

BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION UPPER THAMES BRANCH

Report on Silver-spotted Skippers in the Chilterns 1995-2015

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Photo © Dave Miller

Instead of giving a full report on Silver-spotted Skipper sightings in 2015 (see below for summary), I will give an overview of how they have fared in our region over the past 20 years. This is adapted from text written for the forthcoming Atlas of Butterflies in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire.

This heat-loving butterfly is found in our region only on chalk downland in the Chilterns, and formerly on the Berkshire Downs. It occupies a string of discrete sites ranged along the scarp of the southern part of the Chiltern Hills, predominantly on sunny, south-facing, steep slopes with short, broken turf containing its sole larval foodplant, sheep's-fescue grass. Once much more widely distributed, now its northernmost site in Britain is Beacon Hill Ellesborough, near Wendover. Its strongholds in the Chilterns are the Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve, and Watlington Hill (National Trust).

Its distribution and abundance grew strongly from a low point in 1980 until 2000, but there has been a retraction of range in recent years. The number of occupied tetrads (2km squares) changed little in the past 20 years, from 21 in the decade 1995-2004 to 22 in 2005-2014, although the individual sites occupied did change in that time. This was, however, a big improvement on the 11 tetrads occupied in the period 1987-1992. Our BC observations were extended by major surveys by university researchers(1) in 2000 and 2009, which showed little change in the number of populations in the Chilterns network, but with several colonisations and extinctions. However, since 2009 there have been no reported sightings from the Berkshire Downs or from former outlying sites at Hartslock NR, Turville Hill, Coombe Hill and Bacombe Warren. Nor have there been sightings in recent years reported from former sites at Yoesden Bank, Lodge Hill or sites just east of Princes Risborough.

The Silver-spotted Skipper vies with the Brown Hairstreak as the last species to emerge in our area, appearing in mid to late July. The large, creamy-white, domed eggs are easy to find in August and September, attached to the fine blades of sheep's-fescue grass usually adjacent to warm, bare soil.

Climatic warming is expected to benefit this skipper in Britain. By 2000 it was occupying a wider range of slope aspects, and laying eggs well away from bare ground(2), although latterly this behaviour has reversed(1). In due course a warming trend might counteract the recent range retraction in the Chilterns, provided that good habitat is maintained by appropriate grazing in a network of inter-connected sites. However, the Silver-spotted Skipper is very reluctant to disperse - researchers found no exchange of over 1200 marked individuals between the three main areas of the Aston Rowant reserve(3) - so it seems unlikely that it will re-colonise the Berkshire Downs unaided.

2015 sightings

Earliest: 17th July, at Aston Rowant (Nigel Kiteley)

Latest: 7th September, Watlington Hill (John Holdbrook), and Aston Rowant North (Paul Huckle)

No. of reports by email, website or to Levana: 42.

Largest no. seen: more than 25-30 on 7th August at Aston Rowant North (Dave Miller)

Transect data are not included in the above figures.

Thank you to everyone who reported their sightings by email, via the website, or as records for the Levana database. If you have not already done so, please submit all records of Silver-spotted Skipper to Jim Asher, ideally using the Butterfly Records Spreadsheet downloadable from the [Your Records](#) section of this website.

References

1. Lawson, C.R., Bennie, J.J., and 14 others (2013) The status and conservation of the silver-spotted skipper *Hesperia comma* in South-East England 2000-2009. University of Exeter, Exeter, UK.
2. Davies, Z.G., Wilson, R.J., Coles, S. and Thomas, C.D. (2006) Changing habitat associations of a thermally constrained species, the silver-spotted skipper butterfly, in response to climate warming. *Journal of Animal Ecology* 75, 247-256.
3. Adey, J.P. and Wilson, S.F. (2010) The impact of the M40 motorway on populations of Chalkhill Blue *Lysandra coridon*, and Silver-spotted Skipper *Hesperia comma* at Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve. *Br. J. Ent. Nat. Hist.* 23, 7-19.

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