

THE 2009 BUTTERFLY SEASON AT SHAPWICK HEATH N.N.R. AND WESTBURY BEACON S.S.S.I.

Summary of a report to Somerset and Bristol Branch Committee on 30 September 2009.

The presence of large numbers of migrant **Painted Lady**, the recovery in numbers of the **Small Tortoiseshell** and the success of **Green-veined White** and **Speckled Wood** has given the impression that this year garden butterflies have been common. This may lead to an assumption that all butterfly species have had a successful year.

Records, however, show that whilst transect season totals are higher than those in recent years they still fall well short of those in 2003, despite large increases in **Ringlet** numbers and those of the four species mentioned earlier. Furthermore these increases mask serious problems for some site specialist species.

Specifically, **all four skipper species** did poorly this year at Westbury Beacon: whilst **Large Skipper** had a better year at Shapwick Heath, **Small and Essex skipper** did poorly there. **Brimstone** numbers at both sites have been well below average in the last two years. **Green-veined White** butterflies have been found at three times their normal numbers at Shapwick and Westbury. **Green Hairstreak** was not seen at all this year at Westbury. **Small Copper** was absent until seen at both sites on 27 July after which it did well for the rest of the season. Common blue continued to do poorly at Shapwick but had a good year at Westbury. This is intriguing because **Chalkhill Blue** slumped alarmingly at Westbury. Only 79 were recorded over their 5-week flight period this year whereas 657 flew over a 10-week period in 2007. As horse-shoe vetch is abundant there, it is assumed that the bad July weather and altitude are the cause.

Other site specialists are also giving cause for concern. **White Admiral** at Shapwick have had three poor years in the last four with only 30-40% of the numbers seen in 2003-2005. **Silver-washed Fritillary** also did poorly there in 2008 and 2009 and no females were seen this year. At Westbury the **Dark Green Fritillary** has declined in numbers since 2007. Again, these three species may have suffered as a result of indifferent weather in July and August in successive summers.

Fewer **Red Admiral** and **Peacock** butterflies were seen at both sites this year but **Small Tortoiseshell** numbers recovered to their best totals since 2003 (but fell well short of the exceptional count at Shapwick in that year). **Comma** made a healthy recovery at Shapwick and appeared at Westbury (where it had not been recorded before) but none have been seen locally this late summer despite the presence of much hop and nettle. **Speckled Wood**, which seems content to fly in most weather conditions, figured strongly on both sites. The **Marbled White** at Westbury was seen in similar numbers to past seasons but its flight period was reduced from 9 to 6 weeks this year. At its peak flight time, **Meadow Brown** there was more numerous this year but its flight period was reduced from 17 to 11 weeks: a similar shorter flight period occurred at Shapwick. This effect was probably due to the poor weather. As this could have affected egg-laying it could result in smaller populations next year. The **Ringlet** had another, increasingly successful year with its totals up 450% at Westbury over those in 2007. **Small Heath** at Westbury had an exceptionally strong first brood (177) but only 16 in the second brood.

John Burrell – 30th Sept. 2009