

BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION - UPPER THAMES BRANCH

Brown Hairstreak *Thecla betulae* Report for 2017



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After the previous year's relatively poor season for adult sightings, in 2017 we saw the Brown Hairstreak bounce back with 46 records across 18 different tetrads in our region (77 individual butterflies because several of those records were of multiple sightings). Otmoor proved to be the easiest place to find this elusive species and accounted for 17 of the 46 records, but it was good to see that we also had quite a few chance encounters with adults well away from the usual "hot-spots".

2017's first adult sighting was a transect record by Chris Bottrell on 18th July at Merton Wood, which is a millennium planting in the agricultural flat-lands to the east of that Oxfordshire village, while the final one was recorded by Nick Bowles on 22nd September in woodland near Grendon Underwood in Bucks. This compares to the previous year's rather later season when the first was seen on 31st July and the

final one on 30th September. In favourable years the butterfly can continue flying beyond the end of September but the last time we had an October record was in 2013.

However, it is winter egg counts that we use to gauge how well the butterfly has performed in a particular season because the eggs are relatively easy to find on blackthorn whereas the adult butterfly does its level best to avoid being seen, even by those of us who supposedly know where to look!

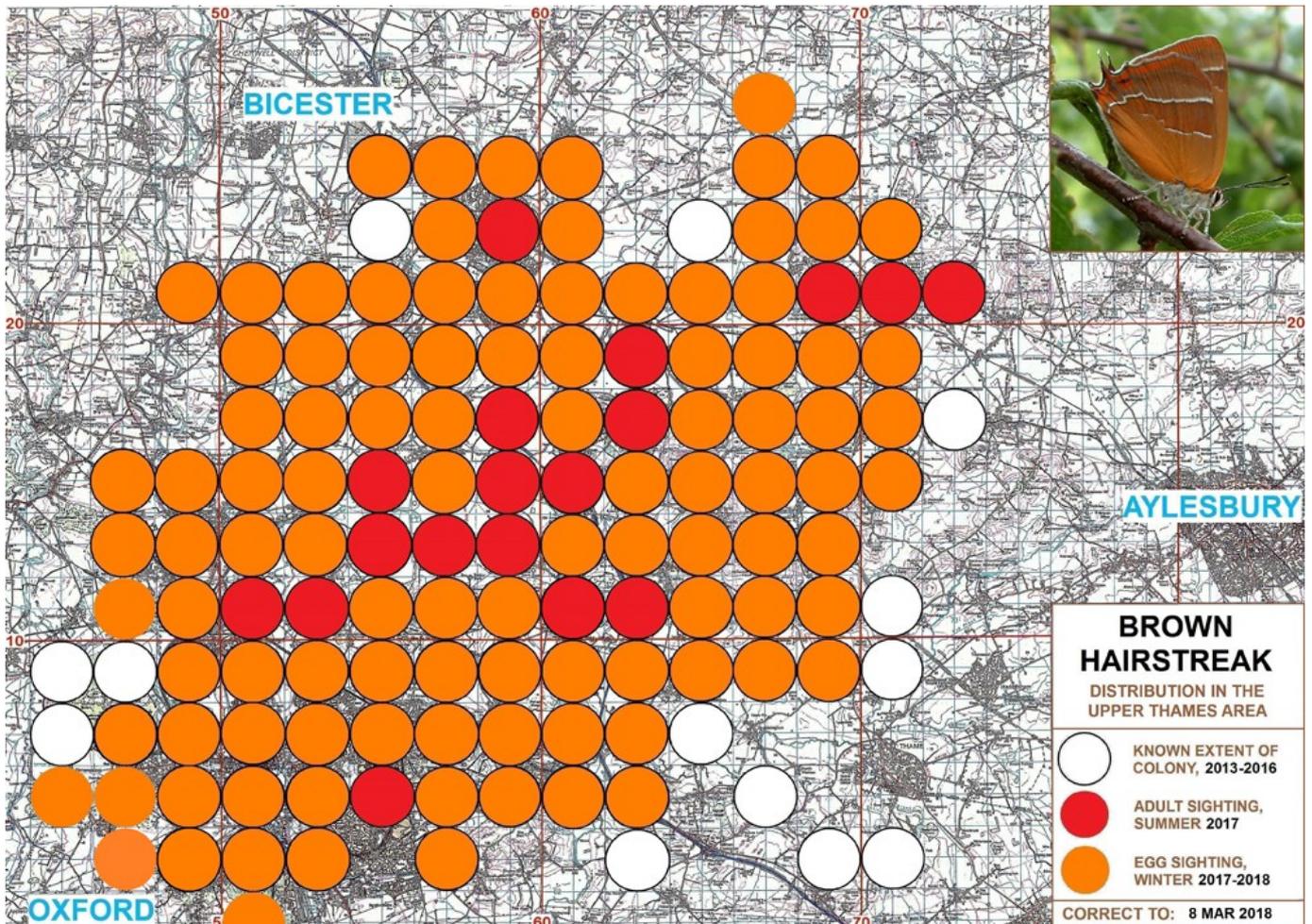
During the winter egg-searching season of 2016-17 we found it quite hard going, even at our core sites. Egg numbers were well down at those places where we carry out thorough searches and, unusually, we failed to add any new tetrads to the distribution map. However, during the current season (2017-18) it has been much easier to locate eggs, counts at our core sites were up again and we added no less than six brand new tetrads, taking the total to 134 within a dozen different 10km squares. Compare those figures to what we had just ten years ago (2007-08), when we knew of only 77 tetrads within seven 10km squares.

The current season's results from some of those sites which have been looked at thoroughly, either during our advertised group egg-hunts or by individuals searching on their own, are listed below along with the totals achieved during the previous season:

Site:	Count 2017-18	Count 2016-17
Bernwood Meadows, Bucks	180	74
Bicester (Gavray Drive Meadows), Oxon	265	121
Otmoor RSPB Reserve, Oxon	33	32
Rushbeds Wood (tramway meadow), Bucks	62	30
Rushbeds (Lapland Farm Meadows), Bucks	130	67
Shotover (Slade Camp), Oxon	72	21

It should be pointed out that at Otmoor, by tradition, we search only along one particular hedge leading away from the car-park. It was planted by the RSPB especially for the Brown Hairstreak shortly after the millennium. Egg numbers there have fluctuated quite significantly over the years, achieving a peak of 123 during the winter of 2007-08, but there is now so much more young and sheltered blackthorn available to the butterfly in the general area within and close to the car-park (and, of course, vast amounts of it elsewhere on this huge site) that it is no great surprise egg numbers have declined somewhat on the specific hedge we look at.

The six tetrads added during the current egg-searching season comprised five to the south and west of the City of Oxford (all discovered by the indefatigable Steve Woolliams, who for two of those finds was accompanied by Caroline Steele and Tim Sharp), while the other one was to the west of Steeple Claydon in Bucks (a sighting made by Stuart Hodges on one of his own farmland hedges). Two of those tetrads extend our core population further north and further south than the butterfly has ever previously been found. The southernmost one takes us to within four tetrads of Marc Botham's very unexpected adult sighting at Little Wittenham Farm (SU5692) on 3rd September 2014 - maybe that particular female took a punt down the Thames!



Of the thirteen “white holes” around the edge of the map, a few are tetrads which we didn’t find time to visit this season while the remainder were searched but no eggs were found. All have produced eggs within the current decade (eight of them during the winter of 2015-16, four during the winter of 2014-15 and the last one during the winter of 2013-14). Those around Thame, Oxon have proved to be the most difficult and we’re beginning to wonder if the earlier finds in that area resulted from a single pioneering female whose progeny have since failed to gain a proper foot-hold, but we’ll continue searching there because it is far too early yet to come to any firm conclusions. The managers of Wytham Wood to the west of Oxford seem to have had a vendetta against blackthorn over the last few years because the Brown Hairstreak’s food-plant has been removed from many of the areas which once produced eggs. Hopefully the butterfly is still to be found on hedgerows around the periphery of the site which we haven’t yet had a chance to search.

My thanks go to everyone who has sent in sightings, either of adults or of eggs, and to those of you who have cheerfully turned out to our organised egg-hunts (sometimes in rather unpleasant weather conditions!). I’m most grateful, though, to those few individual stalwarts who are prepared to go out on their own to search for eggs, in particular Tony Croft, Phil Penson, Karen Saxl, Wendy Wilson and Steve Woolliams, without whom we wouldn’t cover anywhere near as much ground each winter.

Dave Wilton (March 2018)