

BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION UPPER THAMES BRANCH

Grayling Report 2010

Des Sussex



Photo © Andrew Bolton

The Grayling in the UTB area continues to be widely reported from heathland and forestry plantations across the southern part of Berkshire, in all cases on well drained sandy or gravelly soils. Reports from most sites were of low numbers - often only ones or twos but the species seems to be fairly stable both in distribution and abundance.

Some Sites

It is fairly widespread and abundant in the extensive areas between Ascot, Bracknell and Sandhurst. There are former and potential sites nearby (such as Gorrick wood, Finchampstead Ridges and California CP) that have not reported any recent records. Mid Berks has current sites near to Aldermaston and Padworth (Paices, Decoy Heath) and in West Berkshire most records come from the Greenham/Baynes-Bowdown sites, but there are other potential sites that merit further targeted survey effort where access is available - conifer woods near to Mortimer, or restored heathland at Bucklebury, Snelsmore and Inkpen commons.

Sites vary greatly in the amount of the fine grasses that the species requires for caterpillar food - some seemingly good heathlands have very little foodplant. Where the grasses are plentiful and there are sunny open conditions the species does thrive - including along wide sunny forest rides and clearings (such as in parts of Swinley Forest). The mobility of the species is important as patches of good habitat can change in character (becoming shaded or overgrown) as trees mature. This has happened at the South end of Caesars Camp in Bracknell where a sunny heathland verge has become more enclosed and shaded. The upside is that improved forestry policies by some landowners is resulting in wide heathy rides being

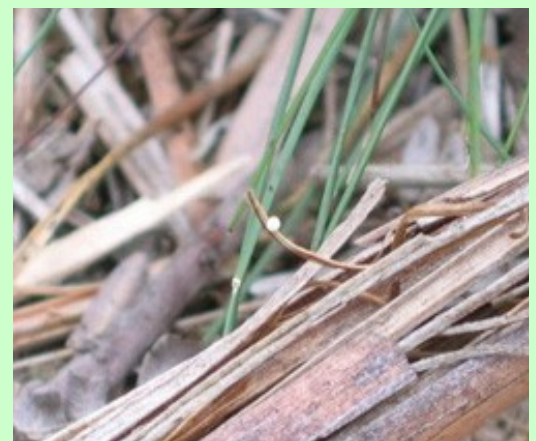


Photo © Des Sussex

maintained to link permanent areas of open heathland such as between Caesars Camp and Wickham Bushes.

Right: Grayling egg (centre of picture) on some dead bracken at Caesars Camp, Bracknell, close to but not on, the fine grasses that the caterpillar eats.

Habitat Management

The main habitat management that is routinely undertaken (that benefits the Grayling) is scrub management, grazing (cattle, goats etc), mowing (e.g. forest track verges and firebreaks) and physical ground disturbance which can provide the bare or sparsely vegetated sandy areas so favoured by the adults. Heathland fires can keep areas clear of scrub (for a few years) but in Berkshire most fires are accidents or the result of arson and are usually very damaging to much wildlife as they tend to occur in the Spring or Summer.

The open habitats at Swinley Brick Pits (restricted access) have plenty of sparse heathy vegetation and bare sandy banks. This site supports good numbers of Grayling - it links with an extensive area of forestry and also golf courses which have heathland habitat patches of value to the species.

A Lost Population?

Other habitat opportunities that the Grayling has exploited in Berkshire are the gravel workings in the Blackwater Valley between Sandhurst and Eversley. This area had a number of records in the 1990's but no recent ones, possibly due to changes as the habitats matured post restoration - perhaps this was just a temporary opportunistic population. However areas of gravel extraction are ongoing and worth surveying where access is permitted.

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