

BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION - UPPER THAMES BRANCH

Brown Hairstreak *Thecla betulae* Report for 2020



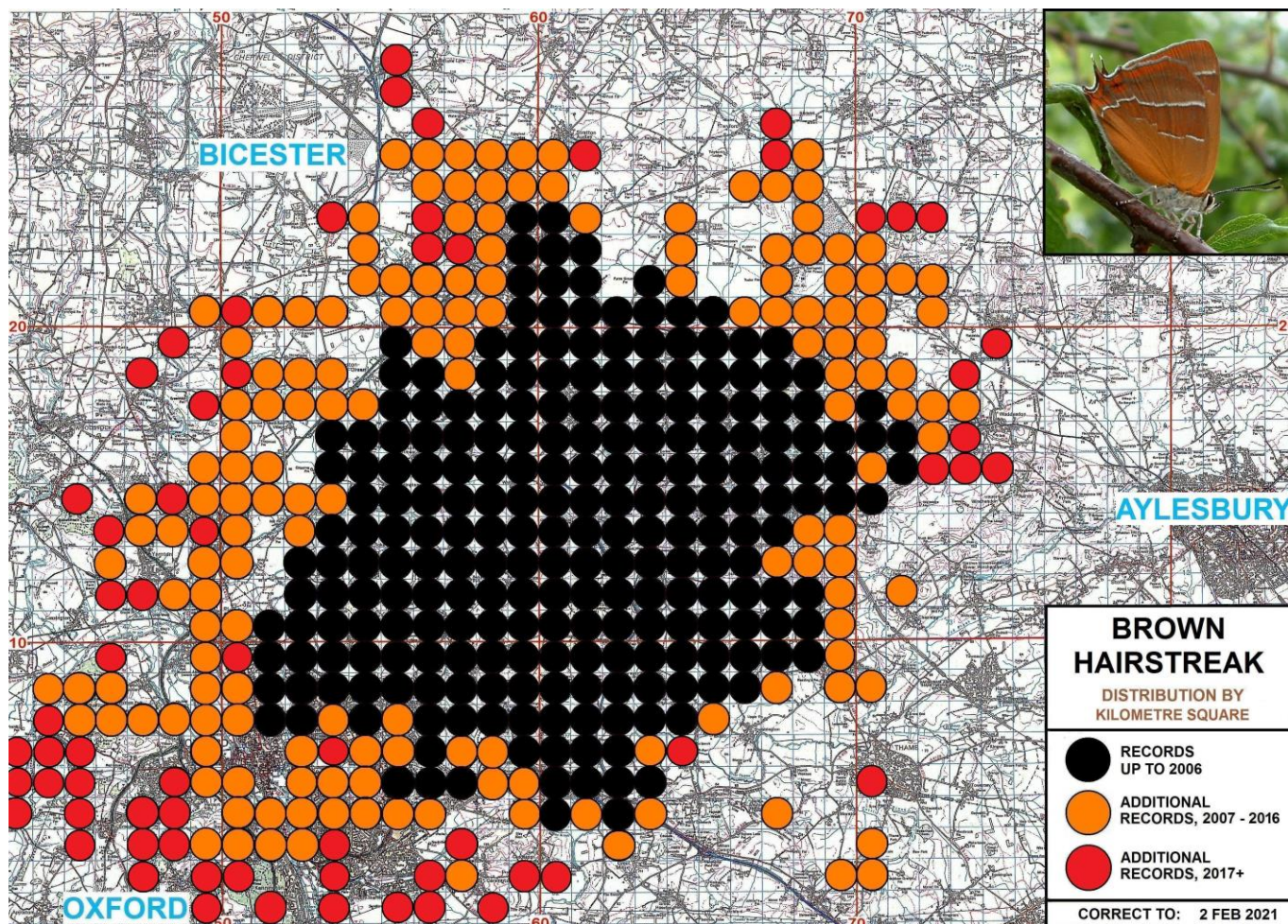
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The fresh male Brown Hairstreak illustrated above, found at the turning circle in Finemere Wood, Bucks during the morning of 20th July 2020, proved to be the year's first adult sighting in our region. Most of the year's butterfly records were from the "honeypot sites" of Otmoor and Whitecross Green Wood which always attract the most photographers. Thankfully some were also found at other places where the adult butterfly hasn't previously been recorded, one such sighting being on 29th July in the garden of BBOWT staff member Colin Williams at Littlemore, Oxford which proved to be a new kilometre square for the species. It was good to see other records coming from gardens in Oxford and elsewhere, meaning that the overall adult counts were similar to both 2018 and 2019:

- 2018** First sighting 14th July (SP7023 Wendy Campbell), last sighting 29th Sept (SU8261 Des Sussex)
Total of 60 individuals, 44 records from 23 sites
- 2019** First sighting 22nd July (SP7021 Nick Board), last sighting 17th Sept (SP5118 Wendy Campbell)
Total of 81 individuals, 42 records from 19 sites
- 2020** First sighting 20th July (SP7121 Dave Wilton), last sighting 20th Sept (SP6111 Tom Dunbar)
Total of 76 individuals, 54 records from 19 sites

Although females can sometimes linger on into the first week of October we still haven't had such a late record locally since 4th October 2013 when one was seen in a garden at Westcott, Bucks (not mine!).

Despite relatively few adult sightings each year it is fair to say that our winter egg searches, which provide a much better barometer as to how the butterfly is doing, suggest that the Brown Hairstreak continues to go from strength to strength in the Upper Thames region. The map below shows how the butterfly appears to be continuing to expand from its original core area:



Our 400th kilometre square in the population shown above was found in January 2018 and the total has now almost reached 460, so at the present rate of progress 500 squares could easily be a possibility within just a few years. The most northerly egg records we have found to date (achieved during October 2018 and replicated in both subsequent winters) come from the M40 Cherwell Valley Services which are very close to the border with Northamptonshire and it is tempting to think that yet another county will soon be added to the butterfly's distribution map.

We tend to concentrate our work on the core area between Aylesbury, Bicester and Oxford and could rightly be accused of having been just a little bit dismissive of occasional sightings in our region well away from this triangle. However, they seem to happen with a degree of regularity now and can't all be explained away by releases or misidentifications. For example, on 3rd September 2014 Marc Botham found an adult female while carrying out a butterfly transect at Little Wittenham Farm near Didcot (SU5692), a site which at that time was more than 10km south of our southernmost square at Oxford (although that gap has subsequently narrowed). However, 10km doesn't seem an impossible distance for a wandering female to travel. In 2015 three adults were reported to us from odd sites (SP9214

College Lake in Bucks, SU5781 Streatley in Oxon and SU8979 Braywick in Berks). As mentioned earlier, the final adult record of 2018 was also in Berkshire (SU8261), this one being in the churchyard at Little Sandhurst which is right on the border with Hampshire. In 2019 an adult was seen in Canada Wood at Easton Hastings (SU2596) to the west of Faringdon, not far at all from the border with Wiltshire, while in 2020 one was recorded in Emmett's Fields close to the River Thames at Little Marlow, Bucks (SU8689). Most of those sightings could easily have been of wanderers from populations *outside* the Upper Thames region. In December 2020 we were particularly pleased to hear from Stephen Reisbach of Surrey Branch who had been searching blackthorn and finding Brown Hairstreak eggs in the area around Runnymede. On 20th December he decided to cross the River Thames into our territory at Ankerwycke and, at the National Trust's car-park for Magna Carta Island (TQ0073), he managed to find a couple more eggs. This seems to prove that the Brown Hairstreak is a butterfly on the march and this is another area we'll have to try and keep an eye on. It is a shame that it is also some considerable distance from where most of our regular egg searchers live so we would welcome help from anyone who lives close by (perhaps near Slough or Windsor) who might be tempted to try searching blackthorn for eggs in the winter months.

Very unfortunately, for this current winter season the ever-changing COVID restrictions meant that any thought of group egg searches had to be abandoned. However, a few of our intrepid volunteers have still been out looking for eggs on their own during permitted exercise and this has resulted in nearly as much ground being covered as in a "normal" winter, including egg finds in several new kilometre squares. Four new tetrads have been added to the core area, quite an achievement in the circumstances. Amongst those new discoveries, perhaps the most significant was by Steve Woolliams who found six eggs on suckering blackthorn along the west side of Radley Large Wood (SP5100) which means that Abingdon, and yet another 10km square, could very soon be within range.

Dave Wilton (February 2021)