

BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION UPPER THAMES BRANCH

Chalk Hill Blue Report 2024

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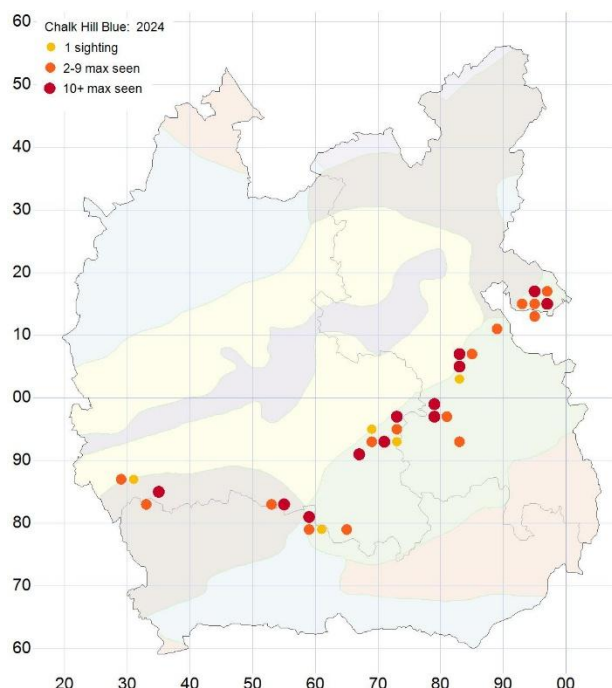
Sadly, in common with all Chalk Hill Blue colonies in southern England, our Chalkies suffered in 2024 (UKBMS data for England shows a **-58%** decline between 2023 and 2024, with a **-11%**, over the last ten years). In the UTB area the decline was slightly worse at **-61.8%**.



For the first time in many years some small colonies did not

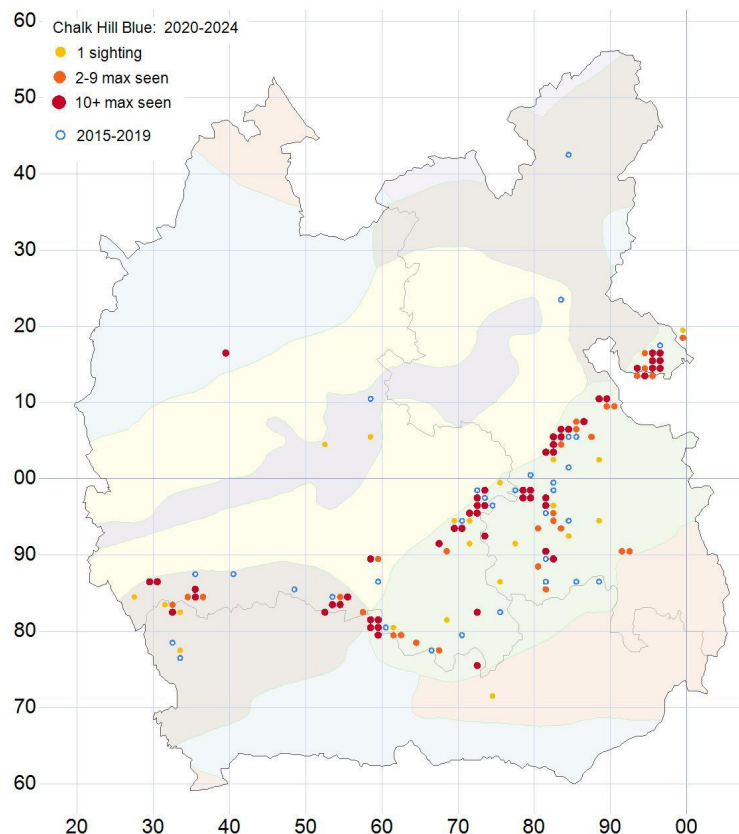
return a single sighting, or at best only a singleton. This is very disturbing because each time a colony is lost the distance between remaining colonies can be enlarged. That makes recolonisation less likely.

Our first record in 2024 was made at Hackpen Hill in Oxon on 11th July. If you remember the early summer was very wet so this date was ahead of my expectations. Two more were seen in the next five days and then a larger emergence began from the 17th July.



At first, signs were sufficiently encouraging that I expected the species to do roughly what it has over the last seven years and show some improvements in a few places and some set-backs in others, but to have an OK (if continually weakening) presence. Smaller colonies at marginal sites are always populated after the sites that have the largest numbers, and probably the best habitat conditions. So, initially I thought that these smaller colonies were simply late appearing and given the number of gloomy days early in the flight period, this wasn't especially worrying.

Most years the relatively long flight period (mid-July to mid-Sept) incorporates a few weeks of generally beneficial weather and equally some that hinder the butterfly. However, by the end of the season the periods of beneficial weather were fewer than usual. As a result, numbers were down everywhere and even some of those sites formerly blessed with hundreds of individuals on a single day were only providing a few tens of sightings; the colonies that usually produce fewer than five adults as a max day count were affected in a similar proportion, so that at four sites with recent records of low numbers, I learnt of no Chalkies all season. At two more there were sightings of a single male.



A map with blue circles showing gradual shrinkage of locations with sightings, especially obvious if compared with 2024 map above.

It is normal to learn of the odd wandering male, away from known colonies but no such wandering was detected in 2024, apart from one a few hundred metres from Lardon Chase. Such distances are minor by comparison with those seen in Milton Keynes and Bernwood Forest in previous seasons.

The season ended at about the expected time but unlike some years with a late flourish, 2024's flight time ended with a whimper. In 2024 the last double figure

report was made on Aug 30th and the very last record on Sept 21st. This butterfly (at Grangelands) was a good two weeks later than the latest sightings at most sites. And almost every September report was of fewer than five butterflies seen. While the numbers seen in those last two weeks were like the data from the worst of the last ten years, they were far below the best years; and there was no 'second brood' (or very delayed emergence). We had at least three 'second brood' individuals flying in October in 2018 and one in 2022.

In summary, we saw that numbers were down in 2023, compared with the average over the average of 5 years previously. A period with a trend of gradual decline. Despite the fall in abundance in 2023, all known colonies produced sightings. The decline seen then, continued and worsened in 2024, and became more disturbing with some small colonies seeming to have failed, in that their locations returned no sightings.