

BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION UPPER THAMES BRANCH

Chalk Hill Blue Report 2020

Nick Bowles

Over the last ten years the distribution of the Chalk Hill Blue seems to have remained stable but there has been a slow increase in the number of reports of the butterfly. Unfortunately not because the butterfly became more numerous, but as more people became enthused to record sightings.

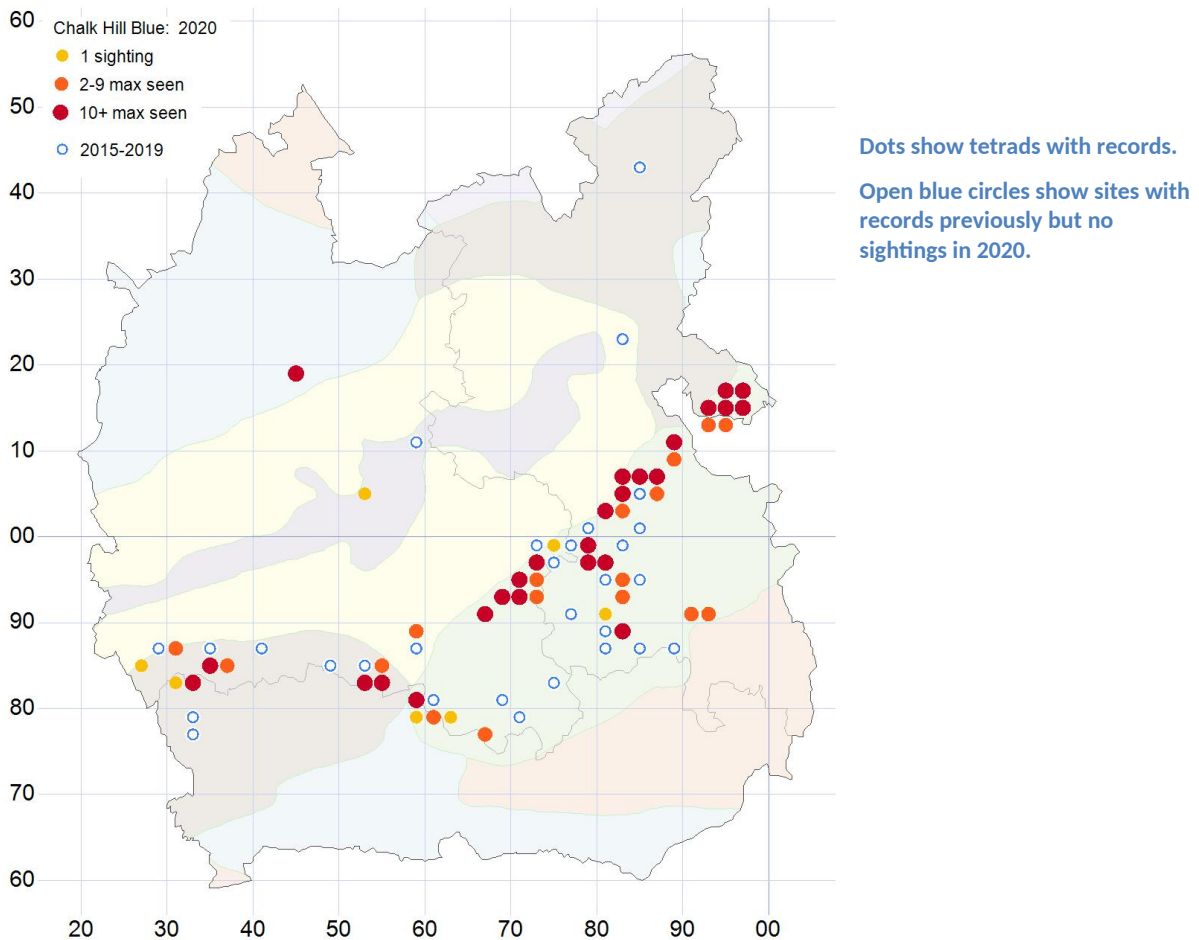


I am grateful to all of them and especially to those that keep me regularly updated as the season unfolds. In 2020, there were just under 600 reports that included details of over 10,000 butterflies.

The first in the UTB area in 2020 was 24th June near Princes Risborough and the last on Sept 21st in the Aston Upton area (pleasing that both sites are ones with UTB involvement and where volunteers have expended some many hours of conservation effort). In truth, the vast majority of the Chalk Hill Blues (Chalkies) were seen in July and August, with only three individuals seen in June and 19 after the second week of September. These dates can be compared with a relatively late first sighting of July 11th in 2019 and a last record on 8th September. So, even if the vast majority were seen in the middle of this period, the flight season in 2020 was relatively long and may have assisted the butterfly in both laying more eggs and in spreading to new areas.



Distribution of Chalk Hill Blue sightings



The map shows what appears to be a retraction to the northern edge of the Chilterns and Berkshire Downs. These are areas where the butterfly's foodplant, Horseshoe Vetch *Hippocrepis comosa* persists on unimproved chalk grassland. The previous reports from sites in-between sites with records in 2020, will mostly represent sightings of wandering males rather than of breeding colonies. However, we do know from long term observation of sites with Horseshoe Vetch and no Chalk Hill Blue that the butterfly can (re) colonise areas that become suitable. For that reason encouraging the planting of Horseshoe vetch on sites that will not be mown in mid-summer is well worth the effort.

I think the lack of sightings from the sites shown as open circles on the above map, reflects fewer wandering males and not any major loss of colonies.

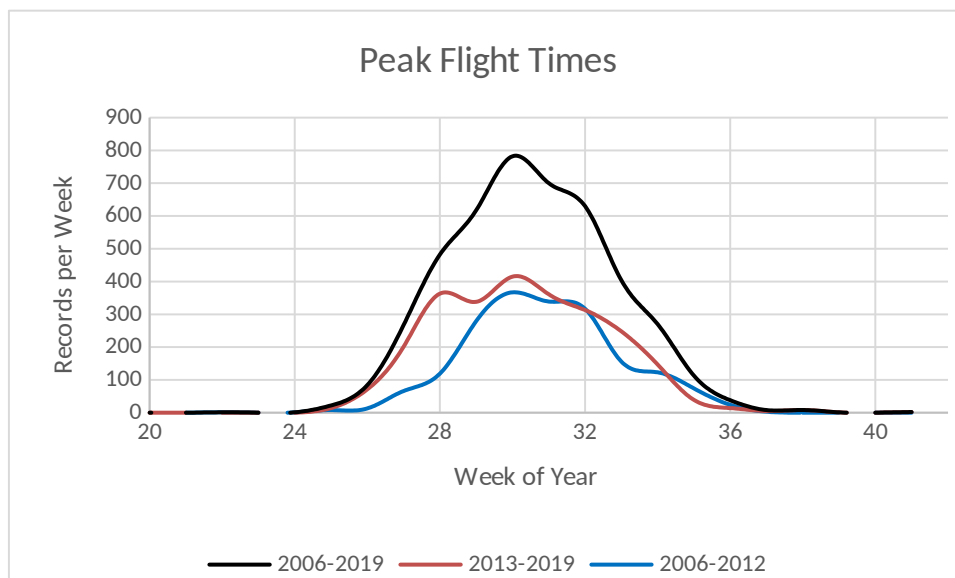
Each year the team of volunteers that assist me in tracking the Chalkie, try to visit all the known sites with Horseshoe Vetch. The butterfly seems to have fluctuating but largely stable population sizes at the various colonies where Horseshoe Vetch has been allowed to persist. In 2020 there was a distinct fall in the numbers of the Chalkie at some sites (compared with the last three years), e.g. at our own Holtspur Bottom reserve but a small rise in numbers at other sites, e.g. the Devil's Punchbowl.

The reasons for numbers changing are multiple and complex so no pattern emerges to explain this; but fluctuation is expected within biological systems. Overall, in 2020 numbers might have been slightly lower than the average for the last ten years. Nationally, after an increased abundance at monitored sites in the years 2006-2015, there has been a fall so that now numbers are roughly similar to those 15 years ago.

Pleasingly, the relatively newly established colony near the Dancers End reserve was still present and a male and a female were observed on Horseshoe vetch in Wendover Woods for the first time in at least thirty years. If the Horseshoe Vetch persists among the increasingly tall trees around the clumps of vetch, this could become another new colony.

Andy Spragg investigated the Chalkie dataset and spotted that all the records we hold are for adults. Obviously there is scope for studies of the immature stages should any one fancy the challenge of searching for eggs (laid around and not necessarily on the foodplant) and the crepuscular larvae. The pupae form under the soil surface (in the location where the larvae hide during the day between bouts of feeding) and are difficult to locate. Andy also spotted that in the UTB area the Chalkie seems to be flying for a longer period than it was twenty years ago. Unlike the national trend to earlier emergence, this is not because it emerges earlier but as our Chalkies seem to persist longer into late summer than they did previously.

On the wing



Chalk Hill Blue flight period (current and reference periods, and overall)

My very grateful thanks to all those who contacted me with news (including of unsuccessful visits); and to Andy for extracting information from the data. It is something that I would not have managed alone. I always welcome news of Chalkies and of Horseshoe vetch growing in sites where it was previously unsuspected.

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