

## GRAYLING REPORT 2020

### Butterfly Conservation Upper Thames Branch

Des Sussex - UTB Grayling species champion

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The Grayling butterfly *Hipparchia semele* is one of our rarest and most threatened species and is listed under Section 41 (S41) of the 2006 Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act as a 'priority for conservation action'. The species has previously declined due to loss of habitat as a result of development and changes in land use.

The butterfly depends on early successional habitats with plenty of bare and sparsely vegetated ground – in our area this it is restricted to sandy and gravelly soils and substrates. Even within nature reserves and protected sites it is at risk of the loss of suitable habitat due to lack of management. Natural succession tends to make heathland, grassland and open forestry areas too overgrown for the Grayling to complete its lifecycle. Management is required to create some form of 'disturbance' to provide suitable open conditions, with a supply of the short fine-leaved grasses that the caterpillar feeds on, and flowering nectar plants such as heathers which the adults feed from. The Grayling appears to be quite mobile and able to find newly restored or created patches of habitat within a few km of its local range.



Grayling at Buckler's Forest August 2020

### **The Grayling in Berkshire in 2020**

In 2020 there were approximately 380 individual Grayling butterflies reported from the UTB area – all were from south Berkshire. This was comfortably the highest total count in recent years, the overall total being boosted by a flurry of good counts from Buckler's Forest and an exceptional count at Hundred Acre Piece.

There were 47 separate records submitted by 18 different recorders.

The recorded flight season in Berkshire during 2020 was from 22nd June to 15th September (85 days). That was a much longer flight season than 2019 (see table 1 below) with very early, and very late records. 15 records were of singles, 18 records were counts of 2-9, and 12 records were of more than 10. Pleasingly there were more high counts than in previous years, and from more sites.

Buckler's Forest has rapidly become a 'hotspot' for the species and a popular site for naturalists, and we had a number of good counts from there. The habitats at this fairly recently created site will develop and mature over the next decade, and it will be interesting to see how the Grayling fares. Forestry areas in Swinley Forest and Buttersteep also produced some good counts, but the highest count - by a very long way, was once again from Hundred Acre Piece at Mortimer, with 136 counted in July.



**A heathy firebreak between Crowthorne Woods and the Forester's Way.**  
*In May 2011 there was a very serious wildfire here which jumped across the road. Management to maintain wide open fire breaks provide excellent habitat for Grayling and other species of conservation significance.*

There was an 'unexpected' record of a single Grayling from Wildmoor Heath Nature Reserve in 2020. There were a few records in 2011-2013 but I think this was the first record since 2013. The site -and nearby Wellington College Heath- should perhaps have suitable habitat for Grayling, but in spite of their heathland habitats both sites are lacking the fine grasses that the Grayling caterpillars need.

The 2020 records came from 13 tetrads (2 x 2 km grid squares) as shown on in Table 2 below. These included 8 tetrads in east Berkshire, and 5 from mid / west Berkshire, all in the south of the county. Covid certainly impacted some wildlife recording during 2020, and there was definitely a lack of records from some sites which are usually reliable places to see Grayling.



**A Grayling perched on bare sandy ground in typical habitat structure with sparse vegetation. Note plenty of fine leaved grasses which the caterpillars need as their food plant.**

Very many thanks to all who look out for this species and submit records, or help with site and habitat management.

*Des Sussex 28 March 2021*

## **Appendices**

Table 1. Recent trends in Grayling recording in the UTB area

Table 2. Occupied Tetrads in 2020

**Table 1. Recent trends in recording in UTB area**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of records</b>	<b>Number of recorders</b>	<b>Total Grayling butterflies counted</b>	<b>Highest count</b>	<b>Number of occupied tetrads</b>	<b>First date</b>	<b>Last date</b>
<b>2016</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>14/07</b>	<b>30/08</b>
<b>2017</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>04/07</b>	<b>15/09</b>
<b>2018</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>29/06</b>	<b>16/09</b>
<b>2019</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>08/07</b>	<b>08/09</b>
<b>2020</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>22/06</b>	<b>15/09</b>

**Table 2. Occupied Tetrads in 2020**

<b>Tetrad</b>	<b>Site/sub site</b>	<b>Number of records</b>	<b>Misc notes</b>
SU4862	Greenham Common	1	BBOWT transects did not happen as usual. We usually get a lot more records from Greenham and Crookham
SU6062	Decoy Heath Nature Reserve	1	We get very few records from this nature reserve.
SU6064	Padworth	1	
SU6264	Mortimer: Hundred Acre Piece	4	This former mineral extraction site has become the no.1 site for Grayling in Berks, repeatedly topping the high count' chart over the last few years.
SU6464	Mortimer: Hundred Acre Piece, Holden Firs	3	
SU7862	Finchampstead: Blackwater Valley	2	Site of current and former gravel quarrying.
SU8462	Wildmoor Heath Nature Reserve	1	First record since 2013
SU8464	Crowthorne Woods & Buckler's Forest	21	16 records were from Buckler's Forest, easily the most recorded site in 2020. 3 counts of >20
SU8664	Swinley Forest: Lower Star to Caesar's Camp	2	Swinley Forest attracts many thousands of visitors each summer. Only 3 of them recorded Grayling in 2020 ! (one of which was me)
SU8862	Barossa: Wishmoor Cross to Surrey (Old Dean/Poors)	1	Usually a reliable site for the species. Surprising lack of records in 2020, with none from Wishmoor Bottom SU8662
SU8864	Swinley Forest: The Look Out to Rapley	4	
SU9064	Buttersteep: Dukes Hill	5	Included a few counts of >10
SU9066	Buttersteep: Kings Ride and Swinley Brick Pits	1	Open ground and heathy verges within forestry.