

BUTTERFLY REPORT

This proved to be a mixed year for butterflies at Woolston, for whereas some species fared poorly others were seen in high or even record numbers. Particularly successful were the butterflies of high summer with record numbers of Gatekeeper and high numbers of Small Skipper and Meadow Brown.

In contrast, species such as Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock were less common than the previous year and the usual influx of Painted Ladies failed to materialise with only one sighting this year.

The first report of the year, as in 2004, was on 17th March but this year it was of a Brimstone. There were the usual March records of Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell and an early Orange Tip on 2nd April.

There were no spring records of Red Admiral, Comma or Common Blue and it was the third week in June before any were reported. Small Copper were seen in good numbers for Woolston especially in the second half of July when large numbers of Meadow Brown were also on the wing.

Speckled Wood were recorded in record numbers in August and the "Indian Summer" saw sightings of Red Admiral well into November, culminating in a latest ever sighting on the 19th December.

It was encouraging to receive a single record of Holly Blue after a blank year in 2004 but there were again no sightings of Small Heath from No.1 bed.

Many thanks as always to those wardens and permit holders who took the trouble to provide details of their sightings. Other than my own records there were few reports of Small and Large Skippers and more information would be welcomed. Thanks also to Barry Shaw of the Cheshire Branch of Butterfly Conservation who collates information for the whole county.

Individual species reports are as follows:

Small Skipper

Thymelicus sylvestris

A single butterfly near the Thelwall Viaduct was the first sighting of the year on 21st June. By 1st July 20 were present of which 19 were on No.1 bed. Numbers peaked a week later with 17 on No.1 bed on 8th July and a further 19 on No.4 bed and one on the Canal track on 10th July. The total figure of 37 could well be a record for Woolston as Small Skippers have only spread this far north in the past 30 years, probably as a result of climate change. By the end of July numbers had fallen and only eight were found during a series of visits in the second half of the month. On 2nd August a previously unknown (to me at least!) colony was found on the West Bank of the river on No.2 bed where five butterflies were found. A single on 11th August was the last report of a successful year for this species.

Large Skipper

Ochlodes venata

This species is relatively uncommon at Woolston and this year was no exception with butterflies seen on just four occasions. The first was a single on the Canal track on 23rd June followed by one on Butchersfield Tip on 1st July. Two were on the Canal track on 17th July and the final sighting was of three on No.4 bed on 20th July.

This is very similar to the previous year although in 2005 the flight period was about two weeks later. Like the Small Skipper this is a species which favours grassy areas where its food plants are left uncut.

Brimstone

Gonepteryx rhamni

The increase in sightings in 2004 continued this year with the first record a single on the Canal track on 17th March. On 2nd April one was on the river and a second on No.3 bed. Further reports from that bed were of singles on 29th April and 2nd May. The final sighting was of a male feeding on dandelions on 11th May.

Large White

Pieris brassicae

Although never plentiful at Woolston this species fared relatively well in 2005. The first was noted on 2nd May and two were seen on 11th May. There were no more records until 10th July when two were on No.4 bed. Numbers then increased with 10 on No.3 bed on 10th July building to a year maximum of 14 for the Reserve on 2nd August. Thereafter only singles were reported with the last sighting on 13th September.

Small White

Pieris rapae

As in 2004 there were few reports of this species at Woolston. Positive identification is always problematic because of its similarity to other species, in particular the Green-veined White. The first sighting was of two on 11th May and none were then reported until the second half of July when four were noted. Large numbers (70 +) of unidentified "whites" were on the Reserve at this time and a proportion of these would have been of this species. Two were seen on 30th August and the final report was of one on Butchersfield Tip on 13th September.

Green-veined White

Pieris napi

This species is common at Woolston and can be found in good numbers across the Reserve. It is difficult to identify however, as, unless close views are obtained, it is easily confused with other species, notably Small White. Because of this, numbers reported are often an approximation. The first sighting was of two on No.3 bed on 12th April with regular sightings throughout the spring and summer. 19 were positively identified on 11th May but peak numbers occurred in the second half of July when up to 50 may have been present. Thereafter fewer were seen and the last record was of two individuals on 13th September. These figures are similar to those for 2004.

Orange Tip

Anthocharis cardamines

An early report of a male on the Canal track on 2nd April was the earliest sighting in Cheshire this year. No more were seen until 19th April when four were present. Similar numbers were present for the remainder of the month and numbers increased at the beginning of May with seven recorded on 2nd of the month and a year maximum of nine on the 11th, of which five were on No.3 bed. The last report was of four on 17th May. This represents a fairly typical year for this species

Small Copper

Lycaena phlaeas

As in 2005 this species fared well this year with butterflies recorded on nine dates. Whilst most records were as usual from No.1 bed, butterflies were seen in all parts of the Reserve with the exception of No.3 bed where the habitat is unsuitable. There were three reports in May with singles on the 4th and the 11th and two on No.1 bed on the 17th. No more were seen until 26th July when five were on No.1 bed and one on the south bank of No.2 bed. Sightings continued into August with three on the 2nd and singles on three other dates up to the end of the month. Interestingly, butterflies were seen on two occasions on the Canal track between the ferry and the entrance to No.3 bed. These represent the first records for this part of the Reserve in recent years. The final record was of two on No.1 bed on 13th September.

Common Blue

Polyommatus icarus

Following last year's high numbers, this species reverted to normal levels in 2005. Surprisingly there were no records until 20th June although butterflies were probably on the Reserve prior to that date. Twenty on 23rd June proved to be the highest count of the year of which nine were found on waste ground at the southern end of No.4 bed. Whilst butterflies were recorded throughout July and the first half of August the only other double-figure counts were on 2nd and 11th August. Eight were on No.1 bed on 16th August and it was disappointing that no further records were received.

Holly Blue

Celastrina argiolus

After an absence of two years a sighting of a single butterfly on the south bank of No.3 bed on 7th August was a welcome return for this attractive species.

Red Admiral

Vanessa atalanta

As in 2004, there were no spring records this year and the first sighting was of three on 21st June. From then until the beginning of August numbers peaked with nine present on 1st July and 2nd August. There were occasional sightings up to the middle of September with three on the 13th. This appeared to mark the end of the season but mild weather at the end of October produced two on the 27th. Surprisingly, reports

continued into November with three on the 1st, one on the 2nd and a further individual on the 13th. Even these late sightings were eclipsed by the amazing sight of a butterfly in flight on the river to the north of No.2 bed on 19th December! This is by far the latest ever sighting for Woolston.

Painted Lady

Cynthia cardui

Painted Ladies were scarce throughout Cheshire this year and Woolston was no exception with the only record a single butterfly on the south bank of No.3 bed on 17th August. Numbers of this migratory species can vary dramatically from year to year but this is the worst showing for a number of years.

Small Tortoiseshell

Aglais urticae

Another disappointment was the greatly reduced numbers of this species after excellent numbers in the spring of 2004. The first was seen on 18th March and numbers began to build in April with 17 on the 12th and 21 on the 19th. When 27 were counted on No.4 bed on 29th April and a further 14, mostly on No.3 bed, on 2nd May, this was to be the maximum count for the year. A survey of the whole Reserve on 11th May produced 25 butterflies and the only other count into double figures was eleven at the end of July. Small numbers continued to be seen until the last sighting of three on 13th September.

Peacock

Inachis io

Although numbers were down on 2004 this was less marked than for Small Tortoiseshell. Records began on 18th March when nine were on No.3 bed and a further four on the Canal track. By 12th April 29 were present and this increased to 42 on the 19th. Good numbers were seen up to the middle of May and there was then a gap until an emergence in mid-July. Butterflies peaked in early August with 44 on the 2nd and the year maximum of 50 on the 11th. This compares unfavourably with the remarkable total of 121 in August 2004. A rapid decline then ensued with the only other reports being four on 30th August, two on 13th September and a late record of one on No.4 bed on 27th October.

Comma

Polygonia c-album

For the first time in recent years there were no spring records and the first sighting was of a single butterfly on No.3 bed on 26th June. On 1st July three were present and on 15th July five were recorded on No.3 bed. Of the five noted at the end of July three were on No.3 bed and one each on Nos.1 and 2 beds. The only August report was of two on the 2nd but there were three September records including five in the Loop area of No. 4 bed of which four were feeding on Michaelmas Daisies. Four were present on 13th September including one on Butchersfield Tip and one to the north of the river opposite No.1 bed. The final record of the year was of one on the favoured No.3 bed

on 24th September. In spite of the absence of spring sightings the year maximum of five (on three occasions) was an improvement on the previous year.

Speckled Wood

Pararge aegeria

The northward spread of this butterfly continues and produced record numbers for Woolston this year. Although primarily a butterfly of woodland with dappled shade, it can be found in a variety of habitats. An early sighting at the entrance to No.3 bed on 5th April augured well and butterflies were seen in small numbers up to the end of July with a maximum of nine on 21st June. August brought an increase in numbers and by the end of the month a survey of the whole Reserve produced a record total of 62 with an additional 13 along the north bank of the river. Incidentally, this was the highest count of the year for the whole of Cheshire. A further count on 7th September seemed likely to exceed even this figure but cloudier weather in the afternoon produced only four butterflies on No.4 bed as opposed to 18 the previous week. In spite of this, an identical total of 62 was counted. By mid-September 48 were still present but numbers then plummeted with four on the 21st and eight on the 24th on the south bank of No.3 bed the final records of the year. Whilst butterflies were seen in all parts of the Reserve they were most prevalent on Nos 2 and 4 beds.

Gatekeeper

Pyronia tithonus

Hot and sunny weather in mid-July produced record numbers of this species which continues to expand its range northwards. Butterflies were first noted on 1st July when 17 were seen. Numbers increased rapidly with 26 on No.1 bed on 8th July and over 250 in No.4 bed two days later. A detailed search of the whole Reserve during the last two weeks of July produced the record total of 1257 which far exceeds the previous record of 821 in 2003. Although this year's survey was more detailed, part was undertaken in less than ideal conditions so the total is probably an underestimate. Nevertheless Woolston provided the largest count of this species in Cheshire this year. Numbers peaked around the end of July but butterflies were present until 21st August when the last of the year was seen.

Meadow Brown

Maniola jurtina

This species also benefited from the hot and dry conditions in midsummer. The first butterflies were seen on 21st June when six were noted. This was the prelude to a rapid increase with 25 two days later and 101 on 1st July. As with Gatekeeper maximum numbers appeared towards the end of July when a survey of the whole Reserve produced the excellent total of 317. This compares with a maximum of 101 in 2004 and 163 in 2003. As expected, numbers declined during August and only six remained by the month end. The final sightings of the year were of two on the 7th and a single on 13th September.

Dave Hackett