

# The butterflies of north and west London

Andrew Wood & Leslie Williams

This joint meeting with Butterfly conservation heard, firstly a presentation describing a tour through a fictional part of Middlesex recording every butterfly that occurs and comparing the situation now with that in the mid-1980s. In 1987, using records from 1980-86, reports were published on *The butterflies of the London area* and *The butterflies of Hertfordshire*. The presentation covered all London boroughs north of the Thames and west of the Lee Valley, which formerly formed parts of London, Hertfordshire and Middlesex. The area has a lot of very good habitats with a lot of green space including old cemeteries, brownfield sites and areas never built on such as parkland, woodland and farmland.

Beginning in the winter, the first butterfly on the wing would be the **Red admiral**, which probably winters in Britain and each year's butterflies are not all new immigrants as previously thought. It undergoes a diapause rather than hibernation, sheltering in ivy and other creepers and is active on warm winter days. It was fairly well distributed in the 1980s and is now more common virtually everywhere in north and west London.



**Red Admiral**



**Comma**



**Peacock**

In late February-early March, the **Comma** is the first of the true hibernators to emerge. It is active till late October-early November, feeding up for hibernation. Its distribution has not changed much, being common in the 1980s and common now.

At about the same time, the **Peacock** emerges. It is generally in hibernation by late August, hibernation being governed by day-length rather than temperature. It makes a noise by flapping its wings to deter predators when disturbed during hibernation. It was very common in the 1980s and is very common now.

The **Small tortoiseshell** also emerges now. It hibernates often in houses and is only active in winter if disturbed.

The **Brimstone** hibernates quite early in ivy and creepers and climbers. It had very few records in the 1980s but it is now well distributed in London.

All the butterflies above are on the wing by mid-March.

Early April sees the emergence of the **Orange tip**, easily recognised by the male's distinctive orange tips to its wings, while the female has black tips. It has moved further into the urban area since the 1980s.

The **Speckled Wood** likes shaded areas and flies throughout the summer. It had very much a western distribution in the 1980s with a large area where it was absent but there are now very few areas where it does not occur, probably due to woodland maintenance.

The **Holly Blue** is probably the most urban butterfly we have, with its food plants being holly and ivy. It was fairly scattered in the 1980s but now occurs pretty well everywhere.

Towards the end of April, the **Large White** is very common. There were few records in the inner urban area in the 1980s but it is now everywhere, possibly due to warmer temperatures and/or to park maintenance with less spraying.



**Speckled Wood**



**Small Tortoiseshell**



**Large White**

The **Small White** shows very little change in its distribution and is pretty well distributed.

The **Green-veined White** in the 1980s was absent in the urban centre but has now moved in, though there is a large gap in its distribution in the Barnet/Borehamwood area.

The **Small Copper** appears in May. It was not widely distributed in the 1980s. It is more common in the western half of the area now but has not really moved into the urban centre yet.

The **Brown Argus** was absent from north and west London in the 1980s but it is now more widely distributed in the west side of London. It is now a specialist of neglected areas where wild geraniums occur rather than a chalk specialist.

The **Small Heath** lives in relatively short grassland. It was not in the urban centre but well distributed elsewhere in the 1980s. Its distribution is now reduced but there are still some in the west and some in the north in the Trent Park area.

The **Common Blue** is pretty well distributed and shows little change in its distribution.

The **Green Hairstreak** had just scattered records in the 1980s. It has reappeared in the Hounslow area on Hounslow Heath and on brownfield sites such as a disused railway marshalling yard.

Now into the summer, the **Large Skipper** frequents long grass in hedgerows and woodland edges. It is still widespread but has declined in some areas.

The **Wall Brown** was widely distributed in the 1980s but declined in the 1990s, with 13% of its 1990 numbers in 1991, 4% in 1993 and 2% in 1995. There have been no records since 2000. It has also declined nationally.

The **Small Skipper** also frequents long grass in woodland edges and hedgerows. It has suffered a decline in population since the 1980s.

The **Essex Skipper** is fairly widespread but its population has declined.

The **Meadow Brown** is nationally probably the most common butterfly but its population has reduced. Adults emerge in mid-June so it is vulnerable to early cuts of meadows. It has had some decline due to loss of habitat.

The **Ringlet** frequents hedgerows and woodland glades. There were hardly any in the 1980s but it is now more widely distributed and becoming more common each year. The Welsh Harp has a well-established colony but only 2-3km to the west, the Fryent Country Park has very few.

The **Marbled White** was very rare in the 1980s but it is now more common in distinct colonies such as that at the Welsh Harp.

There were no **Purple Emperors** recorded in the 1980s but it is now moving into London. It is on the wing in early July. It had been recorded but there was some doubt attached to the records, though it is still in those areas. It is now clear that they are not as rare as we thought they were and

it is possibly becoming more common. It can be seen at the top of oak trees or on the ground sipping salt from animal faeces or urine.

The **White Admiral** is a woodland butterfly to be seen, for example in Ruislip Woods.

The **Silver-washed Fritillary** frequents woodlands and hedgerows. It is increasing but still fairly sparsely distributed.

The **Clouded Yellow** is a migrant from North Africa, which arrives in May-June. Its numbers vary from year to year but it has seen little change in its distribution.

The **Painted Lady** is another migrant from North Africa, covering up to 150km/day during its migration. It is now much more common. It is present every year but numbers fluctuate. Some years, such as 2009, have large numbers.

The **Purple Hairstreak** frequents large oak trees. It is probably under-recorded because monitoring is by transects in daytime and it flies in the evenings. There is a good population at Horsenden Hill and the Brent Reservoir.

The **White-letter Hairstreak** is dependent on elms. There is not a lot of information on it prior to the arrival of Dutch elm disease in the 1970s. There were a few recorded in the 1980s and it has recovered to a certain extent.

The **Gatekeeper** has moved into London since the 1980s. It is probably the most common garden butterfly in the Harrow area in August.

## Getting involved in butterfly conservation

Malcolm Hull

The Chair of the Hertfordshire and Middlesex Branch of Butterfly Conservation explained that the charity is almost 50 years old and the Hertfordshire and Middlesex Branch has over 1,000 members. It is great at recording and has run over 300 butterfly walks but it is not as good at activities, especially in London. He explained that there were a number of ways people could help, e.g. in recording, gardening for butterflies, walks and talks, getting involved with a site, education and publicity and being part of a team.

**Gardening for butterflies** – There are 3 elements to this aspect, namely:

- Nectar sources, such as buddleia, marjoram, hebe and sedum, with a need for seasonal continuity and can include pots or clumps;
- Caterpillar food plants such as garlic mustard, cabbage, holly, ivy and buckthorn; and
- Garden layout to include both sunny and sheltered areas.

**Walks and talks** – The Branch annual members day and annual general meeting is on 5 March 2016. Butterfly walks are advertised on the website throughout the season from late May to early September. There are also indoor talks and events. Together with the walks, these provide a great introduction to local sites and rarer species. All are welcome and there is no charge.

**Get to know a site near you** – Look at parks, woods and farms. What species are there? Who manages the site? What are the plans for its future? What can be done to make the site better for butterflies? As an illustration, he cited the example of Bricket Wood Common, a dilapidated woodland near St Albans, where, by negotiation they have established a ride 40 yards across and now a walk along it might reveal up to 20 species and possibly 500 butterflies in total. This is now one of the best sites in Hertfordshire for the Silver-washed Fritillary.

**Working for butterflies** – Volunteers are always welcomed to work on the reserves, such as Millhoppers Pasture near Tring, and to assist in managing butterfly sites and create new habitats.

**Education and publicity** – Much can be achieved by talking with friends, children and schools, taking part in the Big Butterfly Count (this involved 50,000 people nationwide last year) and helping at shows and festivals.

**Join the team** – Assistance is welcomed through membership, recording, organising events, the newsletter, website and social media, publicity and events and finance.

**What next?** – There is a huge amount that can be done and we cannot rely on others. A lot can be achieved with relatively little effort and working for butterflies is good for the soul.

For more information see [www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk](http://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk)