

## robpartridge

by robpartridge, 24-Mar-14 05:07 PM GMT

Monday the 24th of March, 2014 – a bright day after one of the sharpest frosts of the year, and even in the early afternoon the southerly wind has a bite to it. I've already had small tortoiseshells and peacocks in the garden on and off since February but thought it was time to have a look at the countryside.

If you can call it that... There are many diaries about species-rich places. I read them and marvel at the range of butterflies some people have on their doorsteps (and the stunning pictures that they take of them), whereas I live in a small fenland village, surrounded by vast acreages of flat, arable fields. Nowhere that I visit on a regular basis is managed for butterflies – they have to fend for themselves out here. Most of the places are marginal habitats, always under some sort of threat – development in the case of the old airfield, mechanical destruction of hedgerows on an apparently random basis, mowing of footpath edges and road verges, horses and off-road vehicles damaging the droves and paths that support tiny populations of species that are common in more friendly countryside. I thought it might be interesting to keep a diary about such places, if only so that we can appreciate the others more fully!

Brick Lane is an old footpath of about half a mile in length, running east to west. One side has a thick and varied hedge; up to two years ago so did the other side but then the farmer decided to remove it, and most of the trees as well. Locals were very annoyed as it's a popular dog-walking venue but, ironically, the increase in light has improved it for butterflies except for the speckled wood which used to be common here but was not seen last summer.

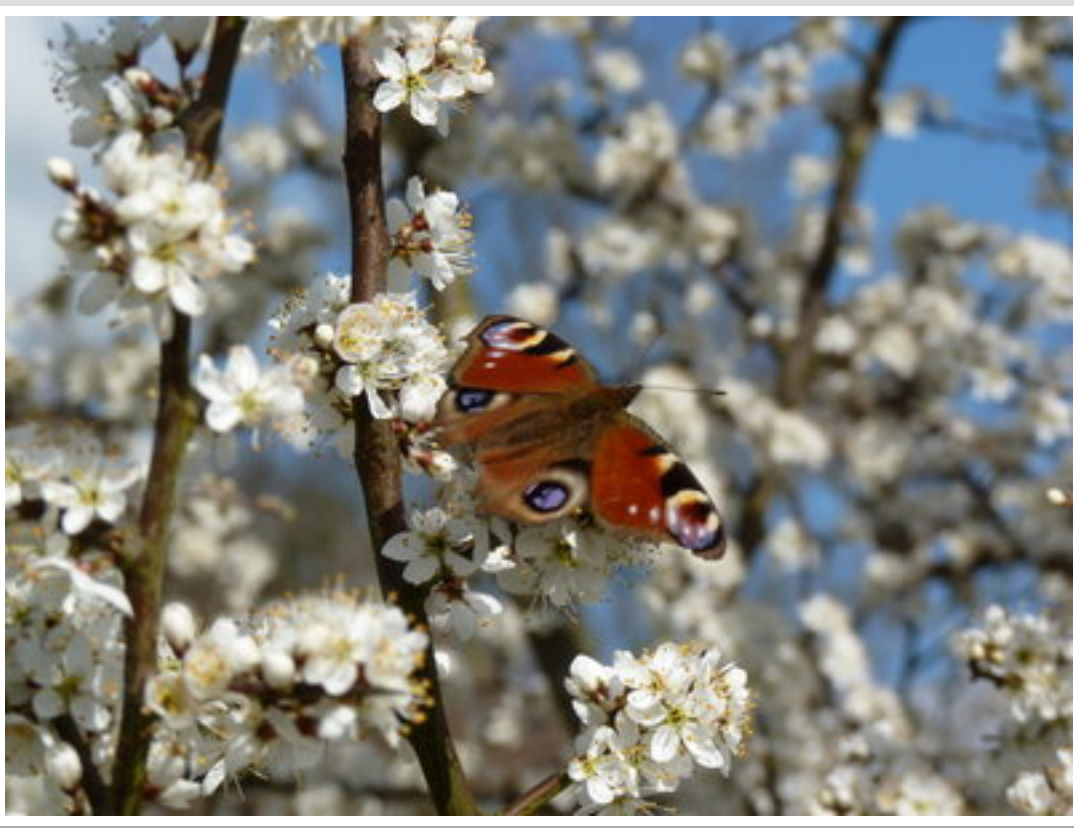
Today, just two each of peacock and small tortoiseshell were present on Brick Lane, and only the former posed for pictures. The one on the ground sat for a long time in the sun but with wings closed; it cannot have been too hot, so why do they do this?



*Brick Lane*



*Brick Lane, Mepal 24/03/2014 – sunbathing with closed wings*



*Brick Lane, Mepal 24/03/2014*

Brick Lane leads to the Gault Holes. This old clay pit forms one of the few deviations in the banks of the Ouse Washes, famous for their breeding waders (or they used to be) and winter wildfowl. The edges are managed by the EA but still provide a good selection of common species in summer.



*The Gault Holes*

South of the village is a long-disused second world war airfield. It has been partially developed for industrial use but much open land remains. However, eventually it is likely to disappear under housing. It has huge numbers of the common rough grassland species.



*The old airfield, Mepal. Lancasters flew from here.*

It was cold and windy up here. Three small tortoiseshells and a lone peacock were sheltering in the verges, warming up on the stones that road-mending companies store here:



*Out of the wind*



*The need for warmth outweighs camouflage*

Just the two species today... If this first posting actually works, I must give credit to Peter and his instructional videos, and if it doesn't, he is in no way to blame! My respects to all the diarists whose pages I have enjoyed without realising how much work goes into it,

Rob

### **Re: robpartridge**

by Pauline, 24-Mar-14 05:18 PM GMT

Great start to your diary Rob. Looking forward to reading more of it as the weather warms up and the year progresses.

### **Re: robpartridge**

by Maximus, 24-Mar-14 08:51 PM GMT

Nice start to your diary Rob, you've set the scene, now I'm interested to see how things unfold.

Mike

### **Re: robpartridge**

by robpartridge, 25-Mar-14 08:58 AM GMT

Many thanks to Pauline and Maximus for the comments. Having read your diaries, there is plenty to live up to. I have a pretty limited range of species in the areas around my village that I'm planning to write about, so I'm hoping that they will do some interesting things this summer to make up for that. I have to say that the opportunities the site gives us to create albums and diaries are inspiring – a model for how such things should be done,

Rob

### **Re: robpartridge**

by MikeOxon, 25-Mar-14 01:15 PM GMT

Your writing brings the place to life! I look forward to seeing more. I believe that Thor missiles were deployed at Mepal (strange name) – hard to believe when you see the peaceful fields now.

Mike

## Re: robpartridge

by Neil Freeman, 25-Mar-14 09:16 PM GMT

Hi Rob,

Great start to your diary, its always interesting to read about peoples experiences from different places, looking forward to further posts.

cheers,

Neil.

## Re: robpartridge

by Wurzel, 26-Mar-14 12:34 AM GMT

Great start to the PD Rob - I'm really looking forward to reading about what turns up as that's the great thing about nature - you never know 😊

Have a goodun

Wurzel

## Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 26-Mar-14 09:10 AM GMT

Thanks to all for the recent, encouraging comments. Like everyone else, I'm impatiently waiting for some more sunshine after those tantalising few days of spring. The weekend should be warmer if still somewhat cloudy here in the east; time to get the moth trap out again, at least.

Mike, Mepal is indeed an unusual name. We have our own short entry in Wikipedia, which explains it thus - "*Listed as Mepahala at the start of the 13th century, the village's name means "Nook of land of a man called Meapa."* That means that there has been a settlement on this isle in the Isle of Ely for at least 900 years. It would be fascinating to know the full story of how the butterfly fauna has changed in that time but I am certain that Swallowtails and Large Coppers once flourished at the bottom of my garden,

Rob

## Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 29-Mar-14 05:23 PM GMT

Proper sunshine at last after some rather dismal weather all week, and a chance to continue the opening tour around the parish before the season really gets underway. The old airfield is on a slight hill, and one of the paths leading away and down from it is The Rushway. The name is thought to originate from a time when most of the fen villages were islands and the practice of going down into the fens to harvest reeds and sedges was an annual event in late summer or autumn before the water levels rose again - this was probably one of the pathways they used. Nowadays it is wide enough only for a couple of walkers and thick blackthorn hedges have taken hold in some sections; it receives little management other than an occasional mowing and even more occasional scrub clearance. Nevertheless, in terms of numbers of species, the half a mile track is the best site in the parish because in addition to all the common things, the few scattered oaks support Purple Hairstreaks and the belt of regenerated elm at the northern end usually has White-letters. When I first discovered these two species less than a quarter of a mile from my house, I was walking on air for days and it is still a thrill to see the first ones each season.



*The Rushway*



*The Rushway, a slightly more open section*

Turning east off The Rushway today, I crossed two fields; the first is intensively cropped but the rape last year was attractive to Large Whites. Then one crosses a recently sown grass field that is cut once or twice a year for silage – hostile country for butterflies.



*Heavy land but two fields to the left is black peat*



*A green desert – rye-grass*

Once onto the Widdens drove, there are butterflies at last. The combination of a drainage dyke, drove-way and hedge is quite common in parts of the Isle of Ely; the variation they offer makes them a magnet for all local wildlife, and a few have been given some limited protection. Most are still used by farmers for access to fields and they can become impassable in winter. However, the bare ground that results makes them surprisingly reliable for Wall Browns.



*Widdens drove – the south-facing bank is a good spot for browns and skippers*

Almost nothing was staying still for photographs despite counting 20 Small Tortoiseshells, 11 Peacocks and 3 Brimstone males along the drove. Finally a Small T took pity on me:



*Pleased to see so many of these*

My wife and I have watched badgers and recorded their setts for more than twenty years. When we moved here it was easy – there were only three setts known to anyone locally. In that time, numbers have increased quite dramatically, and we found several dung pits in a gateway of the drove, about half a mile from home.

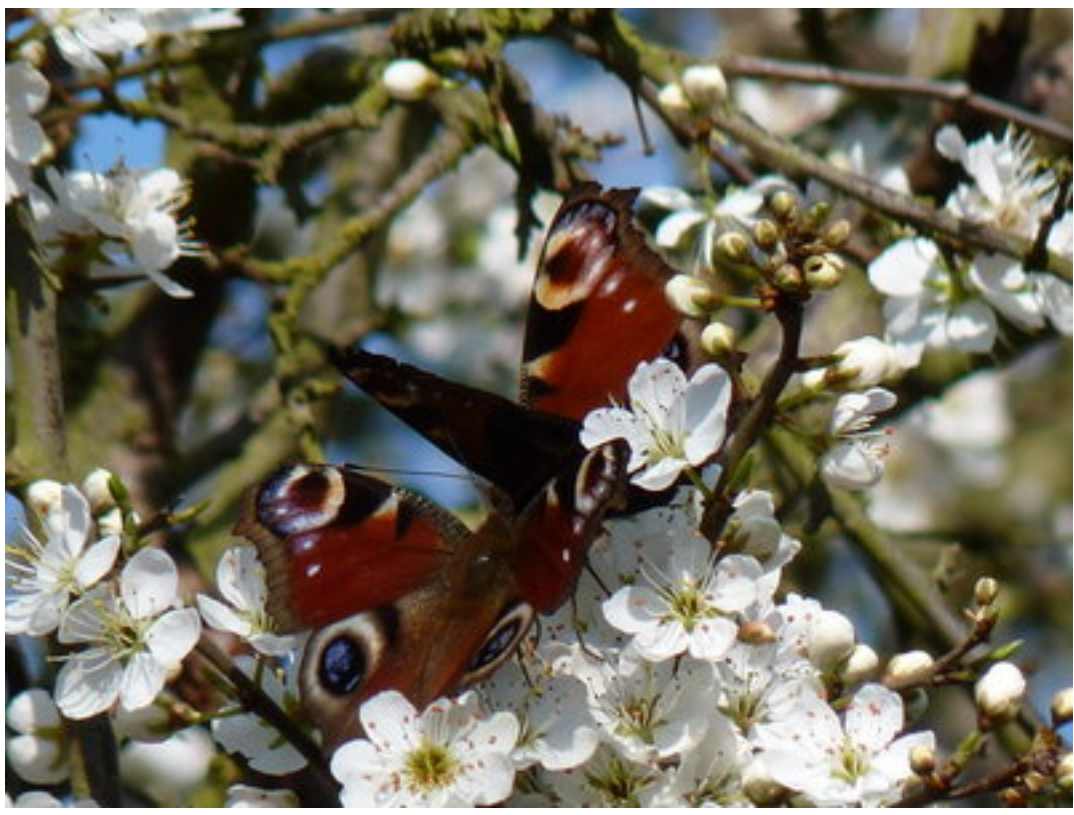


*Gateways often mark the edges of badger territories*

Back on The Rushway and nearly home, we finally had a chance of a good photograph. These two Peacocks were behaving in amorous fashion up amongst the sloe blossom; they made several short flights together before returning to the bush. After enjoying the spectacle, we left them to it.



*Romance in a romantic spot*



*We left them to it...*

The Millenium Atlas made much of the fact that our wider countryside species are able to survive in linear habitats, and that is entirely the case with the areas that I have described so far, apart from the grassland on the airfield. Everything has to live on the edge here.

### **Re: robpartridge**

by Chris Jackson, 29-Mar-14 06:22 PM GMT

Nice photos and comments Rob. What a lovely place to live in.  
Chris.

### **Re: robpartridge**

by robpartridge, 29-Mar-14 06:58 PM GMT

"What a lovely place to live in."

Many thanks, Chris – my wife would say exactly the same about the south of France...

Rob

### **Re: robpartridge**

by Wurzel, 30-Mar-14 12:03 AM GMT

Great report and photos Rob 😊 That's the thing with the nice weather – it can be too nice and the butterflies just bomb around everywhere making photography near impossible 😞

Have a goodun

Wurzel

### **Re: robpartridge**

by robpartridge, 31-Mar-14 03:56 PM GMT

At eleven o'clock this morning only the weakest of sunshine was getting through the high cloud – not much chance of many butterflies, I thought, but an opportunity to get further with the virtual tour of my parish, ready for when the action proper begins any day now. After the end of the Widdens

drove, one arrives at the Ouse Washes. These huge embankments run in a virtually straight line SSW to NNE for more than twenty miles across the fens. In the winter they hold flood water from the Great Ouse catchment, water which once flooded many thousands of acres of low-lying land every year, making most villages islands and indeed the Isle of Ely itself owes its name to the once extensive marshes and and meres created by these floods. Today the washes were losing their water, leaving ideal conditions for the many wildfowl and waders that still nest here in good years – lapwings and redshanks were calling constantly. The east bank is only lightly grazed and managed, leaving plenty of teasels, nettles and thistles for butterflies in the summer. A few peacocks were guarding nettle patches, wings closed, waiting for the sun to break through.



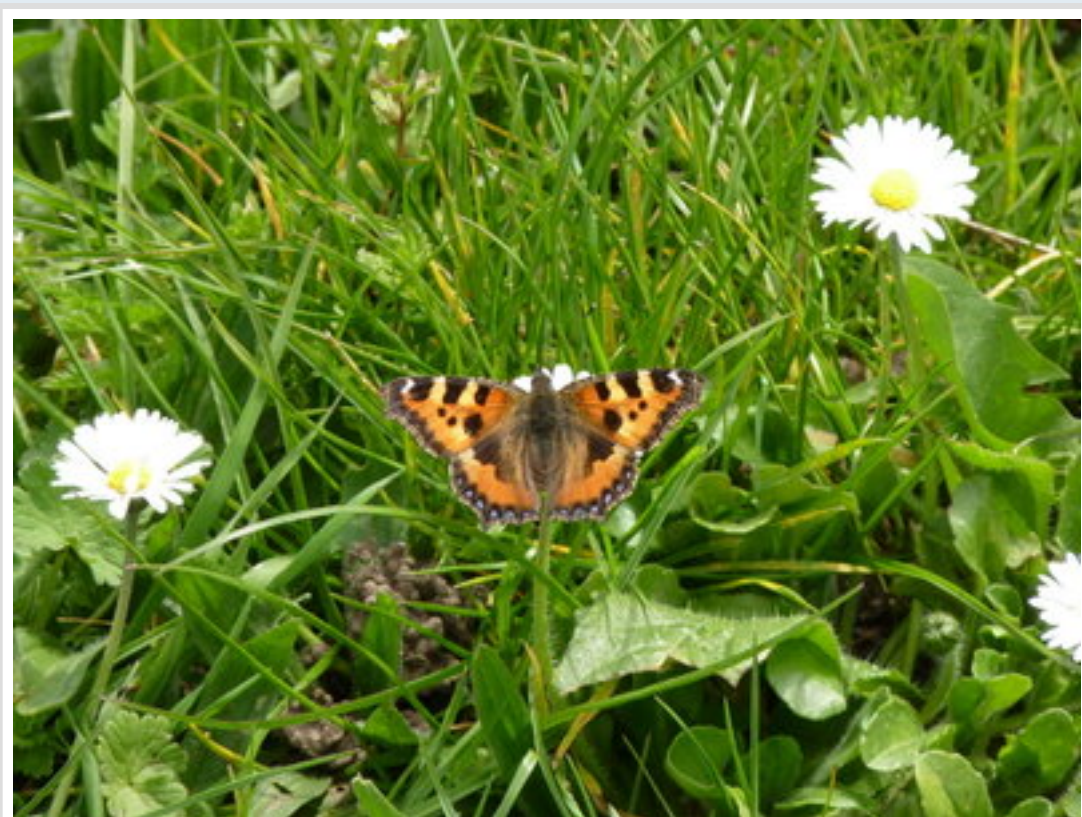
*A few peacocks were guarding nettle patches*

The New Bedford river – not that new now as it was dug by hand in 1650 – is tidal, even though we are more than thirty miles from the sea here. As I climbed on to the top of the bank, a common seal surfaced long enough for one shot; when he reappeared he was almost a hundred yards away:



*The river here is tidal...*

The barrier banks are managed by the EA. Fortunately, in recent years the grazing has been fairly light, allowing nettles, thistles and teasels to develop in good-sized patches. The teasels are highly attractive to late summer butterflies and had several clouded yellows in 2013. Where the grass is shortest, small heaths sometimes develop small colonies. As the sun shone a little more, I was surprised yet again by the number of small tortoiseshells this year, with a dozen in as many yards. Nectar plants are few and far between and some were using daisies. Today, a small dredger was at work – the banks would not last through many winter floods without annual maintenance.



*Nectar plants are few and far between at this time of the year*





*Sometimes it seems intrusive but without this regular work my house would be underwater*

I drove around to the west side of the washes. On the single track road I had to swerve to avoid a grass snake. I stopped and walked back – when it did not move I assumed that it had already been run over but no, it was simply sunbathing on the warm surface. It would not move until I gently lifted it onto the verge with a stick!



*A lazy sun-bather*

Later on I managed another, close-up picture of a much smaller grass snake as it slipped away into a reed bed. March is quite early – I usually see the first ones here in mid-April:



*Despite my quiet approach, he had heard me and was slipping away*

Climbing up onto the western barrier bank and looking north, both the Old Bedford river, on the right, and the Counterwash drain on the left are visible. The latter has the highest levels of protection and is very good for aquatic plants and insects, as well as most of our commoner grassland butterfly species. Today there were a few more peacocks and small tortoiseshells. Also here was a male brimstone and my first small white of the year but neither stayed for a picture:



*The Counter drain and the Old Bedford. The teasels here are smothered in butterflies in late summer*



*I must stop taking pictures of these...*

In the far distance is the outline of Ely Cathedral – it has watched over this landscape for more than a thousand years:



*Ely Cathedral*

The sun had finally given up the struggle. When I got back to the car, a peacock was waiting for me, having found somewhere warm for just a few more minutes. When I drove away, I'm sure it tried to follow:



*Just a few more minutes*

### **Re: robpartridge**

by Wurzel, 01-Apr-14 10:58 PM GMT

That is a great locale you're at Rob 🌿 And that is a great Peacock shot, it really does tell the story of a thousand words 😊

Have a goodun

Wurzel

### **Re: robpartridge**

by robpartridge, 02-Apr-14 08:20 AM GMT

Thanks again, Wurzel. It was a dull day as far as the light was concerned but not as dull as some of the pictures suggest – I think I'll have to turn up the exposure compensation on the Lumix!

Rob

### **The end of the tour**

by robpartridge, 02-Apr-14 03:08 PM GMT

It's time to finish the opening tour of my parish before everyone realises that I don't have many butterflies to show just at the moment. The parish of Mepal forms a scalene triangle – yes, I had to look it up, a new-fangled word, I think – with the western end the most acute angle. Neatly inside this point are two post-war gravel pits, some 60 years old now and, of course, quite mature. The largest is 44 acres in extent and is used by a fly-fishing club. We have many gravel pits in the fens, and once completed, they often form quite good habitat for many species, especially birds. Their insect fauna is less well studied but the margins can also be interesting for most of the wider countryside butterflies.



*The 44 acre pit is now a trout fishery*

Once again the sun was weak if present at all, and I could find nothing on the wing. Eventually I found one small tortoiseshell sheltering from the cold south-easterly wind, in the lee of a dyke – this is what everything else must have been doing here at this time:



*Keeping out of a cold south-easterly*

Nevertheless, this gravel pit has some interesting moths. The first photo shows the empty cocoon of the hornet clearwing at the base of a poplar tree – this species is widespread in my part of the fens but rarely seen unless one examines the trunks on an early morning in June. The second image shows a willow that has been well-worked by larvae of the goat moth. This is a species of conservation concern but some of my local pits have strong populations:



*An empty cocoon of the hornet clearwing*



*Clear evidence of the goat moth*

I could think of one corner that would be out of this wind, and sure enough, a few butterflies were present, including just my second comma of the season. Fortunately, it was a better-looking one than my first:



*The second comma of the season*

This quiet corner also attracts less welcome visitors. Even though we are a rural area, we have our share of criminals as this heap of cable sheathing shows. In the past I always reported such things but, to be honest, I doubt if it does any good. Fly-tipping is just one more hazard that our butterflies have to face:



*One more hazard*

But there were skylarks beginning to sing overhead, and two sand martins appeared briefly over the lake before continuing their journey north. Spring always brings a little hope and, as Philip Larkin wrote, "Things are tougher than we are." I'll end with a picture of the open, arable fields that most people associate with this part of the country. The parish boundary is along the left side of this photograph. It looks bleak and unfriendly for butterflies but even out here there will be some to be found in a month or two.



*Even out here there will be butterflies...*

Thanks for staying with it this far!

Rob

## **Re: robpartridge**

by William, 02-Apr-14 05:42 PM GMT

Great stuff Rob, I'm fascinated by your tales of all the moths. Goat Moths and Clearwings are the stuff of myth and legend in my part of Somerset 😊😊 .

I'm very jealous of your White – Letters too, I'm sure there are some on my patch, though repeated attempts to find them have ended in failure 😊

## Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 02-Apr-14 06:30 PM GMT

### "William" wrote:

Goat Moths and Clearwings are the stuff of myth and legend in my part of Somerset

Thanks, William. A quick look at the Provisional Atlas does indeed suggest that you are a long way from the nearest hornet clearwing! The goat moth now has an odd distribution and I wouldn't be surprised if there are still a few small colonies in unexpected places – it's not something that many people look for, and it does not come to light very often. As for White-letters, in my part of the world populations seem to vary enormously from year to year, and some seasons you hardly see them, whereas last year's hot July really favoured them here. I'd keep checking any likely elms for several years before I concluded that they were absent, but others know much more than me and I'm sure there are Somerset experts on the species,

Rob

## Re: robpartridge

by Wurzel, 07-Apr-14 09:49 PM GMT

Some great reports – we're really getting to know your local patch and nice to see some of the local butterflies 😊 That's the great thing about your LP, you never know what'll turn up and you can take ownership of it, almost becoming protective of it. 😊

Have a goodun

Wurzel

## Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 09-Apr-14 08:38 AM GMT

Thanks Wurzel – but as soon as I'd completed the opening tour, the sun went in and it hasn't come out properly since! I hope this isn't a judgement from above. Looking back at past records, this is nothing to worry about, of course; it will just make for a better morning when things get underway again,

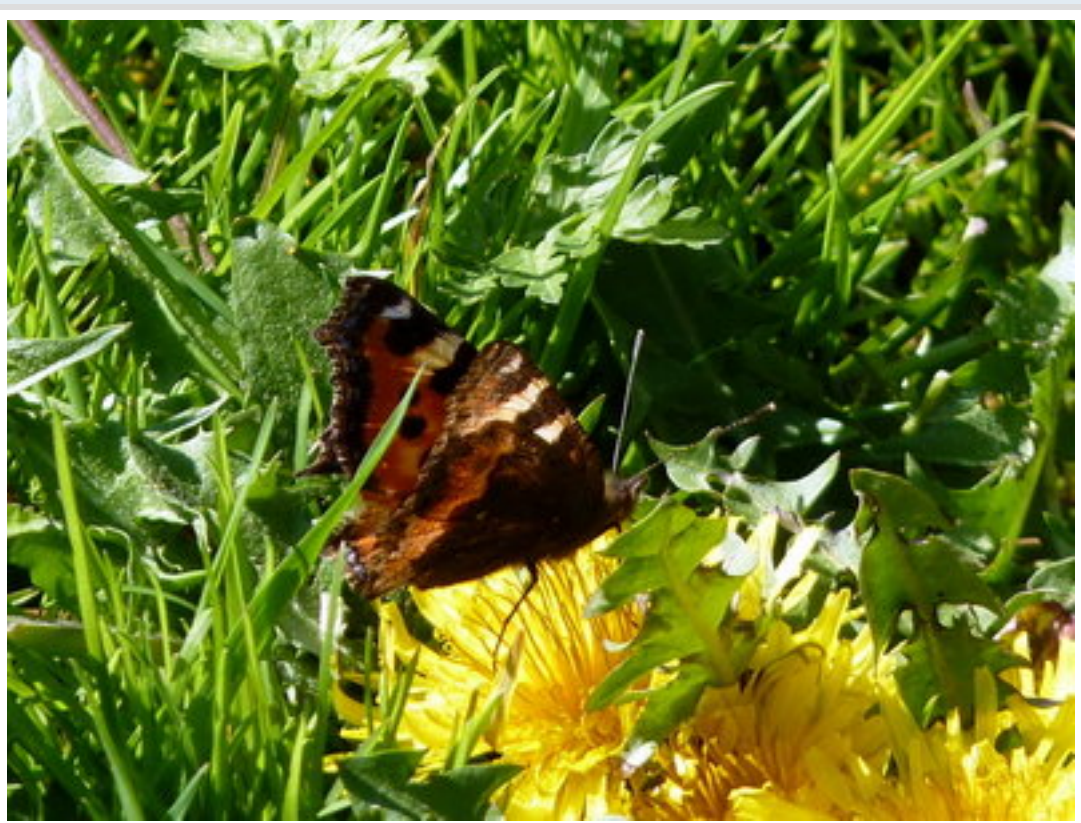
Rob

## Orange and Green

by robpartridge, 09-Apr-14 04:35 PM GMT

Well, the last post did the trick. No sooner had I clicked 'send' than the sun came out and stayed out until mid-afternoon. Somehow, though, I could only manage an hour down at Brick Lane, the footpath and mature hedgerow described in the first post of this diary – I cannot make it out but ever since I retired I seem to have less time for idling!

A male Brimstone flew over the bonnet of the car before I had opened the door – a promising start. The wind was brisk, though, and still chilly despite the sunshine; it would be another visit in which any butterflies on the wing would be seeking some shelter from it. Within ten yards I had both Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock basking on the bare patches of the path. One problem we have here in the wider landscape is a lack of nectar plants, of wildflowers in general; dandelions are important, and so is ground ivy:



*Dandelions are important*

Like lots of other diarists, I am seeing plenty of Bee Flies – or are they Bee-flies?. They are so good at hovering it's possible to capture them in flight:



*In flight*



*...and at rest*

As I was photographing these, something white flew by – looking up, I was in time to see my first Orange Tip of the year, at last. Of course it was a male, of course it was already on patrol and of course a picture was out of the question. But once you start looking, there are insects everywhere in spring. I watched a cranefly ovipositing into algal weed in the shallow ditch than runs by the footpath. I've never seen anything like this before and had always assumed that they were all terrestrial in the larval stage;



*Crane fly egg-laying in a ditch*

When I reached the Gault Hole I could hear a Water Rail squealing – they nest here – and a Cetti's Warbler giving its explosive burst of noise – another resident bird these days. Way across in the reed-bed I could just make out the location of this year's Mute Swans' nest:



*They should be safe out there but some years they fail...*

To my right was a spinney of elm which I have searched for White-letters, so far without success. It is a reminder of the ephemeral nature of butterfly habitats because in the early 1990s it was the little square of sheltered, weedy ground on which I first found Brown Argus in this area as they were making their great march across the countryside:



*Once a site for Brown Argus, now White-letter is more likely*

On the way back to the car, butterfly sightings improved. A Comma was resting on the footpath and allowed me to get very close:



*It must have been asleep - I don't usually get this close*

At the same spot, my first Green-veined white of the year appeared and settled on the only plant of Garlic Mustard I had seen so far, even though there are good stands at several spots along the path later on. I checked but there were no eggs on this plant as yet;





*First of the season for both butterfly and flower*

My last butterfly was also a first, the first female Brimstone of the year feeding on ground ivy, another locally important nectar source. It appeared to have some difficulty inserting its proboscis into these complicated little flowers:



*Feeding but...*



*...with a little difficulty*

Almost at the car, I glanced into the ditch for the last time and found this three-spined stickleback holding territory in the shallow, sunlit water. This tenacious little fish can be found in the most unlikely places, and they have fascinating sex lives but that's another story. I put it in here just to see if it's the first fish ever in the diaries but now I seem to recall seeing some in the beaks of birds! Oh well, here he is anyway:



*A tenacious little fish*

It's amazing what you can see in an hour of spring.

### **Re: robpartridge**

by Pauline, 09-Apr-14 05:14 PM GMT

You're taking me back now Rob – in my youth we used to call them Robinies on account of their red breasts!

### **Re: robpartridge**

by robpartridge, 09-Apr-14 05:53 PM GMT

#### **"Pauline" wrote:**

You're taking me back now Rob – in my youth we used to call them Robinies on account of their red breasts!

Yes, me too, Pauline. Many hours were spent catching them from streams and ponds...And the sun was always shining over the blue-remembered hills,  
Rob

### **Re: robpartridge**

by Neil Freeman, 09-Apr-14 09:29 PM GMT

Ahh yes, Robin Red-Breasts to us too when we were kids, and the smaller ones were always 'tiddlers' 😊

Great reports and photos, I still haven't seen a Brimstone settle yet this year.

Cheers,

Neil.

### **Re: robpartridge**

by David M, 09-Apr-14 09:58 PM GMT

Happy days!! What child of the 70s DIDN'T catch sticklebacks?

So glad I was a teenager before these pastimes were usurped by mindless video games.

### **Re: robpartridge**

by Lee Hurrell, 09-Apr-14 10:19 PM GMT

I did too, in a stream near my Nan's house in Seal, near Sevenoaks. There was a broken bridge and the north Downs were in view. We had to cross a railway line (on a level crossing) to get there. Probably the last time I saw a kingfisher.

Ah....takes me back.

Lee

### **Re: robpartridge**

by robpartridge, 09-Apr-14 10:40 PM GMT

Thanks to all for the comments – who would have thought that there are so many sticklebacks in the streams of memory?

Rob

### Re: robpartridge

by maverick, 10-Apr-14 06:37 PM GMT

Sticklebacks started me off and I've been fishing ever since 😊

### Re: robpartridge

by Wurzel, 10-Apr-14 11:21 PM GMT

Great stuff Rob – especially the Green Veined 😊 It wasn't Sticklebacks for me but a small Minnow like fish which we called 'Bullheads' 😊

Have a goodun

Wurzel

### Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 11-Apr-14 08:12 AM GMT

Hello Maverick – me too, been fishing for about 53 years now! Mostly coarse in the fens but also a long-time stillwater trout angler and every year I manage a week in the West Country for my favourite thing of all, the sea trout. I wonder how many other angling butterflyers there are in these forums – or are they butterflying anglers?

Hello Wurzel – growing up in the fens, the bullhead was a fish of legend for me, and I never saw one until I was all grown up – but after much searching as a boy I did find a stream with stone loach in it. That was a great day. Now it's a golf course.

Rob

### Re: robpartridge

by maverick, 11-Apr-14 06:21 PM GMT

Not to mention the tommy ruff

Been fishing for the same amount of time

Had a few small fish on my hols in Cuba as well

Im from North wales originally and started on sea fishing but have tried everything

Also had two seatrout on my own flies in Scotland

Mainly carp fishing now,I've got two Northwest thirties under my belt

### Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 12-Apr-14 09:06 AM GMT

Hi Maverick,

odd how names vary locally – we always called them bobby ruffe. They used to be so common they were a pest but now I rarely hear of anyone catching them. Thirties from the north west must be pretty unusual still but down here carp are becoming a nuisance, having been stocked into every pit and pond and now beginning to dominate rivers too.

The link to butterflies isn't so strange when you remember that Richard Walker (I think) said that angling is just applied entomology. Obviously he was talking about fly fishing but it sort of holds. Most serious anglers study fish rather than just catching them, just as we study butterflies,

Rob

### Re: robpartridge

by maverick, 12-Apr-14 09:23 AM GMT

Not to mention the bird life,bugs,toads,frogs,the list goes on 😊

### Re: robpartridge

by Maximus, 12-Apr-14 10:57 AM GMT

Hi Rob, I've been angling for about fifty years too and you see an awful lot when you blend quietly into the landscape. I think it was Hugh Falkus who quoted this, but not 100% sure, "There's more to fishing than catching fish".

Mike

### Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 12-Apr-14 12:17 PM GMT

Hello Mike,

it's good to know that there are at least three of us! Falkus's book on sea trout is one of the best angling books ever written, in my opinion, and it's still the first thing I pack if I'm heading west. And if fishing was only about catching fish, I'd have given up years ago...

Rob

## Wheatfields and Small Tortoiseshells

by robpartridge, 13-Apr-14 06:15 PM GMT

After attending grandson Daniel's second birthday party in the next-door village, we decided to walk home as the sun was shining and we were in no hurry. The farmer who owns some of the fields is a good birding friend of mine and so it was alright to take a shortcut around one of his fields of autumn wheat, instead of going the long way round to the old airfield. No camera, not even the trusty close-focusing Papilios – this was butterflying at its most basic. But there were butterflies all the way along the trimmed hawthorn hedge, with its thin fringe of nettles, and they were all Small Tortoiseshells. Some were battered and barely recognisable, others were remarkably fresh-looking. A couple were amongst the nettles and might have been preparing to lay but most were simply enjoying the sunshine, basking on the bare soil, already hard and dry despite the deluges of last winter.

We must have put up at least twenty in the hundred yards or so of field margin before we reached the road. Two thoughts came to mind: first, we always say that hard winters are best for over-wintering butterflies but in my part of the fens we had just a couple of sharp frosts. yet large numbers of hibernating butterflies seem to have come through this time, even though it was a very mild, very wet winter indeed. Second, we were walking in a place that no-one would ever consider giving a second look for butterflies but here they were in good numbers. Multiplied across the many similar fields that stretch away from my village in all directions, just how many Small Tortoiseshells were flying this afternoon? If we have good weather this year, the numbers later on could be spectacular unless *Sturmia bella* really gets amongst them.

The final part of our walk was along a section of The Rushway. At last I saw my first two Speckled Woods of the year, typically flitting through the section with dappled sunshine, and then we passed a courting couple – a pair of Green-veined Whites dancing together around a spray of garlic mustard.

The forecast is promising. I think I'll be back tomorrow with binoculars and camera.

## Re: robpartridge

by Mark Tutton, 13-Apr-14 08:18 PM GMT

Hi rob

I think you will find there are a good number of fishing butterflyers on his site including myself! There does seem to be a bit of a connection I seem to remember having seen a photo of a very nice brace of perch and I know Neil Hulme is a lapsed fisherman.

Of course probably the most famous of all is "BB" Denys Watkins Pitchford who wrote any number of famous angling books and bred purple emperors, releasing them into Fermyn Woods – can thoroughly recommend the book BB's butterflies which was published last year.

Kind Regards

Mark 😊

## Re: robpartridge

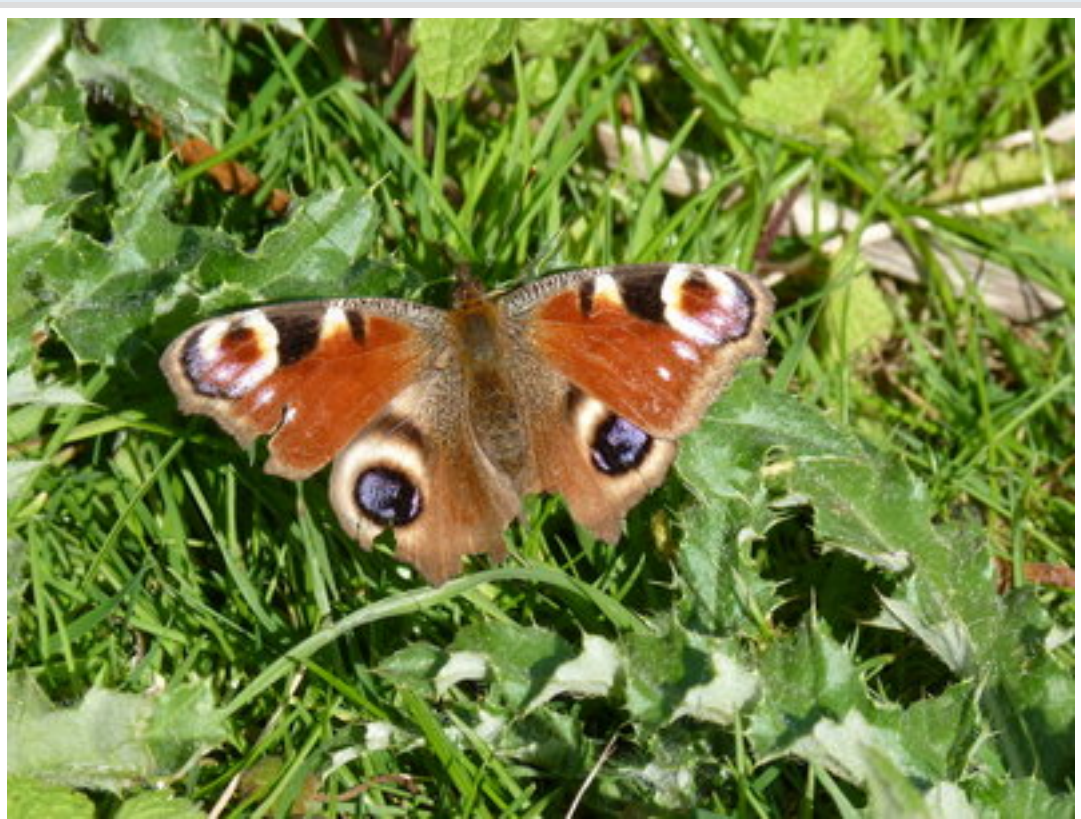
by maverick, 13-Apr-14 08:32 PM GMT

We all need our own site !!! 😊

## In England and April's here

by robpartridge, 16-Apr-14 09:21 AM GMT

On days like these it is not difficult to see what Robert Browning was longing for. In the morning I had to do some writing but by midday the lure of sunshine and birdsong was too much. Within five minutes I was out in the fields. The new tenant farmer has created an access track; it isn't a conservation headland – we have very few of those – but it has already provided some marginal habitat that butterflies will use. A Peacock was basking here, and I make no apology for posting another picture of a battered old warrior – they will soon be gone;



*They will soon be gone*

Looking back from the track, I could see the trees at the end of my road – a single oak and two good-sized English elms. Both have their requisite hairstreaks in good years. These elms have a decent amount of blossom now but later I noticed that many of the smaller secondary trees that White-letters also use have very little:



*The trees at the end of my road*



*The secondary elms have little blossom this year*

The field is, unusually, spring-sown this year like many others because it was used to produce maize for bio-energy last year. That was harvested very late and then the weather took over. This change in the cycle will undoubtedly have implications for wildlife. Along the track, this plant was growing: I think it is charlock but I'm not great with plants. I don't know to what extent it is used by whites such as the Green-veined but it is quite common locally:



*Charlock?*

Once onto The Rushway, butterflies began to appear. There was only one patrolling male Orange Tip; garlic mustard has declined here over the years, seeming to prefer the edges of the path to be mown more often than they are – an unexpected victim of budget cuts? But Speckled Woods were common, with at least ten along the path. Some were basking out in the open just as Jeremy Thomas describes them doing early in the season, whilst others were in more dappled situations, and a few were already showing signs of wear – time, it seems, waits no more for butterflies than it does for us:



*Out in the open*



*Others were in more dappled situations...*



*...and some already showing signs of wear*

The footpath is beginning to look attractive but we are desperately short of wildflowers here. I passed a solitary bluebell. It's probably an escape and a Spanish interloper but we have to take anything we can get!

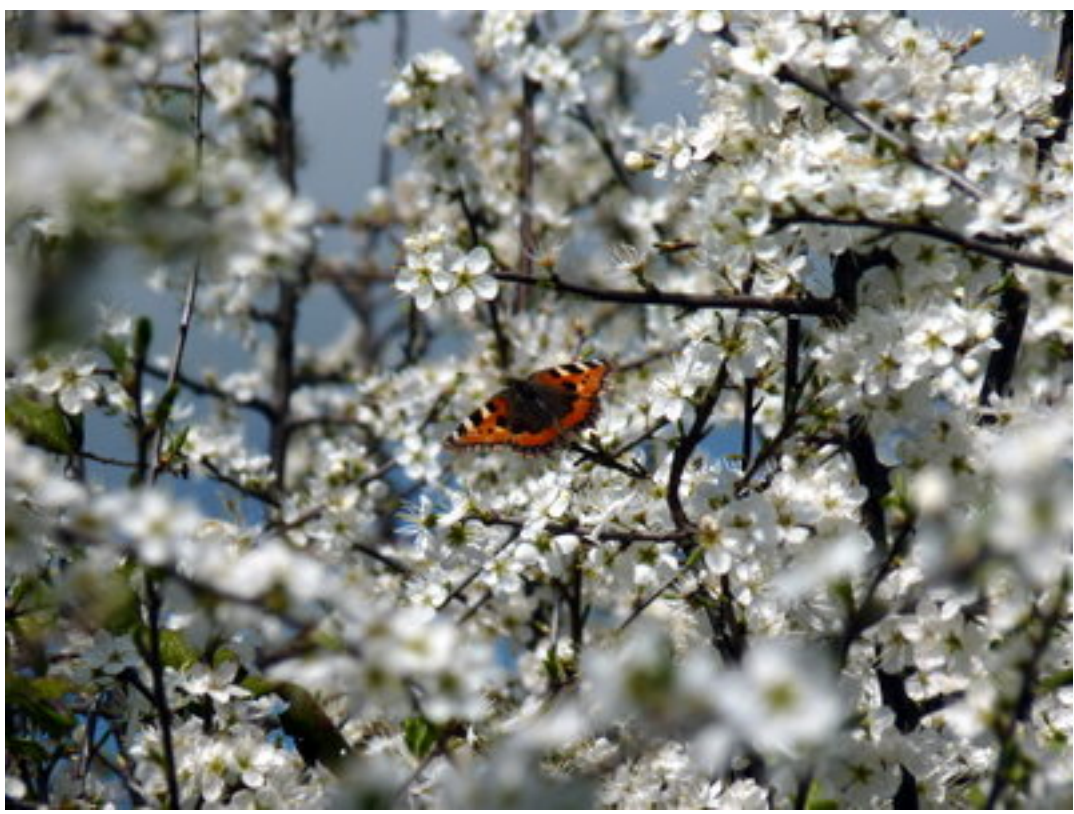


*Beginning to look more attractive*



*We are desperately short of wildflowers*

I don't see many Small Tortoiseshells on blackthorn blossom whereas it is very popular with the Peacocks. Green-veined Whites were also common, flying up and down the path but rarely settling. One that did was captured on a dandelion but is over-exposed, as usual:



*Tortoiseshells here don't do this very often*



*Over-exposed as usual*

Where the footpath climbs a slight hill, we have one tiny hay meadow. Sadly, every year the owner sprays it with weed-killer. It's impossible to think that the cost makes this worthwhile but old habits die as hard as the few plants that might have flowered here:



*Sadly, every year...*

Beyond the meadow is a small field of rape. This is always attractive to whites and there were a dozen or so flying over it but rarely settling. Most would have been Green-veined, I think:



*Oilseed rape is attractive to whites*

Where The Rushway meets Widdens Drove, butterflies were numerous. Four male Brimstones were in view at one point, along with more whites, Peacocks and Small Tortoiseshells. There is a good nettled bed here and I had come with the hope of finding the latter species egg-laying. Within ten minutes a female had arrived. Watching the process of leaf selection is agonizing as she crawls over numerous identical-looking possibilities and rejects them all. Sometimes she bends her abdomen under the leaf and then changes her mind yet again - all very familiar to the married among us, I suppose... This part of the process took 25 minutes.





*Is this the one?*



*No, on to another...*

The spray finally chosen was on the south-facing edge. Once she has begun to lay, nothing will move her, not even the lady out walking with the inquisitive Jack Russell. Though I lay flat out taking pictures, this lady calmly passed by and said "Good afternoon"; either word has got round or I no longer look at all dangerous. The Tortoiseshell continued to lay for at least ten minutes before she left the leaf and rested in the sun nearby. I was able to get a close-up of what she had done, and the whole process amazes me more as time goes by: surviving all the hazards of a caterpillars's life, the frantic feeding in late summer, finding a hibernation site where mice won't eat you, finding a mate and then producing that mass of tiny green pearls to begin the dance again, joining the end to the beginning:



*Finally..*



*In my end is my beginning*

### **Re: robpartridge**

by Vince Massimo, 16-Apr-14 09:39 AM GMT

Great report and observations, Rob 😊

By the looks of the eggs, there are two batches there. Judging by the size of each mass, I would say that they were laid by separate individuals.

Vince

### **Re: robpartridge**

by robpartridge, 16-Apr-14 10:15 AM GMT

Thanks, Vince – I hadn't considered that possibility but I know that it happens often. Do they happen to choose the same leaves in the perfect situation or deliberately lay where others have? Perhaps there are benefits later on in being part of super-sized groups of larvae... I've no idea, having only a Biology O level!

Rob

### **Re: robpartridge**

by Vince Massimo, 16-Apr-14 10:58 AM GMT

Hi Rob,

I'm not entirely sure as to all the factors that dictate why a particular leaf is chosen out of so many. All I know is that it can take quite a long time 😊. It is entirely possible that the leaf was attractive to the second female for the same reason it was chosen by the first individual, but the existence of eggs already on that leaf may have also been a factor. This also happens in several other species (Peacock and March Fritillary) where safety in numbers and "group basking" are advantageous to the larvae. We have also seen mixed egg-laying this week, with an image being posted by "essexbuzzard" of a Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock ovipositing on the same leaf at the same time. As long as there is enough of the food plant, this will benefit both species.

I also have Biology O-Level 😊

Vince

### **Re: robpartridge**

by Mikhail, 16-Apr-14 12:28 PM GMT

Sometimes two females use the same leaf at the same time. These were seen in Reading in the late 80s or early 90s.

I don't have Biology O level.

M.



### Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 16-Apr-14 12:53 PM GMT

Mikhail, even though you are not as well qualified as us, we can make you an honorary member after providing such an interesting picture! Seriously, there has to be a sound ecological reason for such behaviour. Obviously the female STs can detect tiny differences between the leaves but my hunch is that there is some advantage in being among larger groups of larvae. Fascinating.

Rob

### Re: robpartridge

by Lee Hurrell, 16-Apr-14 02:33 PM GMT

What a wonderful report, photos and observation. Fascinating stuff.

I did GCSEs rather than O-Levels, but I equally do not have one in Biology 😊

Best wishes

Lee

### Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 16-Apr-14 03:10 PM GMT

Thanks, Lee. I wonder whether there is any bias towards science in the educational qualifications of members here... As butterflies have as much aesthetic appeal as any form of wildlife known to man, perhaps not. In that, sense as in several others, they seem to cross all boundaries,

Rob

### Re: robpartridge

by William, 16-Apr-14 05:20 PM GMT

I've heard similar stuff about Marsh Fritillaries, and I think Pete posted a photo on his pd with 3 females laying on the same leaf. I believe that the larger surface area that large numbers of larvae provides enables them to heat up more efficiently – not that that should be a problem with the lovely weather we're having 😊😊

### Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 16-Apr-14 05:32 PM GMT

Hello William,

the warming up theory makes good sense. However, if it is the case, I'm intrigued that the first female to lay is pioneering the leaf and taking more risk; the second and third less so because the first brood is already in place ready to warm theirs up! I wonder if that behaviour is genetically determined – whether some females are programmed to seek other clutches rather than empty leaves...

Rob

### Re: robpartridge

by Pete Eeles, 16-Apr-14 06:30 PM GMT

Last year, I wrote an article for the Entomologist's Record and Journal of Variation, having observed something similar in the Marsh Fritillary. After liaising with Jeremy Thomas, Matthew Oates and Ken Willmott, I wrote the following based on their, and my, observations:

*On the face of it, the chances of the same leaf being used among the thousands of leaves available would appear to be extremely small and so I decided to look a little more into this phenomenon, and my thanks to Jeremy Thomas, Matthew Oates and Ken Willmott for their own observations and thoughts. While egg batches of several species are often found together, such as those of Large White *Pieris brassicae*, I was most interested in similar*

observations with respect to the Marsh Fritillary and other nymphalids.

*Matthew Oates has seen this behaviour in Marsh Fritillary on several occasions and not just in years when the butterfly is abundant (pers. comm.). He has also seen this behaviour in Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae* and Peacock *Inachis io*. Jeremy Thomas has come across this behaviour in Glanville Fritillary *Melitaea cinxia* and Small Tortoiseshell, as mentioned in *The Butterflies of Britain and Ireland* (Thomas and Lewington, 2010, 2nd edition) and also mentioned that a newer egg batch is occasionally laid on top of an older batch (pers. comm.). Ken Willmott has also seen this behaviour in Small Tortoiseshell, Peacock and Marsh Fritillary (pers. comm.).*

*All of those corresponded with ruled out pure coincidence as an explanation for this behaviour.*

*The plant being in a favoured position for the site, possibly based on a local microclimate, is considered to provide part of the explanation since, like most butterflies, female Marsh Fritillary select a surprisingly small subset of available foodplants for oviposition, choosing those growing in optimum conditions for their young.*

*A deliberate strategy of co-locating egg batches was also considered plausible since larvae can thermoregulate more efficiently when numbers are higher and, more convincingly, their prickly bodies are a greater deterrent to birds, mice and other predators when en masse.*

*If this is the case, then the ability of females to locate existing egg batches must also be explained. Ken Willmott recalled one occasion where he accidentally disturbed an ovipositing Small Tortoiseshell which then flew around and behind him before returning immediately, without searching, to the same nettle leaf to continue building the egg batch, possibly relocated using her olfactory (smell) senses.*

Cheers,

– Pete

## Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 16-Apr-14 07:05 PM GMT

Thank you, Pete,

and no-one is going to argue with anything that lot say! The ability to locate existing batches must present to account for the apparent regularity of such events involving more than one species. I'm still intrigued by the idea that some female has to start the process off, someone has to be first. Maybe the earliest layers are the descendants of early layers, and the later ones of those females who sought out existing batches... But I'm afraid we are well beyond my Biology O level now!

Rob

## Re: robpartridge

by Neil Freeman, 16-Apr-14 08:46 PM GMT

I did 'O' levels but not in Biology 😊

Great reports and observations Rob, and a fascinating response from Pete.

I am finding it interesting reading about the butterflies you are finding out your way in what are often narrow strips of habitat along the margins of large arable fields. It makes you wonder how many butterflies go undetected in similar habitat which seems to be often overlooked.

Cheers,

Neil.

## Re: robpartridge

by robpartridge, 17-Apr-14 08:32 AM GMT

Thanks, Neil,

as far as I know, I'm a fair drive away from any of the rarer habitat specialist species but fortunately, like you, I find the distribution and the ecology of the commoner butterflies in the intensively farmed landscape quite interesting. Studying a local patch is more fulfilling for me than burning up yet more fossil fuels to visit well-known sites but I have no problem with those who choose to do that!

I have a birding friend who has recorded his local patch, the parish next to mine, and its environs for thirty years; his list is frankly astounding but it's all due to his persistence, skill and knowledge. I suspect the same could be true to a lesser extent for butterflies. Extraordinary things do turn up. In 2007, I think, a new teacher at the school where I worked who did not know of my interest, watched a Camberwell Beauty in an assembly hall for a few minutes before releasing it out of the window – I was in a classroom about 30 yards away! And a year or two before that another birder in Chatteris took a picture of an unfamiliar species on his buddleia which turned out to be the Queen of Spain...

One day! But in the meantime there is still plenty to learn about the rest,

Rob

## Re: robpartridge

by MikeOxon, 17-Apr-14 11:29 AM GMT

To put in my 2p worth – on the basis of no directly relevant qualifications – I think we should take account of the well-developed senses of smell and taste in Lepidoptera. For example, we know the importance of pheromones, especially in the case of moths, and of the presence of scent scale on the wings of many male butterflies. We also know that these insects 'taste' with their feet, as well as having sensors on their antennae.

I have watched a brown hairstreak female walking very carefully over a number of different leaves before deciding where to roost for the night and suspect that she was using her battery of sensors to find one that would offer the best camouflage protection.

I suspect that a female similarly 'tastes' and 'smells' the leaves very carefully before laying, to sense those chemicals that indicate a good healthy plant that will feed her offspring well. In addition, she may possibly leave her own scent mark, deliberately or incidentally, which will act as a message to

others that this is a good place to lay.

Having attracted moths by using artificial pheromones (I've attracted Clearwings in this way at Collard Hill), I have no doubt of their ability to home onto the spot within moments of the source being exposed 😊



*Six-belted Clearwing Bembecia ichneumoniformis Collard Hill - 26th June 2011*

Mike

### **Re: robpartridge**

by robpartridge, 23-Apr-14 12:48 PM GMT

Thanks, Mike - a fascinating picture of those clearwings,

Rob

### **Sun and wind**

by robpartridge, 23-Apr-14 01:22 PM GMT

A look at the forecast this morning suggested that sunshine might be unpredictable this week, so better make the best of it now. Brick Lane was sunny alright but the increasingly brisk southerly wind made photographing anything that did settle very difficult; several Peacocks were visiting dandelions, along with 2 Small Tortoiseshells. Numbers of male Orange Tips were good, with up to 4 visible together at one point but for the life of me I don't know what they are going to lay on this year - there is very little garlic mustard showing at all.



*Plenty of dandelions for the Peacocks*



*...But what will these lay on this year?*

The cuckoo flower is in an even worse predicament locally. At the end of the lane I walked round to the banks of the Ouse washes reserve. Along 150 yards I found only four small plants struggling up through the rank grass, and on the flood meadow where this flower used to be in abundance there were none. The reason for this is clear in the photograph; horses are now stocked at heavy densities on many of our remaining grassfields, and wildflowers don't stand a chance:



*These struggle in rank grass*



*...but don't stand a chance against these.*

Next to that meadow, sadly, is an area that two years ago was unmanaged rough grass for at least 40 years. It had some wonderful anthills and dew-ponds but last year the farmer's son decided to make it more productive. It seems incredible that we can still be losing habitat like this:

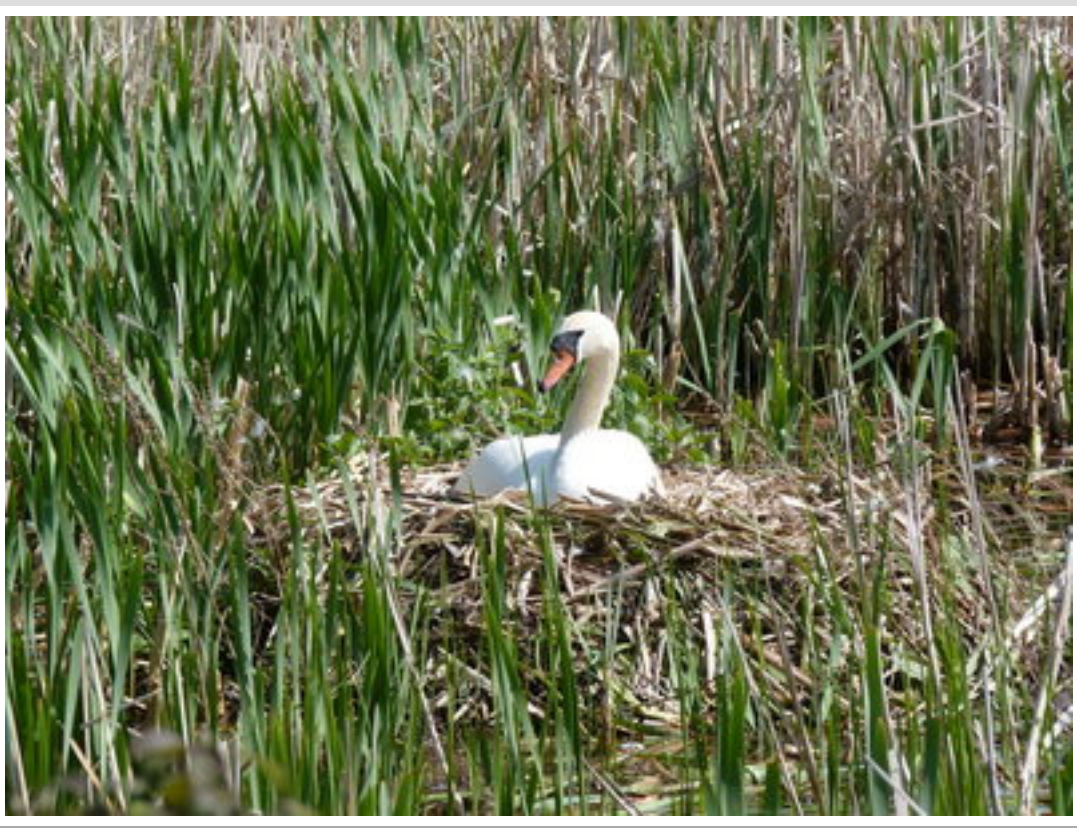


*Once rough grassland, it's more productive now*

But it isn't all bad news. I've never seen the nettles looking better and the number of Small Tortoiseshells and Peacocks laying should make for a bumper summer, weather and parasites permitting. Back on the wash banks, the wind was blowing strongly and the tortoiseshell I photographed could barely hang on to his dandelion. I searched for my first Small Heath or Small Copper of the year but without any luck. Tucked away in the Gault Holes, I found another swan's nest.



*They could barely hang on in the wind*



*Tucked away*

Back on the lane I had a male Large White fly by, and also a Small one on ground ivy, but the commonest white was the Green-veined, as usual here. I am becoming increasingly puzzled by what they eat as caterpillars, in view of what I said earlier about foodplants - I'm going to make the effort to find out. One male Brimstone appeared but no Speckled Woods yet, since the farmer (yes, the same one) eliminated the southern hedge. Close to the car, no stickleback today but a nice queen wasp basking - species, anyone? - and heaps of rabbit fur. I've spent most of my lifetime in the country but never actually seen them fighting.



*No Speckled Woods*



*Species, anyone?*

So, no good pictures, thanks to the wind, but plenty to see and think about. I saved the most moving picture until last. A fluttering in the grass at the bottom of the bank led to me finding this Small T sheltering from the wind but still enjoying the sunshine, to the last. I sat and watched him for several minutes - it seemed only right:





*I sat and watched him for several minutes...*