

## The SWOG guide to woodland butterflies and the plants which may attract them to your wood

This simple guide will allow you to recognise the species of butterfly which may potentially be found in your wood, or encouraged to move in through wildlife-friendly management. The list of butterflies which are present, or that could be tempted to set up home, will depend to some extent upon where your wood is situated, and to a greater extent upon the condition of your woodland.

Butterflies are excellent indicators of habitat health; the more butterflies you have (in terms of both their abundance and the number of species present), the healthier your wood is. If butterflies are thriving you can be sure that the wider fauna and flora is in good shape too.

A list of the caterpillar foodplants is provided for each species, together with some notes on their habitat preferences. Butterflies can be surprisingly good at seeking out new areas which are suitable for breeding, so by providing the right conditions there is every chance that a wider variety can be attracted to your wood.

The more you do, both in terms of general woodland management (which essentially means letting plenty of sunlight into a network of open spaces), and the provision of suitable conditions for each species, the more enthusiastically the butterflies will reward your efforts.

Some general advice is also given on nectar plants, which provide food for the adult butterflies.

### **Grizzled Skipper**

Caterpillar foodplants: Wild Strawberry, Creeping Cinquefoil, Agrimony, Tormentil, Salad Burnet and the succulent shoots of Bramble.

Notes: An uncommon, springtime species which requires wide, regularly cut rides or coppiced areas providing warm, dry conditions.



### **Small Skipper**

Caterpillar foodplants: Yorkshire-fog and occasionally other species of grass.

Notes: This grassland species will only inhabit woods with significant amounts of open space, such as large glades and wide rides.



## Large Skipper

Caterpillar foodplants: Cock's-foot grass.

Notes: A widespread species flying throughout the summer, favouring more humid conditions in lush woodland rides and glades.



## Orange-tip

Caterpillar foodplants: Cuckooflower and Garlic Mustard.

Notes: This widespread, springtime species prefers those damper, humid woodlands where its caterpillar foodplants grow in abundance.



## Green-veined White

Caterpillar foodplants: Garlic Mustard and Cuckooflower.

Notes: This widespread species prefers those damper, humid woodlands where its caterpillar foodplants grow in abundance. It flies in at least two broods each year, in springtime and again in high summer.



## Brimstone

Caterpillar foodplants: Purging Buckthorn on chalky soils and Alder Buckthorn on more acidic soils.

Notes: This nomadic species hibernates as an adult butterfly and can be seen at almost any time of the year. Leave Ivy growing on at least some of your trees; this is where the Brimstone and other insects spend the winter.



## Speckled Wood

Caterpillar foodplants: Common grasses including False Brome, Cock's-foot, Common Couch and Yorkshire-fog.

Notes: This is a highly shade-tolerant species which can live in even overgrown, under-managed woods.



## **Ringlet**

Caterpillar foodplants: Common grasses including Cock's-foot, False Brome, Tufted Hair-grass, Common Couch and Smooth Meadow-grass.

Notes: At home in both more open and semi-shaded woodland habitats. It prefers damp, humid conditions. The Ringlet will fly even on overcast days.



## **Meadow Brown**

Caterpillar foodplants: A wide variety of grasses, with medium- and fine-leaved species being favoured.

Notes: Usually the most common species seen over wide areas of the countryside and present in the rides and glades of almost all woods. It flies from June until October.



## **Gatekeeper**

Caterpillar foodplants: A wide variety of medium- and fine-leaved grasses, including various species of fescue, bent and meadow-grass.

Notes: This species can occur in high numbers in shrubby woodland clearings through July and August.



## **Marbled White**

Caterpillar foodplants: Red Fescue and a variety of other species of grass.

Notes: This grassland species will only inhabit woods with significant amounts of open space, such as large glades and wide rides.



## **Pearl-bordered Fritillary**

Caterpillar foodplants: Common Dog-violet.

Notes: A demanding species which requires the annual coppicing of Hazel on a minimum four year cycle.



### **Silver-washed Fritillary**

Caterpillar foodplants: Common Dog-violet.

Notes: The males need wide, sunny rides to patrol, but the females lay their eggs on tree trunks within shady woodland edges.



### **White Admiral**

Caterpillar foodplants: Honeysuckle.

Notes: A uncommon but quite widespread species which lays its eggs along semi-shaded woodland edges.



### **Purple Emperor**

Caterpillar foodplants: Goat Willow and hybrid sallows.

Notes: An arboreal species which lays its eggs within the crowns of semi-shaded sallows, which are usually found in the damper, lower-lying parts of a wood.



### **Red Admiral**

Caterpillar foodplants: Common Nettle and Small Nettle; Hop and Pellitory-of-the-wall are occasionally used.

Notes: A mainly migrant species which is common in some years. Eggs may be laid on even small patches of nettles.



### **Peacock**

Caterpillar foodplants: Common Nettle and Small Nettle.

Notes: A widespread and common species which hibernates as an adult and emerges from the chrysalis in late July and August. Eggs are laid on large, sunny patches of nettle.



### **Small Tortoiseshell**

Caterpillar foodplants: Common Nettle and Small Nettle.

Notes: This species can be assisted by cutting back mature nettle beds in the last week of May or first week of June, to promote succulent growths in advance of the late June abundance peak.



### **Comma**

Caterpillar foodplants: Nettles, Hop and occasionally Blackcurrant.

Notes: A highly mobile and widespread species. It is most at home along sunny woodland edges, rides and glades.



### **Brown Hairstreak**

Caterpillar foodplants: Blackthorn (sloe), although other species of *Prunus* are sometimes used, including Bullace (damson) and ornamental plums.

Notes: The *Prunus* growing along sunny woodland edges and rides should be coppiced on a three or four year rotation to assist this localised and uncommon species.



### **Purple Hairstreak**

Caterpillar foodplants: Oaks (English, Turkey, Sessile Oak, Evergreen).

Notes: Most active after 6pm on sunny July and August evenings, when it can be spotted flitting around the tree canopy.



### **White-letter Hairstreak**

Caterpillar foodplants: Wych Elm, English Elm and other elms, including Dutch Elm Disease-resistant cultivars such as the excellent, fast-growing 'Nanguen' (marketed under the name LUTECE).

Notes: An under-recorded and elusive arboreal species, flying from late June to August.



## Holly Blue

Caterpillar foodplants: Holly and Dogwood in the spring; Ivy in the summer and autumn.

Notes: Holly trees also provide food for birds in winter. Leave Ivy growing on at least some of your trees.



## Common Blue

Caterpillar foodplants: Common Bird's-foot Trefoil and occasionally Greater Bird's-foot Trefoil, Lesser Trefoil, Horseshoe Vetch, Black Medick, Common Restharrow and clovers.

Notes: This grassland species will only inhabit woods with significant amounts of open space, such as large glades and wide rides.



## Nectar plants for adult butterflies

The guide above includes a list of the caterpillar foodplants, which must be present in a wood if those species are to breed and become resident there. However, adult butterflies also require an abundance of food, to fuel their energetic lives. Although other sources of sustenance are sometimes sought out, such as the 'honeydew' produced by aphids, this generally means nectar.

Whereas the caterpillars of each species are restricted to one or a generally small group of foodplants, the adults are less fussy, collecting nectar from any flowers available. The variety of nectar plants on offer will change throughout the year, and to a great extent on how well-managed a wood is.

In late winter and early spring, when nectar is in short supply, the flowers of willow ('Pussy Willow') are important, providing food for those species which are waking after hibernating as an adult butterfly. Early season flowers soon start to increase in number and variety, including Bugle, dandelions and Bluebell. By summer the choice is usually much greater, with plants such as thistles, Wild Privet, umbellifers, Fleabane and Ragwort providing nectar in abundance.

The most important source of summer nectar in woodland is the much-maligned Bramble. A stand of flowering Bramble may be smothered in butterflies at the height of summer, and the blackberries will feed a host of butterflies, other insects, small mammals and birds in the autumn.

While Bramble provides a vital resource for wildlife, its presence will often come at a price. By letting more sunlight penetrate, which is essential in creating a healthy and vibrant woodland environment, Bramble may grow out-of-control, unless kept in check. The management burden imposed should be seen as the trade-off for creating a beautiful wood bursting with life.