

Wadhurst Park (Batt's Wood and Rolf's Farm East) notes on the butterfly transects 2023.

The weather of the past twelve months potentially played a significant role in determining butterfly numbers this season. It was thought that the extreme heatwave and drought of summer 2022 would cause decreases in populations this year, but the figures for most of the open grassland species indicate otherwise. In contrast, species preferring more shady conditions were mostly in very low numbers in 2023. The heat of the previous summer was followed by prolonged sub-zero temperatures and snow cover in December, which might have helped overwintering butterflies by killing off parasites etc.

Batt's Wood Early – 24th May:

As in 2022, there were very low numbers of butterflies in May with a total of just 25 recorded along the transect route, equalling last year's poor counts. However, against the two species recorded across all transect sections last year, this year there were eight, but only in ones to threes, except for **speckled wood** where 12 were recorded, exactly equal to the 2022 count. Once more the 'wet grassland' sections of 7 and 8 proved very disappointing.

Late – 10th July:

Skipper species were flying in high numbers following the low counts of 2022. 118 insects were counted along the transects compared to 52 last year. Of the trapped individuals, **Essex skipper** outweighed small by six to two, possibly suggesting the former as the more widespread. Surprisingly only one **Speckled wood** was seen. **Silver-washed fritillary** was in low numbers at just five records compared to 12 last season. **White admiral** was not recorded for a second year. **Meadow brown** was in reasonable numbers at 306 individuals, particularly at section 8, and probably on a par with previous successful seasons, whilst **Ringlet** was in the highest numbers of any transect both here and at Rolf's Farm, with 48 along section 6. These latter insects do enjoy the shadier damp rides. **Gatekeeper** was in reasonable numbers this season with a total of 19.

Rolf's Farm East Early – 27th May

Butterflies were in extremely low numbers across the transects in 2023, although diversity was relatively high with 14 species identified. As at Batt's Wood most species were recorded as singles, twos or threes. **Speckled wood** was back to low numbers once more with just 8 seen.

The rare skippers were also in poor numbers with two **dingy skippers** in the Little Hop Field (one egg-laying) and a single **grizzled skipper** seen in the set-aside of section 16. The water meadow grasslands of sections 1-3 seemed to offer little suitable habitat this season for these insects, being mostly tall rank grasses with little or no short turf and bare ground visible. As in previous years it was suggested that target searches be made for these two butterflies. The grasses had put on exceptional early growth following the pre-survey rains.

Small heath was also in very low figures with just five insects recorded, whilst two **common blue** were seen in section 16.

Late – 7th July

As at Batt's Wood the skippers had an excellent season with a total of 424 counted, coming close to the last high count of 2021. Of the trapped individuals, there were 19 **small skippers** and 11 **Essex skippers**, so possibly a slightly higher number of the former flying across the survey areas this year. **Meadow brown** was also back to high numbers once more, in similar numbers to 2019. **Gatekeeper** was widespread but in lower numbers than 2022 and had possibly not peaked yet as it emerges later than meadow brown. The species still showed the second highest count since the transects began. The exception amongst the brown species was **ringlet**, flying in extremely low numbers at just 22 individuals (although this will be a minimum). **Small heath** was absent apart from one individual on section 3. There were four **silver-washed fritillary** records from the wooded sections in the north, but no **white admiral**.

Marbled white numbers picked up once more this season with a total of 45 individuals, the second ever highest count. They have continued to disperse even more widely across the survey area and were found in eleven transect sections compared to the previous highest count of nine in 2021.

Species	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Skipper sp.	52	205	178	488	110	424
Meadow Brown	837	1309	577	1485	569	1273
Ringlet *	194	208	52	208	122	22
Gatekeeper	19	6	16	18	76	32
Marbled White (Brackets show number of transect sections with records)	5 (2)	18 (5)	22 (6)	62 (9)	14 (7)	45 (11)

*Ringlet cannot always be readily identified from meadow brown in hot weather when in rapid flight, especially older insects.

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