

Butterfly Numbers at the Howardian LNR 2012

2012 is the third year of butterfly monitoring: a butterfly/date grid that can be compared year by year.

2012 threatened to be a disastrous year for butterflies, with numbers for the first half of the year (January to June) down to only 40% of last year's numbers. For the first time I did not see a Brimstone, while the Small White and the Common Blue totalled less than a third of the numbers seen last year.

The weather overall was unusually wet, cold and windy for prolonged periods with very few butterflies out on the wing. But when we had a few days of good weather butterfly numbers shot up; this year several species recorded the highest number of individuals seen on one visit (Large White, Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell, Comma, Speckled Wood and Gatekeeper). The result of this was summer numbers (July to October) at 85% of last year's total, giving 70% of last year's numbers as the final figure.

The good news was a continuing steady recovery in the numbers of Small Tortoiseshells. All the Vanessids did well except for the Peacock which dropped by half and the Painted Lady (there were no invasions this year). The best news was an increase in the number of Large Skippers from 5 to 9, and the sighting by Roger G of the first Small Skipper for several years! Skippers like damp grass apparently, so no problems for them this summer.

The Small White numbers dropped suddenly from the 90s down to 30. Their numbers also dropped on the nearby allotments. The Large White only dropped from 39 to 34.

The loss of Common Blues, down to 3 from 15 last year and 75 in 2010, was the most worrying. There has been a decline nationwide and locally. In 2010 they were abundant at Cathays Cemetery, but I saw none at all there this year or last. Numbers are said to drop with hot dry summers when bird's foot trefoil dries out in scrubby places. On the Howardian perhaps their food plant might have been pushed out by taller, stronger vegetation in this very wet year.

I also monitor numbers in our garden, which is planted for butterflies. Here there was no drop in the total number. There was a dire 4 weeks in June/July with none at all, but an astonishing week in August with a record 9 species. There was no drop in Small White numbers and an increase in Large Whites; but together the Whites account for 63% of the butterflies in our garden compared with 17% on the Howardian. I see the colourful Vanessid butterflies earlier on the Howardian than in the garden: perhaps they breed on the reserve and come to the garden for nectar before hibernating or migrating. A reminder that all habitats are connected and our own small contributions make a difference!

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