

Painted ladies and other butterflies



I hope that most people saw something of the spectacular invasion of Painted Lady butterflies at the end of May 2009. The national organisation Butterfly Conservation described it as the most amazing for decades, but for me it was a lifetime event.

Painted Ladies are large, sandy-brown butterflies with white spotted wing tips. They breed in North Africa, but each year numbers move north. They may stop to breed in southern Europe and later in the year the progeny from there arrives in UK. And so they are always around in late summer, but uncommon enough to notice. This year they had such a spectacular breeding success in the North African Atlas Mountains that millions moved north – and kept going.

I thought it interesting to see a few at Pagham Harbour on Saturday 23 May, but no distinct migration at the time of observation (early evening). But on the Sunday I was aware of large numbers moving north through Plumpton. On the Bank Holiday Monday and the following Tuesday there were very large numbers moving north up Station Road (up to eight visible together across a short stretch of road), some stopping (eg. up to five on a one foot square patch of chives in flower in the garden) but most moving rapidly north. These were the peak two days.

Wednesday was a cold miserable day and nothing happened. On Thursday 28 May there was again some movement north, but distinctly less marked. And Friday was similar in Plumpton, but I was in Ashdown Forest in the morning, where there was still pretty impressive movement – probably over 100 seen in two hours, many resting or feeding, but good numbers still migrating more or less north. On Saturday 30 May there was very little movement in Plumpton but during a timed bird survey in East Chiltington from 9.30–11.30 I noted about five apparently migrating and 17 hanging around feeding and resting (seven in one spot). Since then they have been around but in small numbers, not migrating, and mainly rather tatty individuals.

I don't think a real measure of the invasion has been compiled yet, but they arrived across the length of the south coast and reached the Shetland Islands. There were suggestions of four or so million Painted Ladies arriving in Britain.

Another spectacular butterfly locally is the White Admiral. This is a large, glossy blue-black butterfly with big white patches in the wings that sweeps around the edges of woodland and in dappled glades. I hadn't really appreciated that it occurs in our area until I saw one on the broad bridleway through Warningore Wood on 21 June. My local Butterfly Conservation contact hadn't yet seen one this year. So I went back on 26 June to find plenty displaying up and down the ride. This species has been spreading, as perhaps has the Marbled White, also seen here and elsewhere locally. This is a distinctive, more white than black butterfly, with a stronghold on the Downs, and possibly an increasing number of colonies found inland. It occasionally arrives in our garden (it likes meadows with long grass!).

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