

### Butterflies and Nature Conservation

by Dr. John Pontin

*Dr. Pontin is an ecologist who advises the Preservation Society how to look after the Common. He has a special interest in ants and butterflies.*

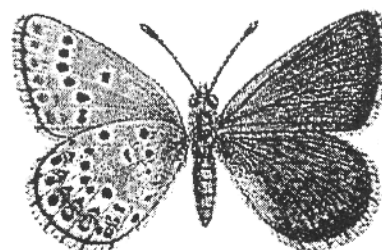
Brightly coloured birds and butterflies are obviously the most popular animals with young naturalists. In Britain our butterflies have been studied by amateurs for more than two centuries.

Butterflies can be split into two main groups and this decides which species are seen in gardens and numerous other habitats. Many such as the Small Tortoiseshell, Peacock, Holly Blue, Whites and Brimstone are wanderers and visit garden flowers and other sunny sites where there are suitable sources of nectar. Most of the others are restricted to unique habitats and very few wander off to start new colonies elsewhere. You will need to visit very special sites to see these. For example our most widespread woodland butterfly - the Speckled Wood - inhabits mature woodland where there are gaps in the overhead foliage so that it can occupy patches of sunlight near the ground. Males will often drive off others that try to enter their home patches. Our other woodland butterflies such as the Wood White and the Fritillaries live in less dense woods and are much rarer because forestry and clearance of woodland has made their special types of habitat rare.

The Silver Studded Blue lives on heathland and can often be seen on Horsell Common in late June and July. Like many other blue species its caterpillars like to live near ants and its chrysalids are found in the nests of the common black ants. These ants live in areas of soil or dead wood which is warmed by the sun so shading of heaths by invading trees makes this butterfly (and many other insect species needing high soil temperatures) extinct. The Large Blue actually became completely extinct in Britain because its grassy habitat became overgrown with the loss of grazing by rabbits and sheep. It was associated with a special ant living in very short turf where the butterfly caterpillars ate the very young ants. It has been successfully reintroduced from Europe. Therefore, in order to successfully conserve species, we may need to know quite complicated details of their biological requirements. We also need somewhere to get the appropriate butterflies if reintroduction is

#### Silver Studded Blue Butterfly

can be found on Horsell Common



Underwing

Upperwing

*Male has violet-blue upperwings with white border.*

*Female has brown upperwings.*

*Underwings of both sexes are grey with orange and black spots.*

necessary and so far we have failed to re-establish the Large Copper which was made extinct by drainage of the fens. The European Large Coppers are not quite able to survive unaided in our few fenland nature reserves.

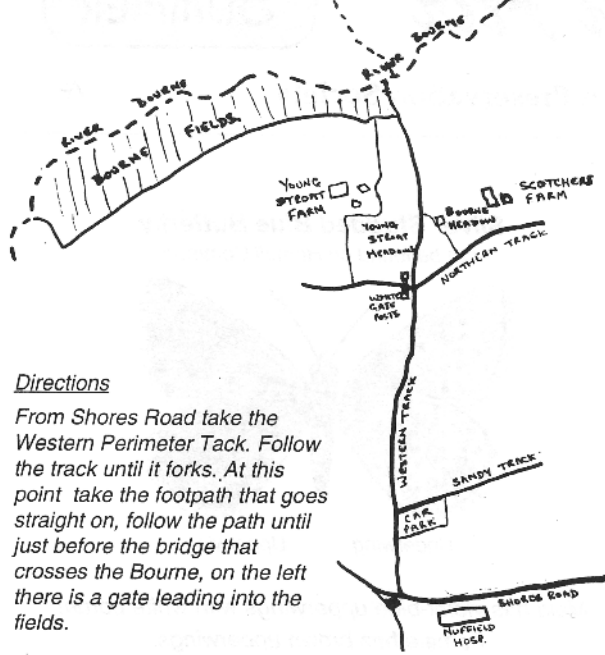
Wandering butterflies are also liable to extinction and this can be quite sudden and mysterious. The Large Tortoiseshell and the Black Veined White are examples which are now extinct in Britain, but not in Europe and we do not know how to re-establish them.

Not everything is gloomy however. Several wandering butterflies can fly long enough to immigrate from the continent, for example the Red Admiral, the Painted Lady and the Clouded Yellow. These can breed here, but their descendants usually try to return to the continent in the autumn - perhaps they will become more permanent residents with global warming. Several resident species are already extending their ranges further north including the Speckled Wood.

I recommend "The Butterflies of Britain & Ireland" by Jeremy Thomas and Richard Lewington (Dorling Kindersley 1991) for further reading about butterflies in general. There is also the Butterfly Conservation Society, PO Box 444, Wareham, Dorset BH20 5YA for those taking a serious interest in anything from garden recording to working parties on nature reserves.

*If you would like to see butterflies in your garden many garden centres sell seed packets of mixed flowers which are attractive to butterflies. Buddleia and Sedum are also some of their favourite plants.*

# Discover the Bourne Fields



## Directions

From Shores Road take the Western Perimeter Tack. Follow the track until it forks. At this point take the footpath that goes straight on, follow the path until just before the bridge that crosses the Bourne, on the left there is a gate leading into the fields.

The Bourne Fields are one of the more recent additions to Horsell Common. During the summer they are an excellent place to study wildlife.

The fields run beside the River Bourne. The river banks are one of the best places to see many different types of wild flowers. The flowers attract insects which in turn attract birds and small mammals.

If you follow the path that has been cut through the longer grass you can see changes in the types of plants that are growing in the meadow. The ground is much wetter in these areas. Flowers such as rushes and iris will grow in wet conditions where other plants would not survive.

Some of our most beautiful damsel and dragonflies, with bright blue, green and red bodies, can be seen skimming across the surface of the water. Ducks, Moorhen and other water fowl swim in the river and if you are very lucky you may even spot a Kingfisher.

## Flowers that can be found in the Bourne Fields



Meadow Buttercup glossy  
bright yellow flowers



Great Reedmace or  
Bulrush  
Tall around 2m grows in  
the river and banks



Germander Speedwell  
small bright blue flower  
with white circle in centre



Red Clover pink-purple  
flowers grows in the meadow

## Return of the cattle

During the summer months cattle will be grazed on Grasslands Common which is on the other side of the Littlewick Road to Horsell village. The Common has been fenced to stop the cattle from escaping. The animals will be allowed to eat the vegetation. This is an experiment to see if heathland can be recreated using the methods of 50-60 years ago.

The cattle are domesticated and docile so they should not bother you. If you walk your dog on this part of the Common please make sure that it does not worry the animals. The cattle will be taken away in October for the winter months.

### Poop and scoop

If you exercise your dog on the Common please be a responsible owner and clear up any mess that the dog makes and place it one of the containers provided. The problem appears to be worse in the areas around the car parks. Dog mess may be natural but it is just another form of pollution.