

Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-June to mid-July 2026

The biggest problem encountered when monitoring the heath fritillary this year was, as so often, the weather. Just as it looked as though numbers were about to pick up and peak, we lost the sun and endured a succession of dull, cloudy days. When I finally managed to fit in some counts, mixed results suggested that some colonies were already well into decline, while others appeared to be peaking, making it difficult to extrapolate data for the missing period. This season's final figures are therefore likely to be markedly less accurate than in most previous years but, with that caveat, it is possible to state that the peak was around 550 individuals, almost identical to last year's fairly mediocre count. My largest colony count was 95, and no other colonies scored more than 30, compared to eight last year. Cow-wheat thrived, despite the dry weather, and there were a number of stretches of wide ride with an abundance of the food plant that simply wasn't there last year, so it is just a shame that more females weren't on the wing to lay their eggs on the underside of the foodplant. Cow-wheat can definitely benefit from a site being allowed to get overgrown and heavily shaded for several years; then, when the shading canopy is removed, cow-wheat responds with a massive eruption of plants, evidently germinating from seeds that had been buried years ago.

I have similarly enigmatic data for other butterflies, with a marked trough in numbers recorded on my transect in early July, followed by a partial recovery a week later. Quite why this should have happened is a bit of a mystery. At this time of year nearly all the butterflies on the wing are members of the brown family, with gatekeeper and ringlet being the commonest, then meadow brown some way behind. This year gatekeepers are well out in front, while meadow browns are having one of their worst ever seasons; every year is different, and I never know what to expect. Every year I get excited about my first sightings of white admiral and silver-washed fritillary, two woodland butterflies that recolonised the reserve in the 1990s, and every year I end up disappointed by the failure of either species to go beyond the toehold that they had established all those years ago. This season seems to be a particularly bad one for them, with only one or two of each species seen on most visits. The fritillary caterpillars feed on violet leaves, a plant that isn't desperately common on the reserve. White admiral larvae need honeysuckle, which is quite abundant, but mainly occurring close to the ground, whereas what the finicky caterpillars are looking for are festoons of the climbers dangling from branches. It may therefore be that suitable foodplants are in short supply for both species, precluding them from ever becoming truly common in Blean Woods.

Still in the category of not knowing what to expect, after 45 years recording wildlife on the reserve, I do have a pretty good idea of what is going to turn up, but surprises are never far away, and this month's unusual find was a single purple loosestrife flower. This is a plant of damp ground, often beside rivers, with vivid purple flowers that have a passing resemblance to an orchid. The fact that it was growing towards the edge of a wide, sunny ride, suggests that it may have been introduced fortuitously, either on the sole of a visitor's boot, or perhaps in the tyre tread of a vehicle or tractor. Sam is also responsible for the management of Seasalter Levels, a wetland site a few miles away on the coast, so I like the thought that his wellie boot may have transported seeds from the Seasalter mud to the Blean Woods mud, the difference between the two being that the water table is lower in the wood, so its mud dries out more quickly in times of drought.

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