

FINDING AND IDENTIFYING BUTTERFLIES AND DAY FLYING-MOTHS

Firstly thank you to Lesley for that amazing introduction last month; I will try to live up to her kind words. In the next few months I will attempt to introduce you to the more common butterflies and day-flying moths, you are likely to see when you are out and about, or if you are lucky, visiting your garden. I am not a scientist; any theories I have are based on observation and my logic (which may well be different to yours).

For each butterfly I have tried to indicate the best places to look, but nature is unpredictable so you may have to search an area more than once to find your quarry. The best days for butterfly hunting are sunny and still; early and late in the day will normally see butterflies less flighty and posing for photos. If I mention a food plant, this is what their caterpillars eat, so will be where the eggs are laid. I have described butterflies as either; Large, which have a 60-70 mm wingspan such as a Red Admiral, think 3 x 10p coins side by side, medium, which have a 40-50mm wingspan, such as a Speckled Wood, think 2x 10p coins side by side and small, which have a 25-35mm Wingspan such as a Common Blue, think 2 x 5p coins side by side.

Butterflies to see in March

The first 5 Butterflies to appear are those that hibernate over the winter in the adult (Imago) form; **Brimstone, Comma, Peacock, Red Admiral** and **Small Tortoiseshell**. When the temperature rises above 13°C they will start to emerge from the shelter of hedgerows, trees and outbuildings and take to the wing. This can be earlier than March if you get local 'hotspots' where the sun warms up an area, such as a hedgerow, above the magic number.

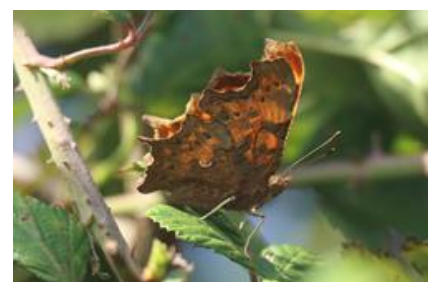
Brimstone (March to October)

A flash of yellow signals the arrival of the Brimstone. This medium-sized butterfly can be seen flying along verges, the edge of woodland, the churchyard and in gardens, as they hunt for nectar and a mate. The males (bottom Left) have the incredible brimstone yellow colour whilst the females (bottom right) are a pale green (almost white). They will always rest with their wings closed so are best identified by their distinctive leaf shape. Although they only produce one batch of young each year, they are a very long-lived butterfly, so can be seen for most of the year. Their food plant is buckthorn or alder buckthorn; the adults enjoy purple or mauve flowers. They are very fast fliers so you may only just catch glimpses of these yellow beauties.



Comma (March to October)

Named after the comma shaped white mark on the underwing (bottom left) rather than the distinctive ragged wing shape, this medium-sized butterfly is instantly recognisable. It uses Common Nettle, Elms, Hops and Willows as food plants so is often found around the edges of woodland; the adults aren't fussy and will nectar on a wide variety of flowers. Take a walk along the footpaths with hedges and wildflowers; they feed early in the morning and again in late afternoon and in between will spend their time hunting for a mate.



Peacock (March-October)

The beautiful colours of the Peacock (below) and their glorious eyespots are in stark contrast to the almost pure black underwing. This large butterfly will often be seen in gardens as well as along verges and hedgerows where they will feed and bask in the sun. They lay eggs on common nettles, you might want to consider a patch of nettles for them in your butterfly-friendly garden or Wild Space (more of that later). The adults will take nectar from a wide variety of plants, but you will often see them on Buddleia and Lavender.



Small Tortoiseshell (March to October)

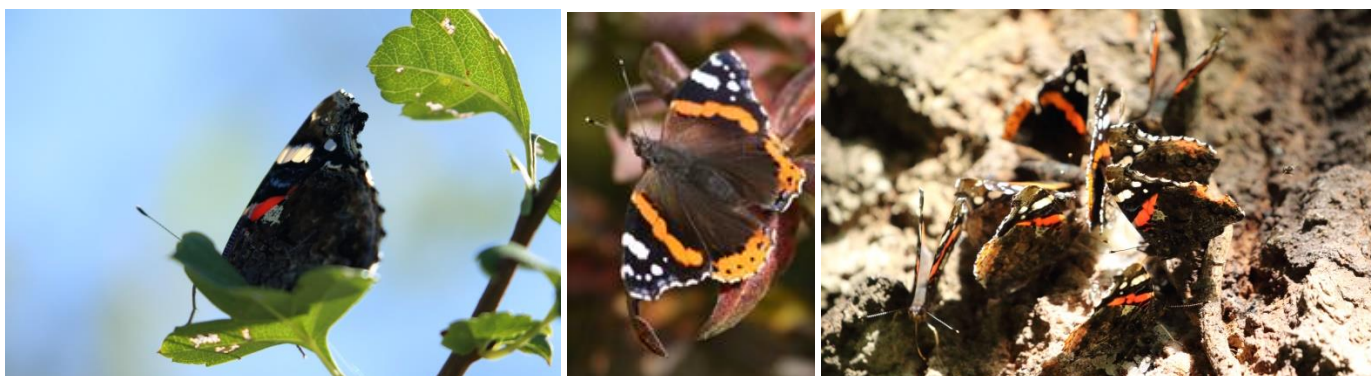
The Small Tortoiseshell (right), a medium sized butterfly, used to be a common sight in our countryside but have been on the decline for years now. Whilst climate change has a part to play a new species of parasitic fly called *Sturmia bella* was discovered in the 1990s. These flies lay their eggs on nettles which the caterpillars eat, the eggs then hatch inside the caterpillar and feast. Parasitic flies are common predators of butterflies and moths and the huge numbers in which insects reproduce normally allows for a balance to be struck eventually as it is never in the interests of a parasite to destroy the host species. However, the introduction of a new species inevitably knocks things out of kilter and it will take time for a balance to be struck or not – that's evolution I guess.

In case you were wondering, yes there is a Large Tortoiseshell but they are very rare visitors to these isles having become extinct in the last century. A few are spotted on the south coast each year but it is unknown whether these are migrants from Europe or are being released by local captive breeders. There are more conspiracy theorists in the butterfly world than you would imagine!



Red Admiral (March to October)

Although some successfully hibernate here, the majority of this large butterfly, migrate from mainland Europe each year. Those you see in March and April have overwintered here, from May onwards the migrants start to appear to lay their eggs on common nettles. With 4 out of the 5 early butterflies using the common nettle as their food plant, please bear this in mind the next time you are clearing 'weeds' and leave some - you won't regret it! The adults have a very sweet tooth and can be attracted to feed on rotting fruit. They will also feed on tree sap and can congregate in large numbers in the autumn around these food sources.



So those are the 5 to keep your eyes peeled for in March, if you like a bit of citizen science then why not download the 'I-Record butterflies' App if you want to find out more click [here](#) .

The other thing you can do is create your own little (or large) Wild Space, click [here](#) .

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