

BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION UPPER THAMES BRANCH

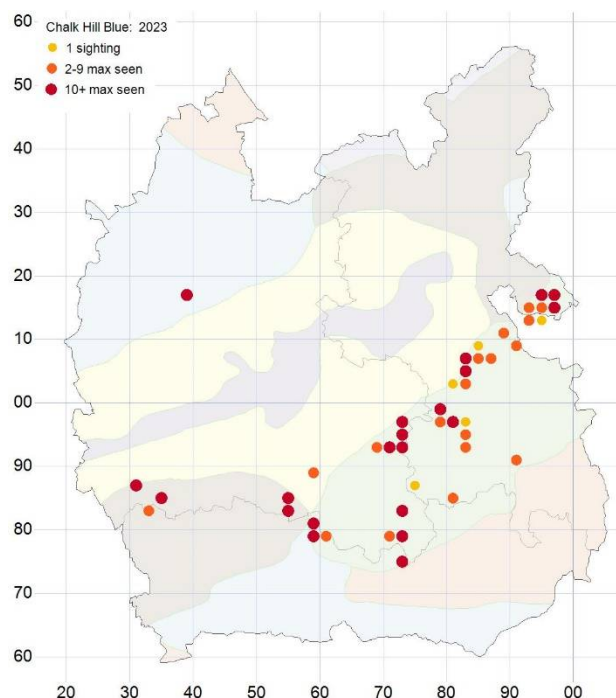
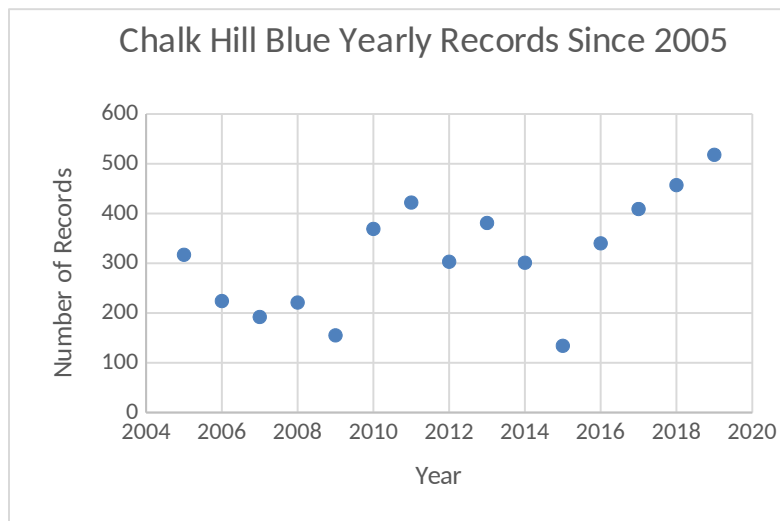
Chalk Hill Blue Report 2023

Nick Bowles

I am grateful to all of those supplying sightings detail and especially to those that kept me regularly updated as the season unfolded.

Within the UTB the Chalk Hill Blue's abundance and distribution seemed slightly worse than in some recent years. Overall, 2023 saw yet another slight fall in abundance at the sites where we expect the largest numbers. However, there were further signs of consolidation of those sites into which the butterfly has been spreading in the last five years.

Thanks to Andy Spragg for this graph (below) of the number of reports mentioning Chalkies between 2005- 2019



The first report in the UTB area in 2023 was 7th July (at Ivinghoe Beacon and Aston Rowant), considerably later than 24th June, the first in 2022. This July 'first' date was more similar to that in 2021 and previous years.

Numbers built slowly, and it was 5 days until anyone reported more than 4 at a single site. At most sites it was another week after that first sighting until there were any reports. An increase to multiple sightings at established sites came towards the second half of the second week of July.

Evidence of the poor numbers came in only Lardon Chase returning a sighting of over 100 individuals flying on a single day, with 118 counted on transect (1st August). In previous years some sites have had day-counts of over a thousand!

As usual, most Chalk Hill Blues (Chalkies) were seen in late July and early August.

Despite the Chilterns being relatively narrow, north to south, the first sighting is usually in the south (e.g. at Lardon Chase) about a week before that in the north (e.g. at Ivinghoe Beacon). However, no such difference was obvious in 2023.

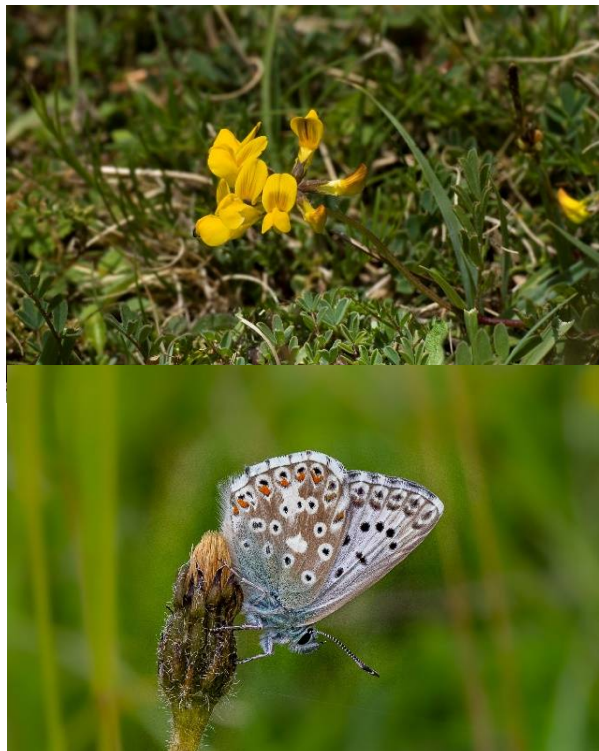
In 2022 the flight season was oddly truncated with only five sightings in September, but in September 2023 we learnt of sightings (some multiple) on 46 occasions. The last sighting was on Sept 16th in the Aston Upthorpe area, with no apparent second brood individuals anywhere. We had at least three second brood individuals flying in October in 2018 and one in 2022.



Why the butterfly's numbers were so low is not clear. Amounts of the larval foodplant, Horseshoe Vetch (*Hippocrepis comosa*) (image right), that were in flower before the butterfly was on the wing appeared to be as usual or more prolific.

Horseshoe Vetch is low growing plant of sparse grassland on alkali soil with low fertility. It has narrow leaves arranged opposite each other along the stems and clustered yellow flowers. It flowers before the similar Birds-foot Trefoil. It is the curled seed pods that give it its common name – Horseshoe Vetch.

Two recently colonised sites returned sightings but one with a very small number of previous sightings did not. The tiny colony within Wendover Woods should benefit from clearance work being done where the Horseshoe Vetch grows.



Andy Spragg's analysis suggests that it would be very informative to have reports (in 2024) from Dunsmore, near Wendover, and Lodge Hill in Buckinghamshire; and from Swyncombe Downs, Watts Bank and Sliding Hill in Oxfordshire. These appear to be sites with sporadic records and might have permanent colonies with infrequent recorder visits. We are fairly sure that there is an isolated colony near Stonesfield but unsure how extensive the area that it covers is. Any news from these sites during the 2024 flight period would be very welcome.

We work with a number of landowners to prepare areas of alkaline soil and plant Horseshoe Vetch. It has been seen to be an effective way to get new colonies established. If you know of sites with potential, please let us know.

Nick Bowles March 2023 nick.bowles@ntlworld.com