# Big Boots to Fill

With Peter Philp taking over the UTB Chair, the roles for which Peter had previously been responsible need to be filled – and the Branch would like to hear from anyone who might be interested in one or more of these.

We fully appreciate that Peter's hard-working boots are big ones to fill, but these roles are primarily ones which can be managed from the comfort of one's own home (though some 'hands-on' involvement would be encouraged, too).



The roles in question are WCBS Co-ordinator, Field Trip Organiser and Volunteer Co-ordinator, but we also have a vacancy for Transect Co-ordinator. Peter would provide guidance and support during the 'handover' process, and for as long as needed. Each of these roles is described below.

## (1) WCBS Co-ordinator



The WCBS (Wider Countryside Butterfly Survey) was established in 2009 by the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (UKBMS) to obtain important information about the abundance of butterfly species in under-recorded habitats (such as farmland borders and urban spaces). This monitoring scheme is organised in partnership with the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).

The WCBS is a random (yet scientifically sound) sampling of the countryside, involving 2 to 4 visits by volunteers who survey two parallel 1-km long transects that are subdivided into 10 sections. The Ordnance Survey (OS) 1-km squares which contain the transects are randomly selected and allocated to volunteers who have registered their offer of help. Typically, volunteers take on a survey that is based close to home, with July and August being the survey's core recording period.

As a Branch, we have been allocated 34 OS squares, of which 25 have – at the time of writing – been adopted, leaving another 9 currently vacant. Details of these can be found at <https://www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk/wcbs>

The Co-ordinator's role is to:

- Remind existing volunteers to survey their adopted squares, and provide guidance and support where necessary
- Help recruit new volunteers (occasional short pieces in *Hairstreak* and/or elsewhere)

- Ensure that all volunteers are registered on Assemble and have completed the appropriate training
- Provide an introduction and support
- Produce a brief end-of-season report for *Hairstreak*

More information about WCBS can be found at

<https://ukbms.org/wider-countryside-butterfly-survey>

## (2) Field Trip Organiser

Make no mistake: this is a vital role within the Branch, one which involves:

- Planning a programme of walks across all three counties
- Agreeing walk details with existing Walk Leaders
- Agreeing walk dates and details with the site owners/managers
- Recruiting additional Walk Leaders, ensuring they are registered on Assemble and have completed the necessary training
- Advertising the walks on the BC & UTB websites, *Hairstreak*, UTB's Monthly Bulletin, Eventbrite and regional & local media
- Reminding Walk Leaders as the walks approach and providing an update on numbers booked
- Encouraging Walk Leaders to write interesting reports for *Hairstreak* and feedback to the Field Trip Organiser

These field trips tend to take place between May and August, at appealing locations which often have resident specialist species. These events enable both UTB members and the wider community to engage with wildlife in a safe environment with a knowledgeable Walk Leader and other like-minded souls; and furthermore, whose aim is to promote personal well-being and – hopefully – a long-term relationship with the Branch and its wider conservation activities.

The role of Field Trip Co-ordinator is one which needs good organisational and communication skills, and a 'never-say-never' attitude.

### (3) Volunteer Co-ordinator

This role is quite a new one, with Peter being the first 'in post'. Its main aim is to direct would-be volunteers to the most suitable role(s), according to their own preferences (and location base) and the Branch's current priorities. You would also need to ensure all new volunteers are registered on Assemble and have completed the necessary training.

### (4) Transect Co-ordinator

This role (currently vacant) has been a UTB-wide one over the years, but we are considering a **Transect Co-ordinator for each of our three counties** (to make the role somewhat easier to manage).



All transects are registered with the UKBMS and need to be surveyed weekly from the beginning of April to the end of September. Most transects have a team of surveyors, so volunteers would not be committed to survey every week.

Each year, you would receive a list of transects within the Branch area (or your county, if we have split roles), together with the contact for each transect. Some contacts look after a number of transects (for BBOWT, NT, etc.).

- You would need to get in touch with each contact well before the season starts, to find which transects have a full complement of volunteers and which could do with additional help. [This can be done by 'bulk' contact via Assemble].
- You would need to help recruit new volunteers (by placing articles in our newsletter, local media, etc); ensure that all UTB transect volunteers are registered on Assemble and have completed the required training; and then place them on a transect close to where they live.

If your boots are big enough to fulfil any of the above roles, you would be assured of support from either Peter or someone else who had previously undertaken the role. Further information on any of these roles may be obtained by contacting Peter on [volunteer-coordinator@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk](mailto:volunteer-coordinator@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk)

**The Branch can only function satisfactorily with the ongoing support of its conscientious members, and would be most appreciative of any help you can offer. Thank you.**



# Upper Thames Moths Report 2024

A brief summary of some of the work carried out this year on our moth species is given below.

## Drab Looper

(*Minoa murinata*)



This species still seems to be doing well in its known sites south of the M4. A survey on 10th May in the woods around Frilsham produced 19 individuals. A search at Fence Wood on 11th May found 9 moths. I am not aware of any records in its old haunts north of the M4. Two searches at Moor Copse NR, now usually the only reliable site that side of the motorway, failed to find the moth which is of concern. A search at Frilsham woods on 12th August for second-generation Drab Looper produced two adults. Going forward, I am hoping we can establish some good contacts from the estates that hold these colonies.

## Forester

(*Adscita statices*)

As this was my last year at work, I am hoping (with a little extra spare time!) to get a project started next year to look at



sites where this moth is found, comparing management of the sites to population size. This year I did manage to find three Foresters at Bernwood Meadow on 27th May. I have struggled to find it here in past years and the meadow is cut fairly early in the summer. By contrast, at the Millennium Field, Sonning Common, the population did well again. At this site, little management takes place and the grass cutting seems to be done by rabbits!

## Agonopterix atomella



UTB ran a “learning the field signs of micro moths” day on 29th May. I believe 17 *A.atomella* larvae were recorded during this session. Going forward, it would be great to search other sites that

have Dyer's Greenweed as, to the best of my knowledge, this moth is only found on one site in the Upper Thames area presently.



**Liquorice Piercer**  
(*Grapholita pallifrontana*)

When I tried to get permission to survey at Bushy Bank in early June, I found my contact at the Earth Trust had left. It took a while to establish a new contact, but the new land manager was very helpful. It did mean I was late surveying, and probably missed the main flight period. A survey on the 29th June produced only two moths. The site has become very scrub-covered now, to the point it isn't easy to walk across. There is still a good amount of wild liquorice of wild liquorice (right).



The Earth Trust is intending to change the site management to favour the chalk flora and have asked for advice on how to preserve the moth while achieving this. I have passed on advice given by George Tordoff, and I will continue to monitor the site. Going forward, I would also like

to survey other UTB sites that have this moth.

***Oxyptilus pilosellae***

UTB continues to monitor sites for this species. It has now been confirmed as being present on at least eight sites in our area.

**Striped Lychnis**  
(*Cucullia lychnitis*)

A number of larval surveys took place, and this species seems to be holding



its own in its Chilterns stronghold. I received several reports of sightings slightly beyond its typical range, around Westridge Green, Berks and Beale Park. It is planned to do some more dark mullein planting projects this year at Peppard Common, and new sites in the coming years.

**Barberry Carpet**  
(*Pareulype berberata*)

Larval searches, at its only known Upper Thames site in Oxfordshire, produced reasonable numbers and the population seems to be stable.



**Scarce Burnished Brass**  
(*Diachrysia chryson*)

A search was made at Cothill Fen for this species on 28th July. It was not recorded. The last successful survey for this moth was 2019.

**Moth surveys at farms carrying out some rewilding/conservation projects**

The table below includes previous years' data for comparison. A search for larvae in other UTB areas with Barberry Carpet also took place. These were at Beale Park, Dry Sandford Pit, Blewburton Hill and Aston Upthorpe Down. No larvae were recorded at any of these sites.

We have been asked to survey at four sites. It is great to see an increase in these types of projects and to be involved in surveying new sites, although we may struggle if we get too many more!

Currently, the sites are:

- Billingbear Farm, Berks
- Pear Tree Farm, Berks
- Oakingham Estate, Oxon
- Sulham Estate, Berks

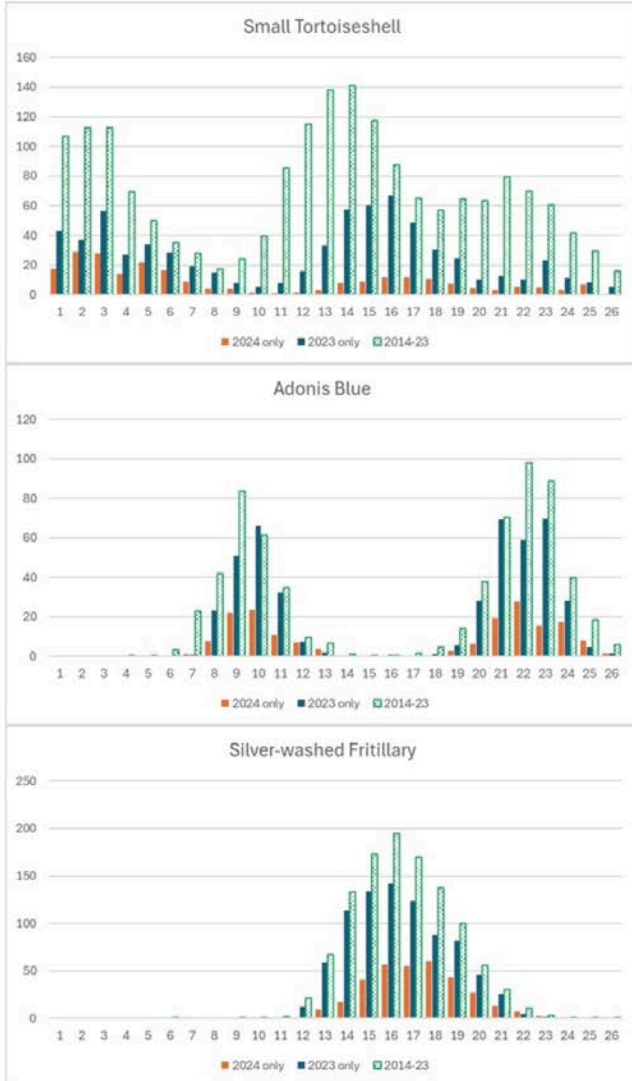
Year	Number of larvae	Number of bushes beaten
2018	35	37
2019	20	50
2020	14	42
2021	166	53
2022	44	49
2023	32	27
2024	33	29

**Peter Cuss**

If you can help out with the monitoring of any of the priority moths in our region, please contact Peter at: [priority-moths@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk](mailto:priority-moths@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk) Thank you.

# In Serious Decline

Below are some snapshots of the live data as it stands for three species that seem to illustrate the poor conditions experienced across the entire season by species with varied phenology. These plots are provided as a rough indication of how the season went for those species. They show a comparison between provisional 2024 data (orange), last year (blue) and the last decade (green). They are based on the number of butterflies seen per 100 transect walks for each week of the season.



It looks to have been a poor year for Small Tortoiseshell in particular, following last year's pattern with low numbers across its entire flight period. Declines in this widespread, habitat generalist species are especially concerning. Adonis Blue is a habitat specialist requiring chalk downland, it also shows much lower abundance than 2023 or the previous decade for both its early and late broods. This pattern is repeated in the single mid-summer brood of a woodland species, the Silver-washed Fritillary.

Data captured from national transect surveys during 2024 (which may be incomplete at the time of writing) doesn't look good for many (most?) of our butterfly species.

UKBMS (the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme), which coordinates and collects data from transects and the WCBS (Wider Countryside Butterfly Survey), has looked at transect data from the 26-week period between 1st April and 29th September 2024, and confirms the widescale acknowledgement of the low abundance of invertebrates throughout the season.

The graphic alongside looks at three species, comparing 2024 with both 2023 and the period 2014-2023, which shows a concerning decline in sightings for both 2023 and (particularly) 2024.



# Conservation Tasks

Conservation is the main reason Butterfly Conservation exists. Conservation has various strands, but I would argue that those tasks conducted to help selected plants (those which butterfly and moth caterpillars use) are the most crucial. As a Branch we have a very full list of conservation tasks. They take place in every county\* on weekends, with additional midweek tasks taking place in Buckinghamshire (mostly in the Chilterns and central region).

Please look through the list of tasks (at <https://www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk/event-calendar>) to see what is happening near you. We appreciate members turning up, including if just to see what the events are like. I frequently say I wish someone would come along and take photos of what we do, but you could come along and simply watch! It is a pleasure to have someone to talk to while you work, though from the perspective of our butterflies and moths, it is best if those coming can lend a helping hand.

\*Those tasks in Berkshire are at a very special and private site with Duke of Burgundy, which are not displayed on the website. To express an interest in helping with these, please email [duke-of-burgundy-berks@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk](mailto:duke-of-burgundy-berks@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk)


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## Butterflies and Moths of the Upper Thames region Facebook Group

We are delighted to report an increase of more than 10% in the membership of this Group since the last issue of *Hairstreak*.

For those not yet 'enlisted', it's a great source of information on what's been happening (and some of what's yet to come) in our area. Why not take a look or join the Group? (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/458565932924345>)



For existing Group members, do please consider allowing your posts (including images) to be used in UTB publications such as this newsletter, by selecting the  Poll option on the home page.

Currently, there has only been around a 1-in-6 take-up.

Thanks; much appreciated.

## Awesomeness



Our Moth Officer, Peter Cuss, recently found evidence of the leaf-mining activity of the larvae of *Stigmella tityrella* on beech leaves.

The eggs are laid at the midrib of the leaf, and the larvae then 'mine' their way in a zigzag fashion towards the outer edge.

In the photo alongside, it is clear to see that the channel gets wider as the larva winds its way outwards. Peter says, "I find it slightly magical that the larvae are able to keep the leaf around them green in order to feed for longer. Isn't nature awesome!"

**Why not send us your own encounters with awesomeness?**

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## Whoops

A couple of regrettable errors appeared in the autumn 2024 edition of *Hairstreak*:

(1). In Andy Spragg's article **In abundance, prepare for scarcity**, there was an error in the (first version of the online) publication (on page 11). Figure 2 inadvertently contained the data from figure 3. Apologies to Andy and to anyone who was confused whilst reading his most illuminating article. The corrected version appears in the version of the newsletter on the UTB website.

(2). In the article **A Question of Balance**, both images on pages 32-33 by Steve Boughton had captions which mis-identified the plant as Ragwort, when it should have been Common Fleabane. These were editorial errors spotted by an astute reader who – in kindly bringing them to our attention – was concerned that the article may unintentionally imply that Fleabane should also be uprooted (which is not the case).

# Poetry in Motion



UTB member Paul Gamble loves butterflies... and poetry, and has elected to write a poem about each of a group of our more elusive species: the Hairstreaks. In this issue, we feature Paul's thoughts – through his poetry – on the White-letter Hairstreak. We hope to include his further thoughts in future issues of this publication.

In Paul's words...

In terms of what persuades me to put words on the page, I'd guess I'd start by saying that words have always been my thing. In my working life, I taught Classics – so no great surprise that Latin scientific names (with their Greek moments too) pop up in poetry about fauna and flora. All of my nature writing arises from observations in the field. 'White-letter' was written after a visit to Chazey Heath to check out the elms there. I saw a number of White-letter Hairstreaks whizzing about at treetop level, but only tantalising glimpses of any of them settled on elm leaves. So, I thought I'd try to capture in words what I failed to properly capture with my camera!

As well as putting together a monthly piece for my village newsletter (Radley), I write about my walking and what I notice when putting boots on the ground (all over the British Isles).

I've run some short-form nature-writing sessions for primary school children. With 'found' objects as prompts (e.g. bird feathers, shells, Clouded Yellow wings, crinkly leaves), some tightly crafted and very imaginative pieces have emerged. The natural enthusiasm of youngsters should never be underestimated!

## White-letter

Sub-optimal down here  
Beneath the wych, bewitched.  
I've got hairstreak neck,  
Yearning to be high and free,  
Where you satyrs  
Cavort on honeydew fuel.

Oh, to have the jay's view  
Of the egg-shaped leaves  
Where you take breaks!  
I know you're up there,  
Spot a shadow: tell-tale  
Spinnaker shape magnified.

Then off you zip, impatient,  
Elming your flight-life away:  
You are the whizzing wizard.  
But not alone: I see another,  
Then a third, soon more.  
Spar, pause, invisibility.

It's a test of patience below:  
Why don't you come down?  
There's bramble here...  
Enough feasting for two -  
Yours the morning nectar,  
Mine a blanche-symbolled wing.

# Parasitoids and the Brimstone Butterfly

It is estimated that of every hundred lepidopteran eggs that are laid maybe one will make it to adulthood.

Some eggs get eaten, or dry out or go mouldy. There are myriad threats out there, including people cutting back vegetation where eggs are overwintering.

For the lucky few eggs that hatch there are many challenges still ahead, and given how slowly caterpillars move, how poor their eyesight is and how defenceless they seem, it is amazing that any get through this stage.

But the caterpillars do have defences... some are obvious: for example, many have irritating hairs to make them less edible (Hairy), or camouflaged so that predators won't find them (Wary), and some have bright colouration to warn predators they taste bad or are toxic (Scary). These are external defences, but caterpillars also have an internal defence: an immune system which, like ours, defends against bacteria, fungi and viruses.

Parasitoids are another hazard that many moth and butterfly larvae face. Parasitoids are flies or wasps that lay an egg on or in the larva. The parasitoid egg hatches into a larva which grows by feasting on the host, carefully eating the least vital organs first. When the parasitoid larva is ready to pupate, the host is killed and the rest of the host is consumed.

The immune system of the moth or butterfly larva is also primed to attack anything foreign invading its body. As it grows, the parasitoid must evade the host's immune system, which is not easy - and many parasitoids are in an arms race with a specific host species, or a small number of related species are constantly trying to adapt to evade the host's evolving immune system. Not all parasitoid larvae will survive, as many are killed by the host.

More is known about butterflies and moths than the parasitoid species that attack them. Records of the parasitoid species are patchy at best, because it is usually necessary to find a parasitised caterpillar and then rear it so that the adult wasp or fly can be identified.



Brimstone caterpillar  
(College Lake, Bucks, 30th June 2024) ©Sue Taylor

But in the case of the Brimstone butterfly, the larva (left) only feeds on Buckthorn and its parasitoid only attacks this one species in the UK; furthermore, it has a distinctive pupa, so in this case we can search for the wasp pupa, which is much simpler.

I'm sorry there is no common name for the parasitoid (as is the case for many of our more obscure insects), so forgive the use of scientific names below.



*Hyposoter roderaceae* is an ichneumonid wasp and is the parasitoid of the Brimstone butterfly (and of its near relatives like the Cleopatra on the continent). The wasp lays its egg in the Brimstone caterpillar which appears to develop as normal. However, just before the Brimstone caterpillar pupates, the wasp larva kills the caterpillar, finishes feeding off the remains and then forms a distinctive striped pupa within the skin of the caterpillar.

Where present, the parasitoid pupa is easy to find as it 'perches' on the top of a leaf along the main vein (right), looking a bit like bird poo. But if you look carefully, all will be revealed, and you will see the skin of the caterpillar and the head capsule, confirming its identity.

Even after the wasp has emerged (below), the wasp pupa can be recorded as it can stay on the leaf of the Purging Buckthorn for several weeks before being washed off.



*Hyposoter rodocerae* pupa  
(College Lake, Bucks, 30th June 2024) ©Sue Taylor

A video of the parasitizing process can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sohuAl9JyTM>



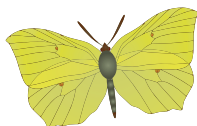
*Hyposoter rodocerae* empty pupa case  
(College Lake, Bucks, 18th July 2024) ©Sue Taylor

All you need to do to add valuable records of this parasitoid is to find a Purging Buckthorn plant. Look for the feeding signs of Brimstone caterpillars (which eat from the tip of a leaf, leaving a half-leaf as shown in the image on the previous page), then look for the parasitoid pupa.

If you find one, you can contribute to our understanding of the wasp by recording your sighting. Make a note of the date and location (8-digit grid reference), and take a photo if you can. Then add the sighting onto iRecord

(preferably) or iNaturalist, adding your name and how many you saw.

There is a twist to this story. With permission, I sent two pupae to Dr Gavin Broad, a specialist in these parasitic wasps at the Natural History Museum, to rear them to confirm their identity. As expected, from one the *Hyposoter roderaceae* emerged, but from the other came the parasitoid of the parasitoid, *Mesochorus olerum*, which had fed on the growing wasp larva as it fed on the growing caterpillar! **Isn't nature fascinating!!**



**Sue Taylor**

# Cutting the Mustard

## Thanks to our members, we now have new brush-cutters.

Those of you who join me on conservation tasks will have seen (and heard!) the very old, noisy and vibrating two-stroke brush-cutter that I have been using for about 15 years. I was explaining that I had to take a break as it made my fingers tingle for hours, when someone present said, “You need a new one”.

Many members chipped in, and Sarah Ronan deserves special mention as she told various people who wouldn't have known about the plan otherwise. With your generosity (and judicious use of eBay for the purchase of some items) we now have two powerful, lightweight electric brush-cutters and all the paraphernalia that goes with them to enable their safe usage.

## Our work can now be far more efficient and productive.



One of two new brush-cutters, harnesses and helmets with visors and ear defenders. This one comes with a battery backpack that allows 10 hours of continuous operation between charges.

lightweight, almost silent and effective ‘clearance saw’ (as the manufacturer describes it). It is effectively an electric scythe, and makes clearing scrub from florally diverse grassland a far quicker and easier task than by using hand tools. With several ticketed operatives, no-one will need to work a full conservation task as we can swap between cutting and the associated raking tasks.

Let's cut to the chase: please join us!

So that all these brush-cutters get to be used optimally, I asked on the UTB Facebook Group page if anyone would like to be trained...

One member immediately agreed to take training and one came forward who already had an active ‘ticket’ – the certificate of ‘proof of ability’ to use one safely. We could still train more members (at the UTB's expense), so please volunteer if you fancy a session with a

**Nick Bowles**

# Fear, Stress, Anger... and Hope

It's vitally important that we find ways to further encourage today's younger generation to become actively involved in conservation.

It was therefore heartening to read about the Oxfordshire-based 14-year-old who was awarded first place in the senior category (13- to 18-year-olds) of a recent Amateur Entomologists' Society event, being presented with the Ansoorge Award for her research into moths in the local area. An article appeared in the Henley Standard (16th October 2024 issue), which can be viewed at:

<https://www.henleystandard.co.uk/news/home/192986/budding-scientist-recognised-for-researching-moth-activity.html>

It is also encouraging to note that many of the recent work parties that Nick Bowles, Chiltern Rangers and others have participated in have also had pupils from local schools in attendance, such as those below (taking a break during a scrub clearance task at Sands Bank LNR, Bucks, in November).



We also learn with interest that **Butterfly Conservation has launched its first-ever Youth Panel, championing its mission to engage more young people with nature.**

This ground-breaking initiative brings together 10 passionate young people aged 16-25 from all corners of the UK to help shape the future of butterfly and moth conservation.

The Youth Panel aims to break down barriers for young people to engage with nature and wildlife, and make butterfly and moth conservation more accessible. With less than 1% of Butterfly Conservation's current supporters and volunteers under 25, the panel is on a mission to inspire and engage the next generation of nature enthusiasts.

Following the lowest-ever year for butterflies spotted in 2024's Big Butterfly Count, and the charity declaring a 'butterfly emergency', there has never been a more pressing time to take action for wildlife.

Kate Merry, Head of Engagement at Butterfly Conservation, said: "We are seeing the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss at a scary rate right now, and we know that the next generation – today's young people – will be hugely affected by this."

Butterfly Conservation's inaugural Youth Panel, funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, brings together young people from various backgrounds,

spanning the length and breadth of the UK, all united by their love of butterflies, moths, and the environment. Each member brings unique skills and perspectives to the group.



Together, they will represent young voices at environmental events, create engaging content for social media, run workshops on youth inclusion in conservation, and develop new ways to involve young people in Butterfly Conservation's work.

The Panel's goal is "to work together to reduce the existing barriers so that more young people can become part of Butterfly Conservation".

If you know anyone aged 13-25, you may wish to urge them to sign up for updates from the Youth Panel at:

<https://butterfly-conservation.org/youth-panel>

Elsewhere, the UK youth environmental action charity **Action for Conservation** commissioned research which surveyed over a thousand 11-16-year-olds across the UK in the summer of 2024 to learn how they felt about the environment.

The resultant report, *Young People & the Environment*, confirms that many young people are indeed concerned about the state of the planet, yet with 62% not feeling that older generations

are listening to their ideas and worries about the future. They (64% of them) also suffer with the symptoms of ego-anxiety (which is defined as a sense of hopelessness about the state of the planet, including climate breakdown and the loss of nature, which can lead to feelings such as fear, stress and anger).

Perhaps one of the most worrying aspects of the report is that so many young people spend so little time with nature.

The report is available to read at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdzzp6p6>

We simply must continue to find ways to integrate the current younger generation into our conservation plans, and to listen to what they have to say on environmental issues. It's more their future than ours, after all.

**Derek Haynes**



# Beacon of Inspiration

**“Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant”** is a quote by the nineteenth century novelist and poet Robert Louis Stevenson, and it seems as relevant today as it did all those years ago.

When we talk of conservation, it's as much about the example we set to others as it is about the benefits we see from the effort expended.

A beacon of inspiration in our Branch for many decades, and someone who has certainly set such an example, is our 'retiring' Chair, Nick Bowles (below, standing), who was recently awarded the **Hidden Heroes Award** by Butterfly Conservation for his outstanding contribution to the conservation of the butterflies and moths of the Upper Thames region over the last 40+ years.



Very well done, Nick – and an award so richly deserved. Nick has not only 'invested' much time and effort in conservation in our region, but has helped to encourage so many others over the years – not only from his hands-on 'graft' on tasks (from which tangible

benefits to our species have resulted) but through his training in the likes of surveying and identification techniques. Literally and metaphorically, Nick has been sowing many, many seeds!

Yet we need to set more examples and expend even more effort if we truly want and expect conservation to work: there are no magic wands to wave around in the wind. On a late-October scrub-clearing task at Buttlers Hangings (Bucks) (see 'before' and 'after' images below), Nick was the only UTB member who turned up. I am sure we can do better as a Branch.



I know most of us have busy lives, but a small increase in our collective presence on tasks would – without doubt – reap rich reward.

So, if you believe in the ethics of RLS's words of wisdom and aspire to be a beacon of inspiration to others, please don't underestimate the difference you could make.

**Derek Haynes**

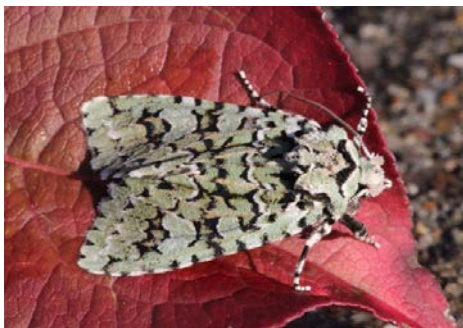
First image ©Peter Cuss  
Other images ©Nick Bowles

# Autumn Harvest

Our members were out and about this autumn, discovering many delights. Here is just a small sample of what they found.



One of six Red Admirals enjoying the autumn sun and rotting fruit (24th October 2024) ©Peter Cuss



Merveille du Jour (late October 2024) ©Ben Paternoster

Send us your winter discoveries! You can post on our Facebook Group pages, add them to the website, or email them to: [newsletter-editor@upthames-butterflies.org.uk](mailto:newsletter-editor@upthames-butterflies.org.uk)

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## Doomed?



Member Esmond Brown spotted this Painted Lady in bright sunshine (but at just 4°C) at Grangelands and Rifle Range NR on 28th November, “happily fluttering about and nectaring on the few flowers still in bloom”.

This is an unusually late sighting.

The latest Painted Lady sighting reported to the UTB website was on 27th October 2024, by Chris Brown, which itself is quite late in the year.

The annual migration south usually starts around September, so it's hard to know what either of these two individuals was planning next. The Painted Lady has no hibernating stage in its life cycle (with caterpillars perishing at temperatures below about 5°C), so it must be presumed that they were doomed.

# In Appreciation

Elsewhere in this issue you'll be informed of various changes of personnel within our Branch, and we are most grateful to all those who are standing down from their roles; and to those who have volunteered to take on these important roles, thus helping to maintain the momentum needed for the Upper Thames Branch to continue with its vital conservation effort.

Yet, some behind-the-scenes processes remain unchanged (and seldomly acknowledged), such as the work undertaken by member Lorraine Evans, who (along with her business partner) owns the design and print company **bluepepper designs** ([bpdesigns.co.uk](http://bpdesigns.co.uk)) in Aylesbury and has been a vital cog in producing *Hairstreak*, including the printing and distribution of paper copies to those members requesting them. The October 2024 main UTB Committee Meeting was keen formally to record its recognition of this work and to thank Lorraine for her continued support.

I'd also like to express my personal thanks to Margery Slatter for taking such good care of the final proofreading undertaking for this publication. [Ed.]

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## Contact with the Branch

If you contact any of our officers using their **upperthames-butterflies.org.uk** email address, please note that any reply from them will not come from that domain name – so do keep an eye out for their reply (possibly in your email Junk/Spam folder). Thanks.

### Membership Latest

Sadly, there has been another slight decrease in membership since the last newsletter, with, currently, 1611 households, comprising 2225 individual members in the Upper Thames Branch.



A warm welcome to all new members; and, if you have any questions for the Branch, please do contact us (details of our officers are on the UTB website). The more members we have the more we can achieve as a Branch, so please encourage your friends to join Butterfly Conservation.

**Brenda Mobbs, UTB Membership Secretary**  
email: [bc.upperthames@gmail.com](mailto:bc.upperthames@gmail.com)

# 'Two-a-penny' Coppers

The very attractive Small Copper seems to have done particularly well in some parts of our region this past autumn, with presumed third-generation individuals being reported quite widely. At a national level, Big Butterfly Count 2024 portrays the Small Copper as having the largest upward trend of any UK species, showing a 48% increase in abundance over the last 14 years.

©David Hastings



'At first glance', one might be somewhat surprised that Small Copper is part of the Lycaenidae family of

butterflies (more typically associated with the Blues), which is the second-largest family of butterflies worldwide - and one which comprises almost one third of all known species. The family is, though, split into 7 subfamilies, of which Lycaeninae is that in which the coppers are classified - with Small Copper having the specific name *Lycaena phlaeas* (in [sub]genus *Lycaena*), where '*phlaeas*' might derive from the Greek word *phlégo*, meaning 'to burn up'.

The markings on the adults are typically quite consistent, but there is a fairly common aberrant form - *caeruleopunctata* - that has a row of blue dots inside the outer orange borders of the hind wings, as seen in the photo above, taken by Tom Dunbar at Aston Upthorpe Downs (Oxon) on 19th September 2024.



A more striking aberration (albeit one much less common) is the cream/white form *schmidtii* (as per the image below, courtesy of the Natural History Museum), which is believed to result from inbred populations



founded by females bearing a single gene. (Note that this form is sometimes referred to as *alba*, but this name is taken to

be just a synonym of *schmidtii*, as opposed to its being a different aberration.) I have always hoped to see this aberration in the field, but the nearest I got was when I bumped into a chap at Yoesden Bank NR, who had seen and photographed one there on a previous visit.

Depending on the habitat, the two main foodplants of Small Copper larvae are Common Sorrel and Sheep's Sorrel. The photo below left, also taken by Tom Dunbar at Aston Upthorpe Downs, shows Small Copper eggs laid on Sheep's Sorrel.



Above: Close-up of a Small Copper egg  
©Gilles San Martin/BC

The species over-winters as a larva.

**Derek Haynes**

Photos ©Tom Dunbar (unless otherwise stated)



# I'll name that in one... or can I?

I was intrigued whilst listening to a recent BBC radio quiz, when the question, “**What is the collective noun for a group of butterflies?**” came up. The answer given was a **fluttering**... which sort of made sense, but I hadn't realised that this was the 'universally recognised' term.

Cue research, when I discovered the following alternative names: flutter, swarm, kaleidoscope, flight, rabble, shimmer, leaping, elusive, wing, shimmer and rainbow – but no mention of 'a fluttering' (which – like a couple of the others here – is not technically a noun, anyway). When huddled at roost, the terms roost (naturally) and (apparently) bivouac are used to describe such clusters of butterflies.

Apparently, a **kaleidoscope of butterflies** is the de facto term (my favourite of those mooted, I have to say), though one commentator opined that this refers to a 'vibrant, changing group', adding that a **flutter** was 'a group flying together in a delicate manner'. Hmm.

Does any of this matter? No, not really (and we needn't lose any sleep over it!), but it's fascinating that there appears to be no recognised definitive term - so one's own preference will work just fine here. Which is your favourite?

And that gets me thinking... oh no, I hear you mutter. Maybe – just maybe – we can come up with an incomparable collective noun for butterflies (and for moths?), which best describes their presence in numbers. Of course, these creatures typically don't behave in a similar manner as some others that gain established collective names to match their behaviour, such as a bask of crocodiles or a crash of rhinos. I suppose it's only when grouped, such as during a migration (or when at roost), that butterflies and moths could justifiably be collectively named.

I'm not sure where there is heading, but I sense a brick wall in sight! I think I'll settle for either a **cloud** or an **assemblage** of butterflies or moths – but I'm sure you'll let me know of something more apt (at [newsletter-editor@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk](mailto:newsletter-editor@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk)).

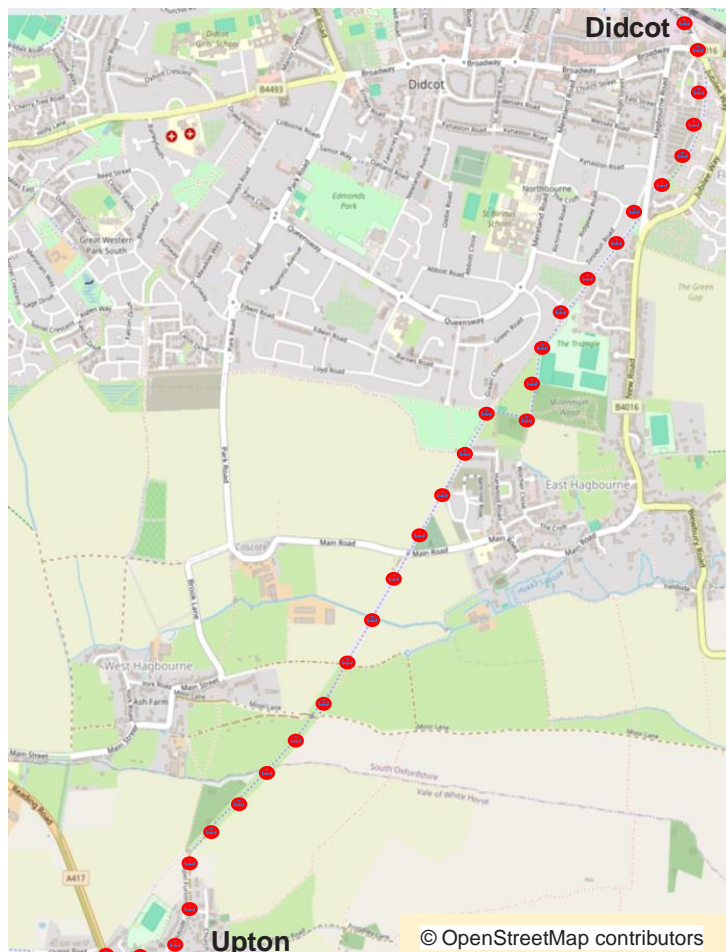


One collective noun that does seem to favour general agreement is that which relates to caterpillars: **an army**, which first appeared in writing in 1828. This seems logical (at least to some extent), given that some species' caterpillars hatch in proximity with their siblings and often share the same foodplants – and they do sometimes seem to be on the march... though probably not fully prepared for the possibility of battles ahead...

**Derek Haynes**

# Home from Home: Working with Sustrans

National Cycle Network Route 544 (NCN544) links Didcot with Wantage, via the village of Upton, in Oxon. The stretch between Didcot and Upton is about 2 miles in length, as shown on the map below.



UTB Member Karen Saxl also works as a volunteer for the charity Sustrans, who are the custodians of the National Cycle Network (NCN) – the UK-wide network of over 12,000 miles of signed paths and routes for walking, cycling, wheeling and exploring the outdoors.

Sustrans volunteers help look after their local communities by engaging with schools, supporting wildlife, and caring for the NCN.

This is Karen's story...

I live on the southern edge of Didcot and have done since the age of 2. I am now 63, so one of those rare people who has never moved from the area they grew up in. Sustrans Route 544 runs along the back of the road I live in and then along the former Didcot-to-Southampton railway line on the stretch heading from Didcot to Upton. The

line was part of the Beeching Closures in the 1960s. I have a memory of walking along the line with my parents when the sleepers and rails were still in place, and I remember one train running along the line which I believe was taking up the rails and sleepers. As a child I played in a field that bordered the line. As a teenager I would disappear for walks along the line. **It is as much my home as the house I live in.**



In geological terms the route is interesting as most of its raised embankments were constructed from chalk cleared from cuttings further up the line, meaning it is a narrow chalk upland running through a clay vale. That means that the flora and the lepidoptera found along the line include some species that are more commonly found in chalk uplands than in clay vales. When it was a railway line it would have been kept clear of vegetation by periodic fires. Since its closure it has been left to itself and has developed into a good mix of grassland and hedgerows (mainly hawthorn and blackthorn). There are also a fair number of cherry trees, crab-apple trees and walnut trees – seeded from people throwing pips and nut casings from train windows. Didcot is close to Harwell, which, until the 1970s, was a major area for growing cherries – a white and a black cherry - and there are wild versions of both along the line. Unfortunately, the orchards fell foul of some disease and were all cut down in the 1980s.

In the 1990s Sustrans took a lease on the line and laid down the 'track' that runs from the South of Didcot to Upton. In doing so they constructed a few access ramps, exposing the chalk in the embankment, to allow access from local footpaths. They seeded these with wildflowers which have enhanced the area's appeal to wildlife.

The Marbled Whites seemed to disappear for a while when the work was being done – but came back in force shortly after. The ramps were covered in kidney vetch, and Small Blues thrived. The hedgerows are home to Speckled



Woods. The grasslands are home to the Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Gatekeeper, Large Skipper, Small/Essex Skipper, Common Blue and Brown Argus. I see the occasional Small Copper, and the Red Admirals, Peacocks and Small Tortoiseshells enjoy

nectaring on the buddleias. There are a few Orange-tips in the spring, but my joy is the Marbled Whites, whose numbers can be spectacular in good years, and I can walk through clouds of butterflies in the long grass by the side of the track. In the early morning and late evening in mid-summer, you can see them lined up... sunning themselves.

About 10 years ago I started to notice that the balance between hedgerow and grassland seemed to be at a 'tipping point', so I contacted Sustrans to ask if it would be okay for me to do small pieces of work, mainly taking out saplings on the top of the embankment. It was also about the time when there was a lot of talk about wildlife corridors as an important way of keeping populations of wildlife connected. Sustrans had some funding for a 'Greener Greenways' project, and Jim Asher (our Butterfly



Records Officer) was among those who helped survey the line and made some recommendations as to how the route might be managed for wildlife. I soon found myself acting as an organiser of some work parties trying to clear the scrub that had taken over at the ramp at Upton – though there was also some clearance by a contractor engaged by Sustrans, who focused on the trees, leaving us to look after the brambles and old man's beard

(clematis) that had taken over, with the result that there was very little kidney vetch in evidence. Like many of the sites UTB works on, there are a lot of slopes - but there is also quite a large flat area on the top.

Sustrans were very good at helping to publicise work parties. They purchased a kombi-tool, and paid for 3 people to be trained to use it – including myself (though I'm not good with machinery and was reluctant, but someone from Sustrans dropped out, so I did use the kombi-tool for brush-cutting on a few occasions, and it certainly speeded up the process). Initially, there were quite a few turning out to help, but slowly the numbers dropped off, in part because I'm not really that good at publicity... and I don't do social media (phobic).

During COVID, I used the route for my daily exercise – though I also spent most of my time away from the actual route itself and along the footpaths around the nearby villages, as the route was rather crowded by people using it for their daily exercise. COVID also saw the local villages of East Hagbourne, West Hagbourne and Upton getting together on Zoom to form a conservation group (HUGS), and that provided a few more contacts to join work parties when they were again possible.

I stopped organising work parties in late 2022, when UTB realised that they weren't complying with some insurance requirements, mainly around first aid. I was busy trying to keep a local bowls club going and working almost full time, so didn't have the time to look at first aid courses and the like that would have been necessary for the work parties to continue. I was also having some skeletal issues (trapped nerves in lower

back and stable elbow fracture from banging myself on a door frame). Whilst I don't think of myself as clumsy, I do identify as having dyspraxia.

I continued with some tasks that I could do on my own:

- Clearing the odd branch that was getting in the way.
- Occasionally there were storms that brought down branches so I cleared them as best I could and let Sustrans know if they needed to get a contractor in to clear debris that I couldn't handle, like the remains of an old willow that was blown over during the pre-Christmas 2023 gales.
- 'Bramble-weaving': basically, threading the offshoots from brambles (and subsequent runners) back into the hedges to stop them taking over the path. In theory it means that you keep a constant supply of second-year growth, which is needed for flowering and fruit ... and good for butterflies and birds.

I'm not really a bird person, but I do enjoy trying to identify the different finches and tits and other species that live in or visit the hedgerows. I am especially fond of the family of Long-tailed tits that chirrup their way along the northern end of the route. There are also Kites that use the thermals to gain height in the mornings, so sometimes they are amazingly close.

In mid-2023, the construction of another path up on to the route just south of Didcot created some problems. The work was part of a covenant relating to a new build bordering the route. Communication with users of the route was so poor as to be non-existent. Sustrans were aware of the obligation, but the contractors didn't tell them when the work was starting. A hedgerow was ripped out, which upset a lot of people as it was done just as birds were starting to nest.

Then a barrier went up, that basically encroached onto the path (right), with no signage to warn anyone. Coarse aggregate was laid on one side of the path to allow machinery to manoeuvre and which was spread onto the path, causing another issue. 'Angry of South Didcot' went round and demanded to see the site manager, and told him exactly what she thought of the company's disregard for the health and safety of users of the route. She took photos and shared them with Sustrans, giving the area co-ordinator the information she needed to follow up with the builder. The barrier was moved back from the path and some signage went up (right). It was quite a relief when the construction of ramps and steps was complete, and the fencing came down.





Sustrans have experimented with taking seeds from further south and sowing them on the ramp (but this area is clay vale, and the seeds were taken from chalk upland), and topsoil was put down over which the contractors later ran heavy machinery. Now it is rather scrubby (and mainly dock) but I suspect it will be back to mainly bramble before too long. I suspect I could

have done more, like trying to explain to the builders that putting down topsoil isn't necessarily the right thing to do if you are wanting to support nature.

At the start of 2024, I was contacted by Sustrans, asking if I would be interested in participating in a project they were undertaking to provide storyboards which illustrated how volunteers supported the network, and the aims of Sustrans. It involved an interview, and a follow-up draft article over the course of the summer.

[The article is now up on the Sustrans website: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/9f74caea09444ae3ba2eede5acb59a78?item=5>].

In late spring 2024, the local Sustrans volunteers were contacted by head office, asking if there were any areas that required attention along the route, as some money was available prior to the re-opening of a stretch further to the south-west, where the controlled crossing of roads was put into effect. I regret not being very specific about the locations of two small stretches that were a bit overgrown, because the next I



knew was seeing the debris left in mid-July by a contractor who went along the whole (nearly 2-mile) length, cutting about 1m either side of the track and blowing the cuttings to the side of the track. Generally, any work done previously was carried out as 'cut and lift'.

Anyway, I was upset; I was angry. I couldn't bear to go out looking for butterflies whilst

all the debris was around. I decided to use the energy from being angry to clear all the cuttings, and it took me over a month... going out early mornings before work and early evenings after work to do a couple of hours with a rake, dragging debris to suitable places along the route (above) to be left to rot down away from the grassland where it was killing the grass, and away from the sides of the hedgerows where it would just encourage more nettle, hogweed and bramble to spread, which constricts the route in various places. One friend who walks the route said she could tell I was angry from the way I was using the rake ... though the reality is that if you are raking out grassland, you need to use a bit of welly to remove the debris, anyway.

Surprisingly, I found that the raking really helped with some shoulder issues I was having – obviously the right exercise!



I also chatted to passers-by, explaining why I was clearing the mowed grass etc. Unlike most of the areas where UTB does conservation work, this area gets heavy footfall. Many cyclists thanked me as they went past, and I talked to one lady who had walked a few miles to get to this stretch “because it is so beautiful”. There was one angry runner, but he calmed down when he realised that I was clearing up the mess rather than being responsible for it!

The experience also prompted me to look at what might be possible in terms of controlling the nettles where they take over every year – so it looks like I’ll be doing quite a bit of hoeing in the affected areas next spring.

I retired at the end of October. I’d already decided that keeping the balance between hedgerow and grassland was going to be a retirement project. I’m not looking to organise any work parties just now, and with everything moving to a new platform, Assemble, I can’t see myself organising anything anytime soon unless someone comes forward to help me with doing everything on Assemble (anyone interested?). Sustrans also uses Assemble, but at least they don’t **make** me use it, with emails to the area volunteers’ office being an acceptable way of communicating. The local group uses Facebook rather than Assemble, but for me that raises even more problems.

Currently, I go out for a couple of hours in the morning most days to do something. I’m focusing on the top of the embankment and the top sections of the ramped areas because I know that is where I’m visible in case something happens when I’m working on my own. I’ve cut down cherry saplings as low to the ground as I can manage, which will be a job that will need doing almost every year. I’ve cut back a number of buddleias at the ramps – hoping that it will improve some of the plants that are starting to get a bit straggly. I’m also experimenting with raking out some of the undergrowth and moss in the hope that the bare soil will continue to encourage kidney vetch and other wildflowers to grow (and discourage the nettles). I’ve also removed old man’s beard (clematis), trying to get as much of the roots out as I can; otherwise, it will take over the whole area and prevent anything else growing (which is what has happened at the ramp at Upton). There are some patches on the top that I will leave in part as they are a favourite for Gatekeepers in the summer. One thing I have noticed is that the old man’s beard seems to thrive in areas where there are cherries, so probably the same issue as with the nettles – spreading because of the nutrients from the leaves ... so I’m going to try raking leaves at those points as well. A project for the summer will be trying to catalogue all the different grasses that grow along the route.



On my first trip out to clear saplings, I noticed that one of the feeder paths had been all but overgrown with grass (left). The path is used a lot by dog walkers as there is a 'doggie' bin part-way down. I spent the next 3 working sessions clearing the path. Worth it, though, to see

the difference (below), and appreciated by others, though it was very hard work.

I have highlighted this as the work I do on the route is not just about butterflies but also about enabling people to use the route (and enjoy the butterflies). Butterfly Conservation is a charity and that means what it does has to provide a benefit to the public. Keeping pollinators going is a part of that, but access to areas where people can enjoy butterflies should also be a part.



I travel along the route on a bicycle, so all of my tools are transported on the bike, and tend to be ones that can either be folded or broken down into sections so they fit into a bicycle basket. As I transport debris to specifically identified sites to leave it to rot down, I have invested in a tent-like contraption to help with carrying the debris. Some dogs seem to get a bit freaked out by it, to the amusement of their owners.

A few words to follow about health and safety, because this is important. It isn't about written assessments; it's about common sense, and it's something I'm doing all the time, whether I'm thinking about doing some work or actually out doing some. It should be the same for everyone, and would be the same if I was at a work party organised by someone else.

**Lone working** is probably the key risk for me. I certainly wouldn't use any electric tools whilst I was working on my own, and I wouldn't work in areas that aren't clearly visible from the path. Ideally, I will let someone know when I'm going out, for how long, and when I intend to return. I carry a mobile phone with the 'what three words' app installed, in case I need to contact the emergency services.

I am using **tools with sharp edges**, and at times working with thorns, so proper clothing and thinking about how I leave one tool if I am switching to another. Personally, I find that an old pair of ski-gloves (I don't ski but they're very useful for



cycling in the winter) seem better than most gardening gloves for protection against thorn damage.

Be aware of **what is happening** with other people **around me**. I'm working on a busy track used by cyclists, so visibility is important. Fortunately, most of the track is open but there are a few areas where visibility isn't great (particularly on the ramp at Upton), so I do have notices I can put up to make others aware that I am working.

I need to **ensure I have enough energy** to clear up and get home when finished, so I monitor my energy levels and look for signs that I am flagging (and either in need a short rest or to pack it in for the day).

**Hydration.** Even when it's cold, being physically active can still work up a sweat, so having some water to drink helps. In the summer I was working during a heatwave, so going out first thing in the morning and again in late evening was a way of ensuring I was working in the cooler parts of the day.

**Inclement weather.** The route is exposed, so no work in high winds. I also wouldn't go out to work in snow, sleet, heavy rain or a hard frost, as the path can get quite icy.

I am enjoying the work I am doing just now, and, as I live alone, it tends to be my main source of social interaction with others – albeit often limited to a short conversation or even a simple hello.

I've recently been looking at some online MOOCs on preventing dementia, and, whilst I wasn't surprised to find that being physically active can reduce dementia risk, I was surprised by what an important role social interaction plays, throughout life.

**Please do think about how you might get involved in some conservation work. Being outside and interacting with other people can be very rewarding.**

**Karen Saxl**

All photos ©Karen Saxl



# Supporting the Brown Hairstreak in Oxford

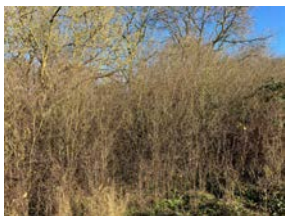
In August 2023 I was surveying for butterflies in the Oxford floodplain when I spotted a butterfly I hadn't seen before in the area. It was a Brown Hairstreak, feeding on ripe blackberries. This was at Hogacre Eco Park, a former sports field now being regenerated for wildlife. I took a picture (below) and recorded the sighting on iRecord.



In December that year a small group of us searched the blackthorn on the site for Brown Hairstreak eggs,

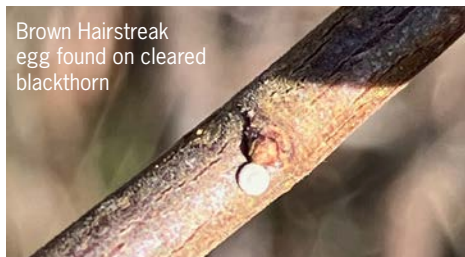
and found a number of them scattered across different locations. So, we knew we had a breeding colony, though probably small, as often seems to be the case for this species. In 2024 we had another sighting of an adult in July, and eggs were found in November (photo right).

There is quite a lot of blackthorn at the Hogacre site, which has been allowed to grow without interference, providing good habitat for the butterfly. But some of it is becoming overgrown with brambles (above, top).



Inspired by Nick Bowles' example, I have been cutting back some of the brambles (below, left); and, in December, Hogacre volunteer conservationists will be helping me to tackle the rest.

Nick put me on to UTB member Geoff Sutton, whose own interest is Black Hairstreak. He and I will visit Hogacre together in December. I'm hoping Geoff can give me some advice on managing the blackthorn. We're also hatching a plan to possibly introduce Black Hairstreak to the Hogacre site.



The presence of Brown Hairstreak at Hogacre led me to check records in Oxford, and I found quite a few sightings across the city in recent years. Brown Hairstreak seems to have found a foothold in the parks and nature reserves, and has even been spotted in people's gardens.

Brown Hairstreak is a 'priority species' in the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Oxfordshire, and in my response to the consultation on the LNRS, I have suggested a potential focus on supporting its population in the city.

**Simon Collings**

All photos ©Simon Collings

## If Truth be Told...



We have here some truths (and possible untruths) about butterflies and moths. On a cold and gloomy winter's day (and there are bound to be plenty!), why not see how well you do with the following true-or-false statements. Good luck.

1. Butterflies smell with their antennae and taste with both their feet and proboscis.
2. All 18,000 named butterfly species worldwide, and about 140,000 different moth species, evolved from a common ancestor that lived more than 225 million years ago.
3. Some male butterflies and moths can create acoustic signals or pulses to let females know they are searching for a perfect match.
4. By 2022, half of all British butterflies had been placed on the Red List of (threatened, near-threatened and vulnerable) species.
5. Some of the oldest butterfly specimens in the world, now stored in the Darwin Centre, were collected hundreds of years ago and archived between the pages of bound volumes.
6. The Painted Lady can complete a 9,000-mile journey from tropical Africa to the Arctic Circle in up to 6 generations.
7. Results from research following the 2022 Big Butterfly Count showed that participants had an average of 9% reduction in anxiety.
8. In 2021, an amateur moth-er from west London discovered an 'undescribed species' (albeit one which is native to Western Australia).
9. Climate change has caused Britain's butterflies to get bigger.
10. Most UK butterflies are generalist pollinators, with no specific relationship with a single plant.
11. There is a moth (non-native to Britain) that has a proboscis that measures a foot in length.
12. Sir David Attenborough has had a tropical butterfly named after him.
13. Almost 200 unique species of butterflies live only in Columbia.
14. Skippers can reach speeds of up to 37mph and have some of nature's fastest reflexes.
15. The Natural History Museum's Lepidoptera collection contains 12.5 million pinned specimens.
16. The female parasitic wasp, *Hyposoter horticola*, keeps a close eye on a set of new Glanville Fritillary eggs, and will lay its own eggs inside them just before the tiny caterpillar is about to hatch.
17. Air pollution is causing as much as a 31% reduction in the rate of pollination by insects.
18. About 1 in every 10,000 butterflies is a gynandromorph, having both male and female characteristics.

In Buckinghamshire, the Bucks Invertebrate Group organises a lot of field trips which include studying butterflies and especially moths. Their list of field trips is available on their website <https://sites.google.com/site/bucksinvertebrategroup/>

In Berkshire, the Berkshire Moth Group holds regular meetings on the second Thursday of every month. They organise other events as well. Refer to their website for details <https://sites.google.com/site/berksmoths/Home>

## Upper Thames Branch Website

[www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk](http://www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk)

<https://butterfly-conservation.org/in-your-area/upper-thames-branch>

Have your butterfly sightings and photos posted on the website by sending them to: [sightings@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk](mailto:sightings@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk)

Upper Thames Branch Moth Sightings Blog  
<http://upperthamesmoths.blogspot.co.uk>

Follow us on Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/Butterflies.Berkshire.Buckinghamshire.Oxfordshire>

Twitter [@UpperThamesBC](https://twitter.com/UpperThamesBC)

Instagram [utb\\_butterfly\\_conservation](https://www.instagram.com/utb_butterfly_conservation)

Holtspur Bottom Reserve

[upperthames-butterflies.org.uk/holtspur\\_bottom](http://upperthames-butterflies.org.uk/holtspur_bottom)

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