

The Wonderful Butterflies of Cumbria 2019 – Chris Winnick

More seriously I have been happy to write a much more detailed account as 2019 was an exceptional year for the UK and the North West. According to the annual UKBMS 2019 was the best year for butterflies since 1997 with just over half of all species having higher population levels than in 2018.....making it the 8th best year since the UKBMS started in 1976. Some species did poorly notably the Common Blue and the 'Whites' [especially the first generation] and although some species did well in the south it was not always the case 'up north'. Dark Green Fritillary were up 51% in the UK but did less well here and the fact that Marble White had their best year ever just serves to remind me that I miss one of my favourite butterflies! Equally the Painted Lady 'invasion' almost missed parts of the south.

However many species seen on NW sites followed the national trend with Meadow Brown [after a poor 2018] up 38%, Ringlet up 23%, Orange Tip up 63%, Brimstone up 32% and most spectacularly migrant Red Admirals and Painted Ladies up 195% and 1,993% respectively. Autumn Peacocks did very well in the NW and Duke of Burgundy had their 8th best year.

Weather was a key factor as many species benefitted from the right combination of warmth, sunshine and rain in the spring [April/May] and summer [July/August].....June was more than passable in the south but indifferent at best in the north. This combination, together with a good summer in 2018, allowed our spring butterflies [and those in 'immature stages'] to flourish: just a shame that in the NW the abundance of 'high summer' butterflies came to an almost crashing end with the start of September!

Clearly suffering from a current lack of recording opportunities for 2020 I started to trawl through the 'reams' of 2019 sightings for both North Lancashire and Cumbria.....I had intended to restrict my search to the Morecambe Bay area [the 'jewel in the crown'] but found I wanted to share some of the many exceptional sightings from further north.

A Painted Lady was photographed on 1st January at Coniston.....if not a portent then a recognised national record.....but few adults took to the wing until the last two weeks of February when warmth brought a temporary end to the hibernation of Peacocks, Brimstones and to a lesser degree Commas, Small Tortoiseshells and even a few Red Admirals. Brimstone numbers were particularly impressive in the last week of February at

Myers Allotment, Lambert's Meadow, Heald Brow and Eaves Wood. Many were forced back into taupe by a cold March only to re-emerge to welcome the end of the month and the stunning April to follow.

April is always an exciting time with the arrival of so many species that over-wintered as pupa or even larva. An Orange tip, the first of many, was seen in Lindale on the 6th and another in the company of 5 Peacocks at Gait Barrow on 9th April. The first Green Hairstreaks emerged at Foulshaw and Meathop Mosses on the 9th with Small White seen at Ormsgill Slag Banks on the 10th and Speckled Woods on 17th April. The first signs that this was going to be a special year were perhaps with the build up of massive numbers of the under-recorded Green Hairstreak. On the 17th 24 were seen at Cliburn Moss NNR and 30 at Meathop Moss and on the 19th 70 were recorded at Nichols Moss and 130 at Savinhill and Helsington Mosses. However by the 22nd 100 were noted at Meathop Moss and 164 at Cliburn with recorders noting that the true figure was likely to have been much higher.

Before hundreds of trees were removed from Meathop to extend the raised mire it was home to vast areas of Bilberry and hosted probably the largest colony of Green Hairstreaks in the UK.....several thousand could be seen often forming 'clouds' at ground and at canopy level. It is good to see that they seem to be making a slow but determined recovery.

On the 18th April 39 Painted Ladies were seen in and near a garden in Wetheral [another portent!] and Holly Blue, Large White and Green-veined White also chose this day to put in their first appearance. Most species were still emerging a little late but to my amazement Pearl-bordered Fritillary at Warton Crag put in what must be one of their earliest ever shows on 23rd April.....an appearance time more akin to their relatives in Devon. An early Duke of Burgundy also emerged at this time on Kendal Fell but Gait Barrow 'Dukes' preferred to wait until the first week of May. By now Orange Tips were being recorded in their 20's and 30's at favoured sites but Speckled Wood numbers remained low until the end of April. Holly Blues were having a 'quite' but welcome presence [notably in church yards!] and the first report of a Small Heath came from the SW facing slope of Warton Crag on the 29th April.

At Warton Crag the nationally rare Pearl-bordered Fritillary reached a modest peak of 14 on the 29th April although it benefited from a longer than normal flight season with butterflies being seen throughout May. Along with the Duke it did better on Whitbarrow recovering from a run of disappointing years. Sadly the 'Pearl' no longer survives at Gait Barrow but Dukes were seen there in low numbers throughout May: an encouraging improvement on recent times.

May started with a string of first sightings: Small Copper and the Wall appeared on the 1st May, Dingy Skipper at Ormsgill Slag Banks and Common Blue at Warton Crag both on the 5th May, the White Sable Moth [Anania Funebris] at Latterbarrow on the 11th May and a Brown Hairstreak caterpillar on the 12th at Gait Barrow. On the following day the same reserve

hosted 6 'Dukes' and an impressive 28 Brimstones....the latter now widespread throughout Morecambe Bay. On 16th May 32 Small Heath, 25 Common Blue, 22 Dingy Skipper and 4 Pearl-bordered Fritillary were recorded at Warton Crag and on the 17th the slag bank at Ormsgill reported 36 Small Blue along with 33 Dingy Skipper and 15 Common Blue.

Unlike their 'close cousins' the first Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries did not emerge more than a week early. [19th May at Warton Crag and just 3 days before Large Skipper at the same site] 50 Green-veined White were seen in Barbondale on 22nd May and Finglandrigg NNR hosted 55 Marsh Fritillary on the following day. [99 MF were reported on 07.06.19]

As Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary [SPBF] and Small Heath numbers were building up June started with a 'mixed bag' of weather. Just one Mountain Ringlet was spotted at Irton Fell on the first day of the month.....but 48 more were seen at this exceptionally early site on the 9th June.....as were 6 SPBF. I do not recall a previous record at this site for SPBF but unlike 'Pearls' they are far more tolerant of different habitats as long as their caterpillars can feed on violet. As a consequence there could be well over 100 colonies of SPBF over much of Cumbria [less so in N. Lancashire] allowing a degree of connectivity while their less tolerant relative the Pearl-bordered Fritillary [PBF] is limited to far fewer [and more isolated] sites that are warmer, have shorter turf, lower water tables, are less shady [ideally where there is a mosaic of bracken litter, dead twigs/leaves and bare earth] but plenty of violet.

The last report of a PBF and the first report of a Northern Brown Argus [NBA] came from Whitbarrow on the 7th June while on the 9th June 3 Meadow Brown were seen on Yealand Hall Allotment and 10 SPBF and 8 NBA were reported from Warton Crag.....a day after the first Small Skipper was reported from the same location. Large Heath usually emerge at Heysham in the 3rd or 4th week of May....a little later further north where 39 were noted at Duddon Mosses on the 9th June and 25 at Meathop Moss the following day. Small Skipper were also seen at the very early site of Allithwaite Quarry on the 10th June with the first Ringlet reported on the 18th June.

Little known Claife Heights [near Wray] hosted 45 SPBF, 50 Small Heath and 19 Painted Ladies on the 19th June....the same day Grayling and Dark Green Fritillary were first recorded on Whitbarrow. Large Heath reached a peak count of 50 on Meathop Moss the following day and on the 21st June while the Coppermines at Coniston saw 35 SPBF and 30 SH Barkbooth had its first 2 High Brown Fritillaries of the year. Wall had a 'goodish' year with 7 recorded at Holme Park Fell on 23rd June: the second generation usually does better and 42 were recorded at Bowness-on-Solway gravel pits on the 3rd August.

A single White-lettered Hairstreak [WLH] was spotted at Latterbarrow on the 24th June and by the 26th June Mountain Ringlet [MR] was putting in a good emergence at a number of the higher 'classic' sites.....116 were seen at Hartsop Dodd and two days later 384 were recorded at the same site.....along with 500 Small Heath [SH]. Despite this both MR and SH are under-recorded butterflies with large mountainous areas completely un-recorded. Other notable records for the day include 100 Meadow Brown at Latterbarrow 20 Grayling at Jack Scout [Silverdale], 20 NBA at Yewbarrow and 6 High Brown Fritillary at Barkbooth.

July 1st saw the first Silver-washed Fritillary at Brigsteer Woods, one of its favourite haunts, along with 65 Ringlet and 15 Large Skipper. The next day witnessed an 'explosion of butterflies' at Yewbarrow with 120 Dark Green Fritillary, 100 Painted Lady, 80 Ringlet, 80 Meadow Brown, 40 NBA, 20 Large Skipper, 10 Common Blue and a single Purple Hairstreak. On the 3rd July Myers Allotment [BC's only reserve in the NW] had 62 Ringlet, 50 Meadow Brown, 11 Painted Lady, 5 Speckled Wood and 2 Dark Green Fritillary and on the same day RSPB Hodbarrow recorded the first Gatekeeper. Grayling did well without reaching the heights of 2018: 30 were seen on Scout Scar and 56 on Whitbarrow on the 6th June.

It was also pleasing to see that after 2018 [when many WLH sites were discovered] this elusive and under-recorded butterfly did well during the first two weeks of July at known sites including the River Kent near Sedgwick, Oxenholme Station, Yealand Hall Allotment and sites near Penrith and Brampton. Ringlet numbers 'soared' [many Morecambe Bay sites hosted 30-130] but after 2018 it was especially pleasing to see Meadow Brown recover so well with North Cumbria leading the way: 125 were seen at St. Helen's near Flimby, 100 at West Beach Dunes near Silloth and 150 at Mawbray Banks [12th-15th June] with pride of place going to Bitterlees Beach, Silloth, with 200 on the 25th July.

Other notable July records include 38 Small Tortoiseshell seen at Faulds Brow, Caldbeck, on the 12th, 43 Gatekeeper on Walney Island on the 14th, 20 Purple Hairstreak at Flashbank, Brigsteer, on the 15th and the 68 Small Skipper on Kendal Fell reported on the 29th July. However the last days of July and early August were dominated by the Painted Lady [PL] 'invasion'....officially the 3rd biggest invasion since 1976 but, as this influx almost by-passed part of the south, possibly the biggest in the north?

This phenomenal migration amounted to many 100's of thousands and quite possibly millions.... and left Knapweed hillsides and Buddleia gardens smothered in beautiful butterflies. Numbers of PL started to build up rapidly and by the 29th August 33 were seen at Holehird Gardens, 36 at Ormsgill Slag Banks, 50 on Arnside Knott and 87 on Kendal Fell. On 31st July 107 PL were seen on Knapweed at St. Bees Head and on the next day 88 were on one patch of waste ground in Barrow, 120 in Old Park Wood near Holker and 235 during just 30 minutes recording on Kendal Fell.

On the 3rd August 300 PL were noted at Grizedale Forest and on the 8th August 137 were seen at Smardale Gill and 500 at Bullpot Farm on Casterton Fell. Even by the 25th August 145 PL were still to be seen at Smardale Gill with the greater surprise being that they were accompanied by an astonishing 520 Peacocks. With so many Painted Ladies and Peacocks [together Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell and Comma] now widespread and very visible it was wonderful to see so many people re-discover their child-hood delight at seeing beautiful butterflies close up and adorning their gardens and flower beds.

Three more species should be mentioned: Scotch Argus continued a worrying decline on Arnside Knott with only 14 seen there on the 30th July however the situation at Smardale Gill remained buoyant with over 450 seen there on the 8th August. Brown Hairstreak, including egg laying females, were seen quite regularly at Gait Barrows from the 8th August but in very low numbers. And finally there were several Clouded yellow singletons observed notably in the second and third week of September at Ormsgill, Foulney Island and at Pilling.

September was a disappointment with both weather and butterflies in marked contrast to most of the spring and summer. A strong showing of late Speckled Wood [SW] Red Admiral [RA] and Small Tortoiseshell [ST] helped maintain interest with 33 ST and 26 RA seen on the 17th September at Flookburgh and Leighton Hall respectively and on the following day 48 SW were reported from Halecat Woods. Red Admirals continued to brave the elements through October and with less success in November with the last being seen on the 19th December....just 'piped' by a Brimstone that was so disturbed from hibernation that it put on an appearance on the 30th December.

To sum up the weather of 2019 was most helpful, especially following 2018, but this special year cannot be fully explained by this alone. Professor Tom Brereton points to conservation through agri-environment schemes, increased woodland [and woodland management], increased grazing by wild animals [and conservation grazing] and a slowing in the rate of agricultural intensification as important contributory factors. He also notes that 'a number of 'Priority Species' [including DS,LH,SB and MF] that have been the focus of intensive conservation effort by BC and partners are no longer in long term population decline'.

I believe there is a positive message from this: many recorders are active conservationists and do not always see a short term response to their labours. After working your way through Hawthorn, Blackthorn and Bramble thickets it can be frustrating to see little improvement in butterfly numbers the following year! Yet the message must be that this work is vital: as the weather [and climate] change and the factors that Tom Brereton refers to become more important so our butterflies must have the opportunity to take advantage.