

Butterflies at Wheatfen

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The seasons at Wheatfen bring variety with butterflies as with other flora and fauna. Warm days in early March bring out overwintering peacock butterflies and brimstones visit the nodding daffodils that line the path to Home Dyke. The dense clusters of ivy throughout the reserve make ideal hibernation sanctuaries for the brimstone, and the abundance of buckthorn on which the female lays her eggs ensures this beautiful insect thrives here.

By the middle of March, on a sunny day, commas and tortoiseshells can be seen seeking nectar plants and basking on the emerging lush new growth.

The re-emergence of these butterflies is always welcome and shows the grip of winter has eased, but the appearance of the distinctive male orange tip is, for me, the true symbol of spring. He is followed about a week later by the female who has grey, rather than orange tips to her wings but the underside of both have exquisite camouflaged hindwings.

As April brings warmth, nectar and longer days, speckled wood, green-veined white, small white and holly blue can all be seen on a walk around the reserve.

The migrants arrive in May. Red admiral, and usually later in the month, the beautiful salmon-pink and black painted lady. The timing of their arrival depends on the winds from North Africa and Europe. Some years see huge numbers of these lovely insects arriving early and their numbers are swelled by the next generation eggs being laid on thistle and mallow.

June brings the jewel in Wheatfen's crown – the emergence of the swallowtail. The reserve is carefully managed to ensure milk parsley can flourish and eggs can often be found to show visitors on Swallowtail Day, mid way through the month. The sight of these stunning butterflies gliding over the reedbed searching for the yellow flag irises which grow in profusion on Four Acres is a memory taken away by many visitors.

The browns and skippers begin to emerge later in June, with meadow brown and large skipper leading the way, followed by ringlet, small skipper and gatekeeper.

Another very special butterfly at Wheatfen is the white admiral, which has benefited from coppicing to open up an area of Surlingham Wood, allowing honeysuckle and bramble to flourish. Good numbers can be seen soaring high into the canopy before gliding down to the bramble blossom or to bask on the leaves of the cascading honeysuckle. The underside of both male and female is particularly beautiful with orange patterning and strong white banding.

A colourful scene greets visitors who walk along Smee Loke in mid July. The path is lined with pink hemp agrimony flowerheads which become alive with peacock, small tortoiseshell, red admiral and painted lady, sharing the flowers with bees and hoverflies.

In the reedbeds, milk parsley plants are being chewed by fat, maturing swallowtail caterpillars. They will shortly pupate before emerging again in August to give another spectacular display, often coming to the garden to feed on knapweed. Occasional species seen this month have included the wall butterfly, purple hairstreak and clouded yellow, making a total for the reserve of more than 20 species.

The butterflies of this lovely place are just one very good reason to enjoy walks around the reserve.