

BUTTERFLY REPORT

To describe 2006 as an eventful year would be an understatement with many species recorded in spectacular numbers and the reappearance of Clouded Yellow after an absence of ten years. Increased monitoring in recent years has highlighted the importance of the Reserve for butterflies. This is borne out by the Cheshire and Wirral Butterfly Report for 2006, which notes that Woolston Eyes recorded the highest numbers in the county of Small White, Peacock, Comma, Gatekeeper and Speckled Wood. In addition, the Reserve produced the latest ever county sightings of Small White and Clouded Yellow!

The year started slowly with cold weather in March and early April. The first butterflies were not reported until 25th March when there were sightings of Brimstone, Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell. Early May saw an early arrival of Painted Lady and good numbers of Orange Tip were on the Reserve with a maximum count of 28.

High summer saw record numbers of Gatekeeper and probable record totals of Small White (200+) and Peacock (223)

Late August saw the first sightings of Clouded Yellow since 1996 and this was followed in early September by a record count of Comma (63). Other migrants such as Red Admiral and Painted Lady fared well but numbers of Small Tortoiseshell and Green-veined White were disappointing. It was encouraging to have a number of sightings of Holly Blue from various parts of the Reserve.

The exceptionally mild autumn and early winter saw butterflies in flight well into November with the last report of an unidentified individual on the 27th.

The year was also significant for the creation of a Butterfly Transect under the auspices of Butterfly Conservation. A transect is a set route of between one and two kilometres incorporating as many different habitats as possible. The route is walked each week between April and September in suitable weather conditions and is divided into a number of sections. The Woolston Eyes transect starts on the west bank of No.2 bed, continues along the south bank of No.3 bed and ends at the Ferry hut on the Manchester Ship Canal. All butterflies seen within the transect are recorded together with details of temperature and wind strength and submitted to the U.K. Butterfly Monitoring Scheme for analysis. The scheme provides the opportunity to monitor butterfly populations over a period of many years. There are over a hundred transects in Britain and further details can be found on the UKBMS website [www.ukbms.org].

Although the transect got off to a slow start with temperatures in early April failing to reach the minimum for recording under the scheme (13C), the year proved very successful with 18 species recorded and a maximum of 200 butterflies noted in mid-July. It is essential that the transect is walked every week and I am grateful for the enthusiastic support of Dave Bowman and Les Jones who have kindly monitored the transect in my absence.

As always, I am grateful to fellow wardens and permit-holders for submitting their records via the logbook. These records are particularly helpful in providing early and late records and this report is dependent on such information to give as complete a picture as possible of butterflies at Woolston. Thanks also to the Cheshire branch of Butterfly Conservation for their support in establishing the transect.

Individual species reports are as follows:

Small Skipper *Thymelicus sylvestris*

It was not until 29th June that the first reports were received with three on the Canal track. The following day three were found on No.1 bed and numbers increased to 18 for the whole Reserve on 4th July. A detailed survey between 15th and 24th July produced a maximum count of 23 for the year. Thereafter, only two reports were received with the final sighting of a single butterfly on Butchersfield Tip on 3rd August. Numbers were down compared with 2005 but in spite of the short flight season this year this species was seen in above average numbers for Woolston. Both species of Skipper are ignored by many observers, no doubt because of their inconspicuous nature, and more records would be appreciated.

Large Skipper *Ochlodes venata*

Although relatively uncommon at Woolston this species was seen in good numbers this year. The first report was of two on the Canal track on 13th June and over the next two days a total of 12 was recorded with a further three to the north of the river. This is the highest count for at least five years. Further reports of up to four were received during the following three weeks and a count of seven for the whole Reserve between 15th and 24th July proved to be the last of the year. Butterflies were reported from areas of suitable habitat across the Reserve with No1 bed and the Canal track proving particularly popular. In contrast to the previous species the flight period was two weeks longer than in 2005.

Clouded Yellow *Colias croceus*

After an absence of ten years the appearance of four butterflies on 22nd August was very welcome although not totally unexpected as there had been a number of sightings locally in the previous weeks. September produced a number of reports with one on the south bank of No.2 bed on the 8th, three around the Car Park on the 9th, and a further two the following day including one flying north along the west bank of No.2 bed. The final records were of one flying north over No.1 bed on 29th October and a remarkable sighting of two mating in the same area on 1st November!

Brimstone *Gonepteryx rhamni*

On 25th March one was seen near the Car Park and a second on the south bank of No.3 bed. Further sightings from No.3 bed on 11th and 23rd April and from No.4 bed on 26th April completed the spring records. Unusually for Woolston there were three summer reports with singles at Bollin Point on 1st July, No.3 bed on 15th July and a final sighting on the west bank of No.4 bed on 14th August.

Large White

Pieris brassicae

The first report was of three on No.3 bed on 31st May. There were no further records until 11th July when a total of four was seen. The maximum count for the year occurred in the second half of July when a survey of the whole Reserve produced a total of 12. A single butterfly on 3rd August was followed by three on 5th September and two the following day, which proved to be the last of the year. Butterflies were reported from most areas of the Reserve but as always in small numbers. This year's maximum is about average for this species at Woolston.

Small White

Pieris rapae

This species was seen in exceptionally large and possibly record numbers this year whereas in the rest of Cheshire numbers were below average. A single on 26th April was the first of the year and on 19th May six were on No.3 bed. There were no further records until the summer brood emerged with 16 on 4th July. Numbers increased dramatically and by the 26th well over a hundred were noted. Butterflies peaked on 3rd August when 162 were counted on the Reserve itself and a further 46 along the river. Good numbers remained throughout August with counts of 79 on the 14th and 105 on the 22nd. A survey between 7th and 10th September produced about a hundred butterflies. No further records were received until one was seen on the Canal track on the exceptionally late dates of 29th and 30th October. Whilst butterflies were reported in good numbers across the Reserve they were particularly attracted to Himalayan Balsam on the north bank of No.2 bed. This has colonised the area following the reconstruction of the bank and the removal of woodland habitat.

Green-veined White

Pieris napi

In contrast to Small White this species was seen only in very small numbers this year, possibly because of the dry summer as Green-veined Whites thrive in damp conditions. Four on 3rd May was the first report followed by the same number a week later when a further five were on the river. There were infrequent sightings in June and early July and the maximum count for the year was seven during the second half of July. August and early September produced four reports of two butterflies and the final record of the year was of one on 10th September. Even allowing for under-recording this compares very unfavourably with numbers in recent years. In 2005 for example up to 50 were present.

Orange Tip

Anthocharis cardamines

Given the exceptionally cold weather conditions in spring it was not surprising that the first record of this attractive butterfly was not until 23rd April when there were reports from the Canal track, Car Park and the south bank of No.3 bed. Small numbers were then reported almost daily until the end of the month. Early May saw an increase in numbers with six on No.4 bed on the 5th. A survey of the whole Reserve on 9th and

12th May produced a total of 28 with a further one on the river, which is probably a record total for Woolston. The final sighting was a male on No.3 bed on 16th May.

Small Copper

Lycaena phlaeas

There was only one sighting of the first brood when a butterfly was noted on the Canal track on 31st May. The next report was from the Sandpit Pond area on 16th July and was followed by sightings of two and four on No.1 bed on 17th and 26th July. A single butterfly was on the Canal track on 3rd and 6th August but the maximum count of the year occurred during a survey of the whole Reserve on 7th, 8th and 10th September when eight were found. Of these, four were on No.1 bed, three on the Canal track including one at Latchford Locks, and one on No.4 bed. This is the highest total in recent years.

The final record was of two on No.1 bed on 15th September.

Common Blue

Polyommatus icarus

A single butterfly on the Canal track on 24th May was the first of a reasonably successful year for this species. Fourteen were counted in the same area on 6th June and by the middle of the month 22 were on the Reserve. Few butterflies were seen thereafter until mid-July when thirteen were recorded. Numbers then built to 23 on 26th July and a year maximum of 26 on 3rd August. Sixteen were still present on 22nd August but numbers then declined with eight on 3rd September and a final record of one on 10th September. The Canal track, Butchersfield Tip and No.1 bed proved the most productive areas this year whereas there were no sightings from the southern end of No.4 bed where up to nine were found in 2005.

Holly Blue

Celastrina argiolus

Following the single report of this species in 2005 it was encouraging to record no less than seven sightings this year between 24th July and 8th September. There were a number of reports from the Canal track and the south bank of No.3 bed where one was on Rosebay Willowherb on 3rd August. Other sightings were from the Viaduct Pools area of No.1 bed and the south bank of No.2 bed. It will be interesting to see whether this upturn in fortunes for this attractive butterfly will be maintained.

Red Admiral

Vanessa atalanta

As in the past two years there were no spring records and the first sighting was of two "rather tatty" individuals in the centre of No.3 bed on 2nd June. Small numbers were then noted regularly until an increase to 19 in the second half of July, which proved to be the highest count of the year. Single figure counts throughout August were followed by totals of 11 and 12 in the first half of September. There were regular reports during an exceptionally mild October with butterflies seen on no less than 11 days. Five were still present on 1st November and a single the following day was the last of a successful year.

Painted Lady

Cynthia cardui

In common with other migrants this species was seen in good numbers in 2006. An early sighting of two on the north bank of No.4 bed on 5 May was followed in early June by a series of records culminating in a count of nine by mid-month. Very few were then seen until 26th July when a count of 22 proved to be the highest of the year and the best total for at least five years. Other noteworthy counts included ten on 22nd August and four in early September. The final record was of one on Buddleia on No.3 bed on 15th September.

Small Tortoiseshell

Aglais urticae

This was one of the few species to disappoint this year with only small numbers seen. Reduced numbers at Woolston are part of a national decline which may be due to a parasitic fly which is moving northwards, possibly as a result of climate change. A report of one in the Car Park on 25th March was the first with single figure counts until 26th April when 21 were counted across the Reserve with a further two on the river. These included 13 on No.4 bed. The river to the north of Nos1 and 2 beds proved to be a productive area this year although not strictly part of the Reserve. This area accounted for more than half of the counts of 16 on 3rd and 9th May. There were no more totals in double figures until early September when a survey on the 7th, 8th, and 10th produced a maximum count for the year of 31. The only later record was of one on No.3 bed on 9th October.

Camberwell Beauty

Nymphalis antiopa

An unconfirmed report of one on the Canal track in late July was the first since 2003.

Peacock

Inachis io

In contrast to Small Tortoiseshell, Peacocks were present in record numbers during mid-summer. The first was seen on 25th March and small numbers were reported during April building to 21 on the 26th. The first brood peaked in early May with 34 on 3rd and 43 on the 9th with a further 14 on the river. Thereafter six were noted on 2nd June and singles on a few other dates in June. The second emergence started in mid-July when 72 were present. By 26th July numbers had built to a record total of 223 of which 119 were on No.3 bed including 31 on Buddleia. This was by far the highest count in Cheshire for the year. A single Buddleia on Butchersfield Tip held no less than 60. Numbers rapidly reduced with 59 seen on 3rd August, this being the last double figure count of the year. Eight were present on 27th August but there was only one record in September. October produced three sightings with two on the 19th and the 29th and the final record was one on No.4 bed on 19th November.

Comma

Polygonia c-album

This species was also present in record numbers this year with the first sighting of two on 23rd April. Up to two were seen on three dates up to 10th May, which was the last sighting of the first brood. The second emergence began with two on 29th June and five on 2nd July. Counts in single figures continued throughout the summer until numbers started to increase towards the end of August when 13 were on No.3 bed on the 28th. This equalled the previous record total for this species but paled into insignificance when a survey of the whole reserve on the 7th, 8th and 10th September produced the remarkable total of 60 and a further three on the river. Of these, 18 were on the south bank of No.3, mostly attracted to Buddleia. This count is the highest ever recorded in Cheshire! Very few were seen subsequently with singles on 3rd October and the 1st and 2nd November the last of the year.

Speckled Wood

Pararge aegeria

In view of the low temperatures this spring it was unsurprising that the first sighting did not occur until 23rd April. Early May brought an increase in numbers with ten on No.3 bed on the 10th. A detailed survey in mid-June found a total of 15 but very few were seen during July with ten on the 26th the highest recorded. As usual with this species numbers increased during August. The month started with a count of 17 and by the end of August 31 were present. Numbers continued to increase and a year maximum of 56 was recorded during a survey of the whole Reserve on 7th, 8th and 10th September. This is a little below last year's record count of 62 but still represents an excellent total given the loss of suitable habitat on the north bank of No.2 bed. Very few were seen thereafter with three on 18th September and three reports of singles in the first half of October and the final sighting of the year on 19th October.

Gatekeeper

Pyronia tithonus

This species is seen in ever-increasing numbers at Woolston as it continues to extend its range northwards. As in 2005, hot and sunny conditions during the flight period produced record totals and Woolston Eyes was again the most productive site in Cheshire for this species. The first report of the season was of 25 on 2nd July followed by 67 two days later. Butterflies continued to increase in number and a detailed survey of the whole Reserve between 15th and 24th July resulted in the remarkable total of 1638. This represents an increase of nearly 400 on the previous record in 2005. However, the 2005 figure was considered to be an under-estimate as some areas of the Reserve, notably No.4 bed, were surveyed in less than ideal conditions and it seems probable that butterflies were present in similar numbers in 2005. After the peak counts in mid-July numbers fell dramatically and by 14th August only five were noted and surprisingly there were no records after that date.

Meadow Brown

Maniola jurtina

The hot summer resulted in good numbers of this species and the first were seen on the typical date of 14th June. By the end of the month 76 were recorded and numbers continued to increase into July. 108 were present on the 4th building to a maximum count of 238 in the second half of the month. 184 were still present on the 26th but by August numbers had begun to decline with the highest counts of 19 on the 14th and 26 on the 22nd. The final sighting of the year was of three on No.1 bed on 7th September. Although plentiful this year the maximum recorded was down on the previous year's excellent total of 317.

Dave Hackett