

BUTTERFLIES OF ALEXANDRA PALACE PARK 2024 – A BRIEF REPORT

It is recommended to read this report in conjunction with three Spreadsheets:

- 1) The First and Last annual sightings of butterflies in the Park from 2019 to 2024.
- 2) Butterfly Conservation Transect sightings by Dee Cullen for AP Park 2024.
- 3) BC Transect sightings by Dee Cullen for AP Park's Anthill Meadow 2019-2024.

Nationally, 2024 was an alarming year with a significant drop in butterfly numbers. The BC's "Big Butterfly Count in the summer recorded the lowest numbers in the 14-year history of the scheme. The reasons for this are complex, but a main factor has been the weather over recent years following droughts in 2022 and then in 2024 the UK's wettest spring since 1986. And extremes of weather affect the abundance of critical food plants and the ability of the butterflies to breed successfully.

This lack of butterflies was also very evident in the Ally Pally Park with the late appearance of species overwintering as adults - Red Admiral, Peacock, Brimstone, Small Tortoiseshell and Comma. Fortunately, the Easter weekend at the end of March was warm and sunny and at last good numbers of butterflies were seen - but then cooler and showery weather returned in April with sightings again reduced. Even a mini heatwave in the second week of May failed to bring out the butterflies – and this trend continued to the end of June when hot and sunny days welcomed high numbers of our meadow species especially Meadow Brown and then Gatekeeper.

- 1) Dee Cullen's transect recordings at the Park from the beginning of April to the end of September show a fall of 19% in butterfly numbers in 2024 compared to 2023. And in the specific butterfly 'hot spot' area of Anthill Meadow a 21% fall in numbers.
- 2) In total 27 species were recorded in the Park, with only three species not seen – the one-off sightings of Long-tailed Blue and Green Hairstreak from 2021 - together with Silver-washed Fritillary, of which one or two are usually seen annually.
- 3) The Big Event though was undoubtedly the first recorded Purple Emperor butterfly on July 27th, on the racecourse path (presumably taking salts) near to the Conservation pond. Spotted and photographed by Helen Bantock (a moth specialist) but not relocated thereafter – in spite of the best detective efforts of Henry Wyn-Jones and others. This was a hoped-for event, as there have been regular sightings of Purple Emperors at nearby Hampstead Heath over the past 10 years. Add to that the fact that (male) PE's are often found flying at the tops of oak trees and their larval plant are Sallows – both of which are present in that area of the AP Park. We have to be on the lookout again in 2025!
- 4) There must be real concerns as to whether the Park can sustain what have become 'rare' species – Small Heath, Brown Argus, Ringlet and White-letter Hairstreak. And shockingly only one Small Tortoiseshell butterfly was seen on April 1st in spite of the abundance of nettles in the park – a feed plant for their caterpillars.

- 5) The 'Losers' in 2024 with significantly smaller numbers observed included Small Whites, Holly Blues, Speckled Woods, Gatekeepers, Small Coppers, Purple Hairstreaks and Red Admirals
- 6) There were only a couple of 'Winners' with extra numbers of Marbled and Green-veined Whites observed.
- 7) Of the remaining species, the numbers were generally as expected – Skippers, Meadow Browns, Brimstones, Comma etc. 2024 was a strange year for Common Blues with very few seen from early June until numbers increased in August.
- 8) Gratifying that the Park's hotspot in 2024 was the Anthill Meadow which regularly held the most butterflies and where 21 of the 27 species were observed. This was surely due in part to the sterling efforts of the AP Park Friends' work parties in clearing areas of brambles and planting new wildflowers. By comparison, the 'upper meadows' towards Blandford Hall were relatively quiet. And in spite of the old, tall vegetation being cut back in spring, the new scrubby plant growth behind the cricket club car park did not attract many butterflies – and ditto the northern perimeter of the cricket pitch...

Finally, the Friends have recently commissioned advice from Butterfly Conservation on the future management of Anthill Meadow to best serve the needs of the Park's vibrant but fragile butterfly communities. We look forward to enjoying the fruits of this advice in the years to come.

Information compiled by Tony Jakeman, Dee Cullen, Gerry Rawcliffe, Markus Percic, Stephen Middleton and Greg Smith.