

### **The butterflies of Cranford Country Park**

There are around 60 species of butterfly in the UK, with 31 of those recorded within the county of Middlesex and 26 of those 31 recorded at Cranford CP.

I volunteer for the UKBMS (UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme) The first recording at Cranford CP was in 1999 and I took over from Alison Shipley in August 2016.

As part of my monitoring I follow a set route every walk. This is known as a transect. The Cranford Park transect consists of nine sections which cover a variety of habitat from woodland to meadow to scrub, and which takes me from the M4 wall, alongside the orchard, through the ancient woodland, through meadow land, through the cattle paddock and along the River Crane and Frogs Ditch. At the end of each section I record how many butterflies were seen, the species, the amount of sunshine, wind direction and temperature.

All of this information is entered on the UKBMS website, and their recording team can then gather information on highs and lows, and identify any decline in numbers.

Sadly I have spotted quite a large decline in the numbers seen at Cranford Park. If you look at the average yearly table below, you will see my concern. I have chosen a similar date for each year for easy comparison.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Total numbers</b>	<b>Total species</b>	<b>Most prolific</b>
08/07/2017	223	10	Meadow Brown
08/07/2018	234	10	Small/Essex Skipper
04/07/2019	230	14	Meadow Brown
07/07/2020	92	11	Large White
02/07/2021	69	9	Meadow Brown

I am assuming the decline is due to Covid. During 2020 the park was extremely busy during lockdown, with many new visitors using the park for exercise. The long grass meadow areas were invariably trodden down, there were more dog walkers, joggers and cyclists. These may have impacted on the butterflies food plants and where they would normally lay their eggs. I am looking forward to seeing the final figures for 2022, and hope that there will be an increase.

My UKBMS mentor, Paul Busby, suggests the very mild 2020 spring weather was probably the cause for the steep decline in numbers. The dry spring may have dried out the grasses that these butterflies larva would normally feed on.

The Herts & Middx 2020 report shows that across the county the Meadow Brown was down by 73% compared to 2014-2019 records, Ringlet numbers were down by 43% and Speckled Wood down by 36%

During my years doing the transect, there has also been some good news ....

The lovely delicate Ringlet butterfly was first recorded in Middlesex in 2004. From 2010 onwards there were more frequent sightings in the county. 2019 was a fantastic year for Ringlets at Cranford Park, but sadly I recorded none in 2020 and 2021. They were very prolific around the orchard area, but I do not know why they have disappeared from there.

The Small Heath butterfly is very small and dainty. They used to only be seen in selected pockets around the county, but the population at Cranford Park has grown each year. They seem to prefer the end of the cattle paddock nearest to Cranford Lane.

The elusive White-letter Hairstreak has been recorded at Cranford Park in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2015 and 2017, and the even more elusive Purple Hairstreak was recorded in 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2019. A dry hot summer seems to bring these haristreak species down from their preferred habitat, which is in the tree canopies. The rarer Brown Hairstreak has never been recorded at Cranford, but they have been seen in nearby Yeading Brook. The more common Green Hairstreak has also not been recorded at Cranford but they are often seen in Ickenham and at Hounslow Heath.

A single Silver-washed Fritillary was recorded by Alison in 2006. This large handsome butterfly has a very distinctive flight, that can only be described as fast and gliding. I recorded a single one in 2018, and was delighted to record another solo one this year. They appear to enjoy the buddleias that grow profusely along the M4 wall.

We get three varieties of Skipper at Cranford. The Large Skipper, Small Skipper and the Essex Skipper. The Small and the Essex look identical, but the Essex has black tipped antennae, which sometimes cannot be seen in flight and I often only realise after I have taken photos. Their numbers have stayed relatively the same since 2016.

We have had sightings of the pretty Painted Lady butterfly at Cranford, but always of solo butterflies and usually during a year when there has been an influx of this migratory species across the UK.

Cranfords most prolific butterfly species has to be the Meadow Brown. I not only see them in the meadow and cattle paddock but also nectaring on bramble and dog roses. They are a fairly drab brown in colour and only when they rest with their wings open, can you identify if they are male or female. Males are almost completely brown with two eye spots, and the females have a splash of orange on their upper wings.

The ancient bluebell woods are very popular with Brimstone, Holly Blue and Speckled Wood butterflies. The Holly Blue has two flushes each season. The first flush prefers Holly, and the second flush prefers Ivy. Speckled Woods are very territorial and you can often see a pair spiralling in the air in the dappled shade of the woodland edges.

