



Fife & Clacks Group Newsletter April 2010

East Scotland Branch

Welcome to the first Fife & Clackmannanshire Newsletter of 2010. As always I should welcome articles and notes from any of you for inclusion in future newsletters. I have been giving a number of talks on moths and butterflies to local organisations and I am always amazed at the tales I get told afterwards; I am sure that some of you will have tales to tell also and so please send them to me so that we can share them. So far this year I have addressed the Monday Afternoon Social Group in Crail, a number of different SWRI institutes and the Glendevon and Muckhart Amenity Society; I'm not sure that we have gained many new members or recorders from these events but the talks have always been received with enthusiasm. Forthcoming talks include both Guides and Scouts groups and hopefully the reception from a younger audience will be similar.

Recent Butterflies

The sunny days at the start of April brought a number of butterflies out of hibernation. Small Tortoiseshells and Peacocks particularly have been seen from Dunfermline to St Andrews. There have also been a couple of Comma sightings: an early one from Tentsmuir on 27 March and others more recently from Cupar and Kinghorn. By the time you get this newsletter, they will be swarming all over us. Perhaps this year someone will find Comma caterpillars. (Don't forget to photograph them!).

The first butterflies I heard of this year were a Small Tortoiseshell in Perth on 21 January and a Small White in Milnathort on 19 February. The Small White was extremely early and the fact that it was found inside a shop suggests to me that it emerged early because it was kept much warmer than would have been the case had it pupated outside like its brothers and sisters. A mating pair of Small Whites was reported from Kinghorn on 11 April and that is more like the time we'd expect.

Orange-tip butterflies have also now appeared. Like the Small White, they over-winter in their chrysalis stage and emerge as adults in the spring.

Finally, a single Green Hairstreak was spotted on one of the Tentsmuir transects in the second last week of April, which I think is the earliest Fife record I have, certainly for the last five years.

There is some debate about whether our recent cold winter will have had an adverse affect on our butterflies and as always with such things there are many different aspects. For example, some say cold winters are beneficial because the creatures will stay in hibernation throughout, whereas in mild winters they may occasionally wake and expend energy trying to find non-existent food. Cold winters will also reduce the likelihood of mould or disease attacking the hibernators. On the other hand, insects might not survive the prolonged low temperatures and literally freeze to death,

although being under a blanket of snow could be quite cosy as well. In any case, we shall have to wait and see; so far, things look quite encouraging.

Recent moths

There have been tales from neighbouring counties of large numbers of over-wintered moths being caught in light traps. For example over 400 Chestnuts one night in West Lothian! One theory is that the moths had come from miles around to hibernate in the leaf litter in that wood and the trapping just happened to coincide with them coming out of hibernation before they dispersed again to the more open countryside. Whatever the reason, it would have been a stunning and unexpected sight.

I had a couple of trips earlier in the year looking, by torchlight, for the elusive Lunar Yellow Underwing caterpillars, which feed on specific grass types from dusk onwards. Although I found a number of other night feeding larvae I had no luck with the target species. However, the light traps and sugar patches yielded the usual range of seasonal moths such as Pale Brindled Beauty, March Moth, Yellow Horned, Chestnut and Pine Beauty.

More recently, the late spring species have begun to appear in my garden trap: Common Quaker, Hebrew Character, Clouded Drab and Early Grey. Much the same mix is being reported from other garden traps through the region. Elsewhere, the Chamomile Shark is turning up in small numbers and if you remember from last year, its caterpillar was found all over the place and so it is likely to be flying through our gardens now as well.

Butterfly Gaps

Last year seems to have been a very good year generally for butterfly sightings. Over the branch area I had more records than for the previous two years combined. Last year was also the final year of the latest five year cycle for the butterfly Millennium Atlas update. As I have said in previous newsletters, the atlas updates can be misleading if, for example, a known colony is not visited during a five year period therefore appearing in the atlas as a loss. I left it much too late last year to organise any decent attempt at filling gaps, but this is now the first year of the next five year cycle and so we have a bit more time to formulate a plan! I produced a table for the branch newsletter showing a summary of 10 kilometre square populations and I repeat this below, but with data just for Fife and Clackmannanshire.

“The table below summarises the position for most of our species at the start of 2009 and also shows the records for the year. There are approximately 28 ten-kilometre squares or parts of squares in Fife & Clacks. The first column of figures shows for each species, in how many of these 28 squares we have records. The second column is the number of previously recorded squares for which we have had no records during this five year cycle (these are what I have called the “gaps”. The atlas update would show that we have lost the species from these squares.) 2009 records are the numbers of 10km squares we recorded the species in during 2009 and the next column is how many of these squares filled the previously identified gaps along with gaps still remaining. The final column lists the number of squares recorded in 2009 where the species had not been recorded before – range expansion perhaps.”

Species	Number of squares recorded before 2009	Gaps - No records for at least 5 years	2009 Records	Gaps Filled in 2009 & Gaps Remaining	New squares in 2009
Large White	27	6	21	3/3	-
Small White	27	3	20	1/2	-
Green-veined White	27	3	25	2/1	-
Orange-tip	26	-	19	-	-
Green Hairstreak	8	4	3	1/3	-
Small Copper	27	4	15	1/3	-
Northern Brown Argus	6	2	3	0/2	-
Common Blue	25	9	15	2/7	2
Red Admiral	27	4	21	2/2	-
Painted Lady	27	4	20	2/2	-
Small Tortoiseshell	27	-	24	-	-
Peacock	27	-	22	-	-
Comma	16	-	16	-	4
Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary	16	3	5	0/3	-
Dark Green Fritillary	17	7	5	0/7	-
Grayling	4	1	2	0/1	-
Meadow Brown	28	5	19	3/2	-
Ringlet	26	2	21	2/0	-
Small Heath	22	2	11	1/1	-
Large Heath	1	1	-	0/1	-

This is a lot to take in, but we can see from the “gaps filled” column, that there are quite a few gaps still to investigate over the next five years – as well as reconfirming all the other squares again! The table also shows that the Comma range is expanding as we’d expect but also that Common Blue now occupies all but one square. (25 squares up till 2009 + 2 new squares in 2009). Perhaps these have been overlooked in the past or equally this could be a genuine expansion for reasons unknown. By the way, the square that is missing from most species is NT59 which covers mostly sea but also a small corner of the East Links beside Elie. My initial reaction to the numbers in the table is that Green Hairstreak could be in trouble (I spent many hours last year trying to confirm the historic colony at Lochornie without success); Large Heath might be in trouble, but it should be straightforward to confirm that by a couple of trips to Tipperton Moss, west of Loch Glow (good plan for an outing in the next couple of years); Small Pearl-bordered and Dark Green Fritillaries have not had gaps filled, but I don’t think they were necessarily targeted last year - it might be a nice project for someone to visit all the fritillary sites over the next five years – volunteers?

Some Caterpillar Tales

Last year I received a frantic phone call from a lady in a neighbouring street. She told me that she was being invaded by caterpillars gathering in great numbers round her front door. I immediately

went round to find quite a number of caterpillars clinging to the walls on either side of the door and many more crawling over the doorstep. I was rather concerned because she wanted advice on extermination rather than identification and when we eventually traced the source of the caterpillars to her (defoliated) Euonymus bushes the desire for massacre was reinforced! I exaggerate, but there was some dismay and I see that the bushes have been removed from the garden this year.

These were Magpie moth caterpillars and I gathered as many as I could over two or three visits and took them home. Some of the refugees I sent to good homes and I bought a couple of Euonymus bushes and a flowering currant, which is the more usual food-plant, to feed the remainder. Nearly all the caterpillars I kept managed to pupate and I had the pleasure of seeing a few adult Magpie moths in my garden later in the year. I am delighted to say that this April I found caterpillars on my Flowering Currant suggesting that a colony has now become established in my garden. I wonder if I can be criticised for unauthorised species expansion or introduction.

Continuing the subject of caterpillars, on one of my visits to Tentsmuir NNR last year I caught a Garden Tiger Moth that left me with a clutch of eggs on one of the egg cartons in my trap. Imagining the fantastic prospect of having 150 adult Garden Tiger Moths to photograph, I decided to keep the eggs and raise them to adulthood. It wasn't long before I had around 150 tiny, hairy pets; they feed on dock, dandelion, bramble and a variety of other common plants and so it was not hard to keep them well fed. However it quickly became obvious that I had taken on more than I could handle: I had separated them into boxes with ten caterpillars in each and every box had to be cleaned and replenished almost daily. So once again I found good homes for some and then I released the rest back in Tentsmuir, keeping just ten for myself. One of the difficulties in rearing these creatures is how to ensure they survive over winter – I am told that 90% mortality in captive populations is common. Many "breeders" will keep them warm and feeding continuously thus avoiding hibernation altogether. Survival rates are good, but of course the adults will emerge at completely the wrong time of year. When my ten started to get a bit sluggish I put them in a clean box with crunched up kitchen roll and no food and kept them in the back of my car (the car has no heating and so was a reasonable facsimile for the frosty outdoors!). I am pleased to say that all ten survived, wakened up in late March and are now fully engaged in rapid growth. I am looking forward to seeing them pupate in late June and hopefully emerging a month later.

Forthcoming Events

The following events have been arranged. I am also hoping to have a search on Benarty Hill for Green Hairstreak on the 15th or 16th of May. I need to investigate suitable access points but please call me for details on 01383 730446 or e-mail me if you are interested.

Date	Event	Details	Contact
Sat. 15 May	National Moth Night. Bat walk and moth trapping on Cullaloe SWT Reserve	8.30 pm, meet at reserve car park on B9157, 1.5 miles north of Aberdour (NT186872).	Tim Brain 01577 840317
Fri/Sat 25/26 June	Moth trapping and butterfly walk on East Lomond	Meet at the Limekiln on East Lomond at 9.30pm of Friday for moth trapping and again 10am on Saturday to empty the traps and take part in the butterfly walk. (NO238058). There is car parking close by either at Craigmead or the East Lomond Relay Station.	Kate Morison 07950 786245
Sat. 3 July	Auchtermuchty Common to see Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary	Meet at the car park (NO236134) on the B936 about a mile north of Auchtermuchty at 1.30pm.	Kate Morison 07950 786245
Sat/Sun. 21/22 August	Moth trapping at Auchtermuchty Common	Meet at car park (NO236134) at 8.30pm. on the 21st. to check early moths at the traps, and again at 10.00am. on the Sunday to see what was caught	Kate Morison 07950 786245

Duncan Davidson

Tel: 01383 730446

Email: duncan@dwwd.freereserve.co.uk