

Upper Thames Branch Silver-studded Blue Report 2024



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Butterfly Conservation Upper Thames Branch

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Des Sussex (UTB member) & Grahame Hawker (Upper Thames Branch 'SSB' species champion)

<https://www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk/specieschamps>

Summary

Since the last 'SSB' report in 2020, there has been a welcome increase in recording activity, largely due to the formation of the Silver-studded Blue Crew by Grahame. This has prompted more pre- and mid- 'flight season' communication between active recorders, and has helped to recruit some new people to spend time looking for, enjoying, and recording the species. Of note, in the last few years there has been an annual SSB Crew survey of the Barossa ranges.



Habitat restoration and creation work has helped the 'SSB' to expand its local range and populations in the Barossa Range Danger Area, and in the extensive forests south of Bracknell and Ascot. The prospects for the species at these sites are certainly much better than 10 years ago.

The species is still hanging on at the heathland nature reserves at Wildmoor Heath and Broadmoor Bottom, but its future at these sites is far from secure.

The Silver-studded Blue remains a high conservation priority in the area, and its dependence on actively managed heathland makes it a useful indicator of habitats of high conservation value for a range of specialist heathland species.

Introduction

The last report was in 2020, so this report aims to update on the plight of the species during the 4 flight seasons between 2021 and 2024, as well as providing some notes on recording effort and habitat management work.

The species is well documented as requiring active habitat management to maintain a diversity of age/height structures in the heathland habitats, including plenty of short sward vegetation.

Recent survey effort.

During the period 2016 -2020, iRecord shows 127 records of SSB in Berkshire. For the 4 years since (2021-2024) there have been over 720 records. This significant increase is in large part due to the efforts of the SSB Crew, and in particular the group survey days at Barossa organised by Grahame Hawker and Surrey Wildlife Trust. The use of the iRecord 'app' has also increased the number of records, as many singletons are recorded at the precise location, whereas some recorders still 'bulk' their records to a larger scale grid reference.

The 'Berkshire Silver-studded Blue Crew' has grown and evolved, with an email group which keeps in touch during the flight season with messaging aimed at promoting targeted survey activity. This has worked quite well, and the group survey days have been very successful in bringing people together to work as a team. These days have also included bringing experts and beginners together to help with training and awareness of the species.

Considering the huge numbers of visitors to some of the sites where the Silver-studded Blue is found, it is still largely overlooked by most people, being a small and inconspicuous butterfly. It is amazing that in the last 10 years the most people recording the species in any one year has been 18! It can only be assumed that most of the UTB butterfly 'twitchers' and photographers who go to 'get' the species for their annual list either do not submit records, or they go to the other colonies nearby in Hampshire and Surrey.

Records and update on general distribution and status

The maps and tables shows a summary of the records from 2021-24. Table 1 shows that there are higher numbers being recorded more consistently year on year than 10 years ago. This is due to an increase in populations, and not just due to the increased recording effort. Some notes on reasons for this are given in the site reports below.

The flight season (table 1) has been influenced by weather, which has seen some extremes such as the heatwave in 2022 which saw very early first and last dates (as far as records show), but very good numbers were seen during the flight season. The very poor wet spring and absence of sunshine in 2024 was widely reported as resulting in a very poor year for butterflies, but the Silver-studded Blue seemed to have a fairly good year from our data. The rather short flight season does perhaps limit survey and recording effort.

Site reports and notes

1. Barossa MoD Training Area - Wishmoor Bottom & the Range Danger Area:

See maps 1a and 1b. The group survey days have included access to the Range Danger Area (RDA) organised by Surrey Wildlife Trust with kind permission of the Defence Infrastructure Organization. The RDA is permanently closed to public access for safety reasons, and as such provides a wonderful undisturbed wildlife sanctuary. Whilst wildlife, including some butterflies can be seen around the edges from outside the fence, the chance to do active surveys in this area has added greatly to our local knowledge of the species, and to the outcomes of the habitat management undertaken by SWT and DIO.

Significant heathland restoration and management has been undertaken by them in the RDA and on the accessible training areas at Wishmoor Bottom. This has included



scrub management, mowing for firebreaks and heather management, and grazing by Belted Galloway cattle. This has greatly improved the extent and quality of suitable habitat for SSB. The contrast in distribution between maps 1a and 1b is clear to see, and the increased distribution is backed up by increased numbers seen at many locations. During the 2022 group survey, there were many hundreds flying in the 'Poppy Hills' area at the northern end of the RDA, an area that 10 years before had been dense birch

and pine scrub totally unsuitable for the species. This is credit to all involved in the conservation work.

Wishmoor Bottom remains the best place to see the species in Berkshire. This population, which survived due to the mowing of firebreaks (now even more important as part of heathland management plans) has provided the core from which the species has been able to spread into new habitat restored across Barossa and Swinley Forest.

Note the 'meta-population' of SSB at Barossa and Swinley Forest extends across the county boundary into the Surrey parts of those sites, but here we are only reporting on records from the Berkshire side. It is known that some good counts of SSB on the Surrey side have been reported in recent years.

2. Swinley Forest:

See maps 1a and 1b. Swinley Forest is contiguous with the MoD Ranges and Poors Allotments. The forest is actively managed for timber production, recreation, and conservation. Pre 2000 the main 'heathland' habitat in the forest was at Caesar's Camp (restored in early 1990's), but there are now many more areas of heathland restored and maintained as nature conservation areas and wide corridors.

Importantly some of these directly link to the MoD heathlands and Poors Allotments, enabling specialist wildlife like the SSB to disperse when weather and habitat allow. Like for Barossa, a comparison of the maps 1a and 1b show a great increase in distribution in the forest in the last 4 years. The species has moved from the MoD Ranges, along the wide corridor past Lower Star Post and up past Upper Star Post. In the last 2 years it has dispersed east of Upper Star Post along the wide habitat corridor past Pudding Hill, and has also been seen west of Gormoor Farm.

As such it has moved approximately 2km to the north, and 2.5km to the north-east in the last few years, mainly using the habitat corridor created as a result of a new

water main through the forest. Active management of the habitat by The Crown Estate has created ideal habitat for the species to breed and disperse. More recently (2022) an area of about 3.5 ha of heathland habitat has been restored at Wickham Bushes, and this is now providing suitable habitat for the SSB to colonise.

Interestingly, there have been hardly any records from Caesars Camp, which one might expect to offer some suitable habitat. This should be a target for habitat management to favour the species.

At the SE end of the forest the species is also doing quite well along Vicarage Lane in Surrey as a result of habitat conservation work, with the potential to move north into the Berkshire parts of the forest near to Rapley.



3. Wildmoor Heath and Broadmoor Bottom NR:

BBOWT undertake transect monitoring at both sites, but numbers are very few, with even fewer seen 'off transect' by other recorders. The species seems to be 'just hanging on' at both sites and increased management for pioneer/short sward heather is required if the species is to become at all viable.

Cattle grazing has been re-introduced by Bracknell (2024) in helping to create short open habitat conditions on the damp heath, much of which has become rather rank and overgrown. The problems with getting grazing on the site have not helped the task of maintaining the site in a favourable condition for pioneer heathland species such as the Silver-studded Blue.

Broadmoor Bottom is contiguous with MoD RDA being just separated by a chain link fence which is no barrier to butterflies. Creating suitable habitat by grazing and mowing is needed to help boost the species here.

4. Buttersteep Forest and Swinley Brick Pits:

Maps 2a and 2b show the survey records from the last 10 years. Map 2a shows a significant increase in distribution (compared with 2b) within some of the rides and open habitats, this is due to the recovery and dispersal of the Silver-studded Blue within the forest, and an increase in survey effort by a small number of people. At many locations during 2021-24 the numbers have been in the 10-20 range, whereas previously counts were mostly in the 1-10 range. The increases have been due to positive habitat management of wide heathland rides, and the creation of some new heathland conservation areas. Additionally the species is making use of some forestry compartments with young crops (<3 years) which have open habitats with plentiful pioneer heather (all 3 species). These latter habitats and colonies will be short lived as the tree crops develop and shade out the heather, but will give the species a better chance to disperse to new areas as they become suitable.

The Swinley Brick Pits area is not easily accessible, but this area has had a lot of habitat restoration in the last 3 years, and now has more suitable habitat for the species.

The Swinley Forest Golf Course lies contiguous with the Buttersteep forestry areas, and the golf course has quite large areas of managed heather (ling and bell heather) and acid grassland. This area has not been surveyed for SSB as far as we know, in part due to limitations of safe access -the course does not have any public access.

5. Other sites.

Potential West Berkshire Heathland Butterfly Project

Whilst Silver-studded Blues are slowly expanding their range in east Berkshire, there are currently no known colonies in the west of the county. There is a thriving colony just across the Hampshire border on Silchester Common, but all other local colonies have been lost. There has been a lot of heathland restoration on a number of sites in West Berkshire in recent years, so now would be an excellent time to develop a West Berkshire Heathland Butterfly Project taking in suitable sites running along the West Berkshire/Hampshire border, especially as Bucklebury Common and Padworth Common have new enthusiastic rangers, and a thriving colony of Graylings has developed on Fifty-Acre Piece. Whilst such a project would benefit a wide range of pioneer heathland species, the main targets would be Silver-studded Blue, and Grayling.

The areas of land that could be part of this project are Wokefield Common, Fifty-Acre Piece, Padworth Common, Burnt Common, Silchester Common, Tadley Common, Decoy Heath, Paices Wood, Bucklebury Common, Crookham Common, Greenham Common, Newtown Common, and Snelsmore Common. The fact that the majority of the potential sites for inclusion in this project are owned by just a few owners- BBOWT, Englefield Estate, Silchester Parish Council, and Bucklebury Estate - would make partnership working easier.



Volunteer work party doing some bare ground creation at a mid-Berks heathland.

Wellington College: No further records have been received from Wellington College since the single female in July 2020. The heathland is being actively managed for wildlife but the site is not well connected to the heath at Wildmoor. This may change following recent clearance under the pylons from the Wildmoor car park, which may create an open heathland corridor. The car park and road will still provide a potential barrier to heathland species moving freely between the 2 sites.

Swinley Park: Silver-studded Blues have been seen in parts of the golf course to the south of Swinley Park. The Grayling has also been seen from both areas in recent years. The golf course has quite large areas of managed heather (ling and bell heather) and acid grassland of high value to heathland invertebrates, most of this is mown annually. The course does not have any public access which limits opportunity for survey.

Records were reported in 2022 from **Bucklers Forest** in Crowthorne but none since. As far as we know there has been no further survey effort in **Silwood Park** since

sightings were reported in 2018. Little more is known about this site, and it merits some investigation in 2025.



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the landowners and land managers who are putting effort into positively managing sites to maintain and enhance the heathland habitat and special species that it supports. Many thanks to Surrey WT and MoD for enabling the survey days in the RDA.

'SSB Crew' - Very many thanks to all who look out for this species and submit records.

Thanks to Peter Ogden for help with UTB records and maps.

If you are interested in joining the 'SSB' Crew do get in touch with Grahame - grahamehawker@hotmail.com

All photos Grahame Hawker unless labelled otherwise

Grahame & Des, April 2025

note: We have done our best to analyse the data fully and accurately but accept that there may be some minor errors. Some records are from where sites overlap with Surrey and Hampshire and it is sometimes hard to separate which county the record was from.

Please notify us if you spot any obvious errors or omissions.

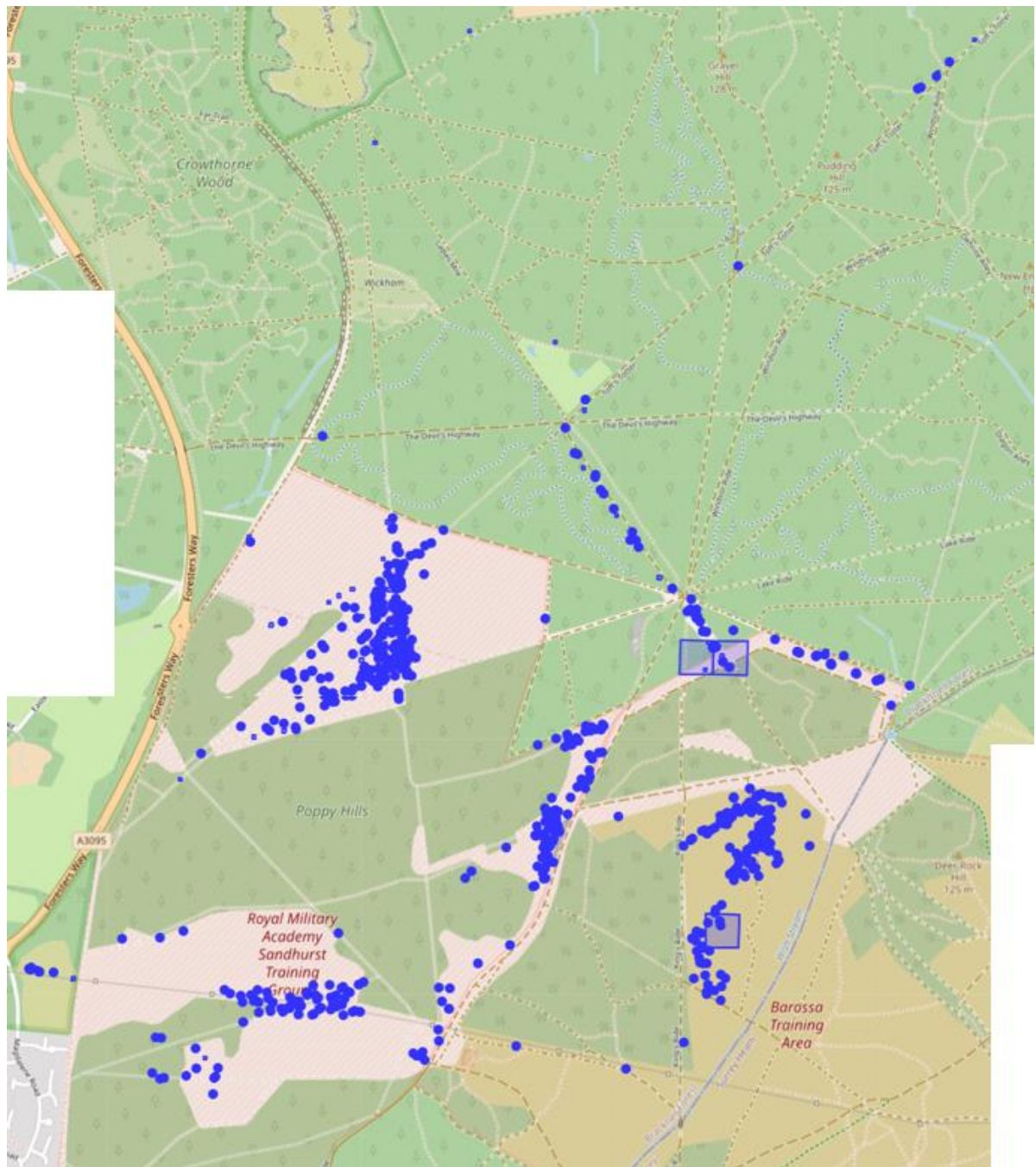
Maps and Tables

Map 1a	2021-24 Distribution in Swinley Forest and Barossa
Map 1b	2016-20 Distribution in Swinley Forest and Barossa
Map 2a	2021-24 Distribution in Buttersteep Forest
Map 2b	2016-20 Distribution in Buttersteep Forest
Map 3	SSB in Berkshire: 2024 data at tetrad (2x2 km) resolution
Map 4	SSB in Berkshire: 5 year (2020 -2024) data at 1x1 km resolution
Table 1.	Recent trends in Silver-studded Blue recording in the UTB area
Table 2.	Tetrads from which Silver-studded Blue have been recorded (2015-2024)

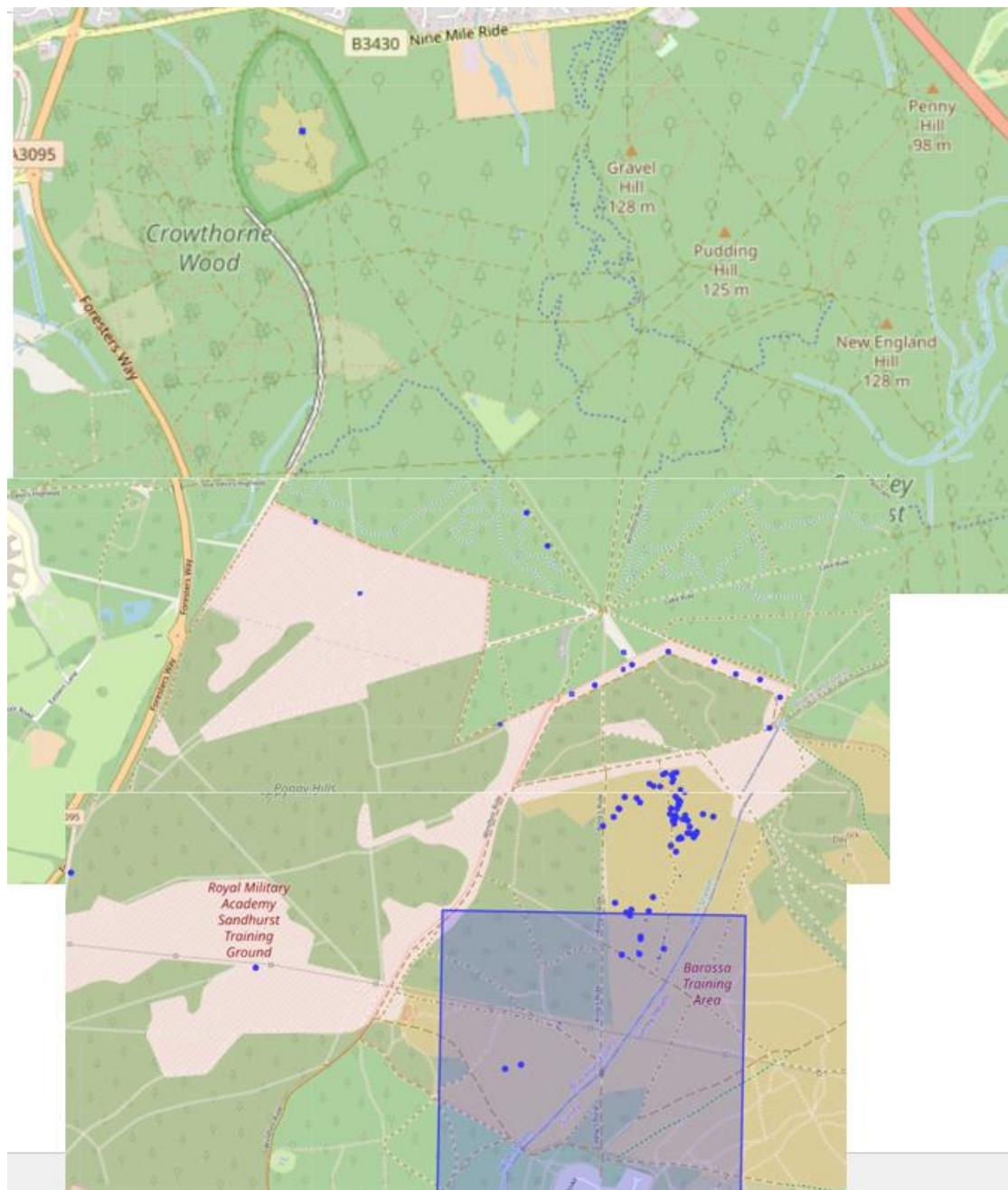


Photo - Grahame Hawker

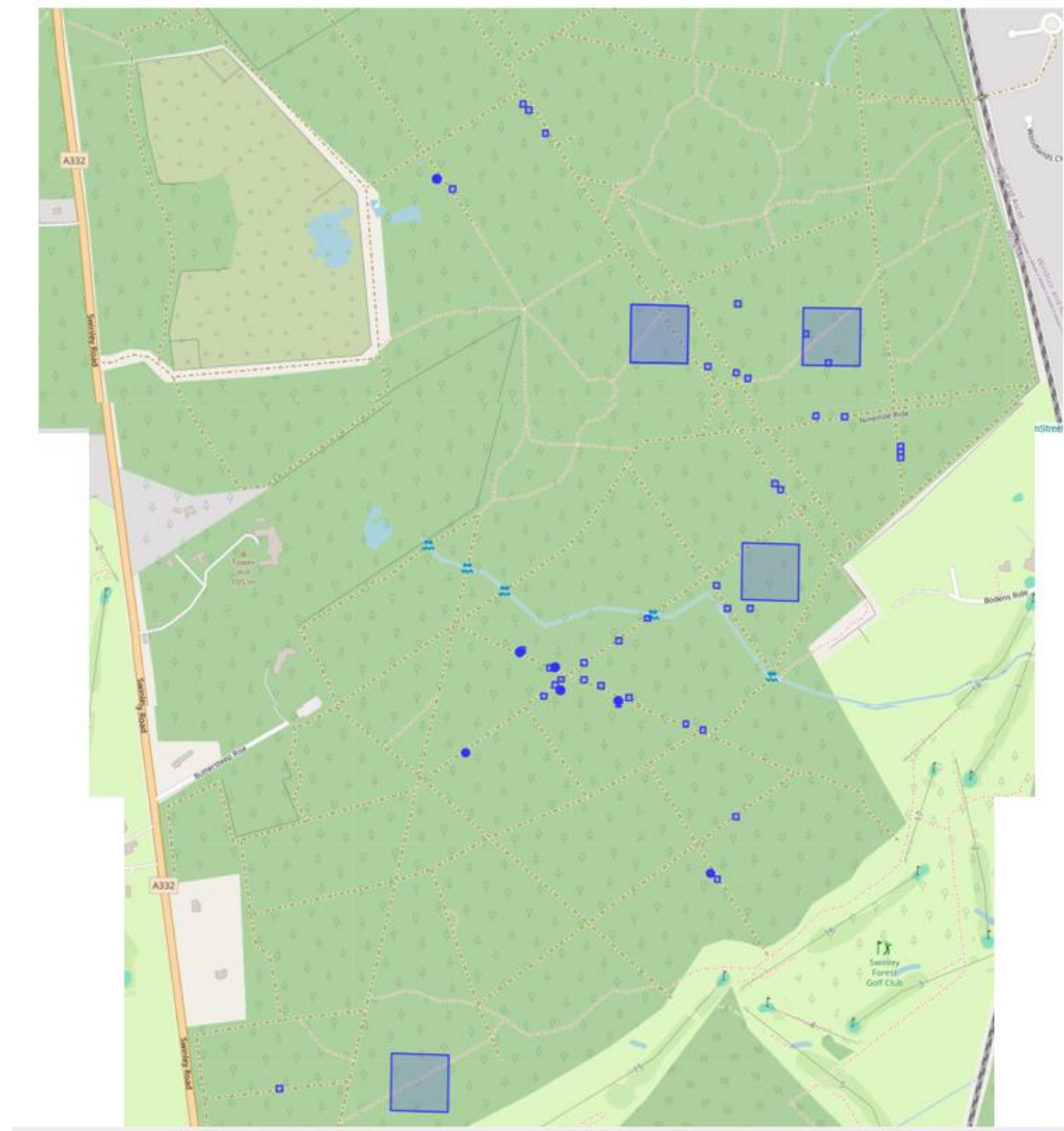
Map 1a Swinley Forest and Barossa 2021-2024 (data from iRecord)



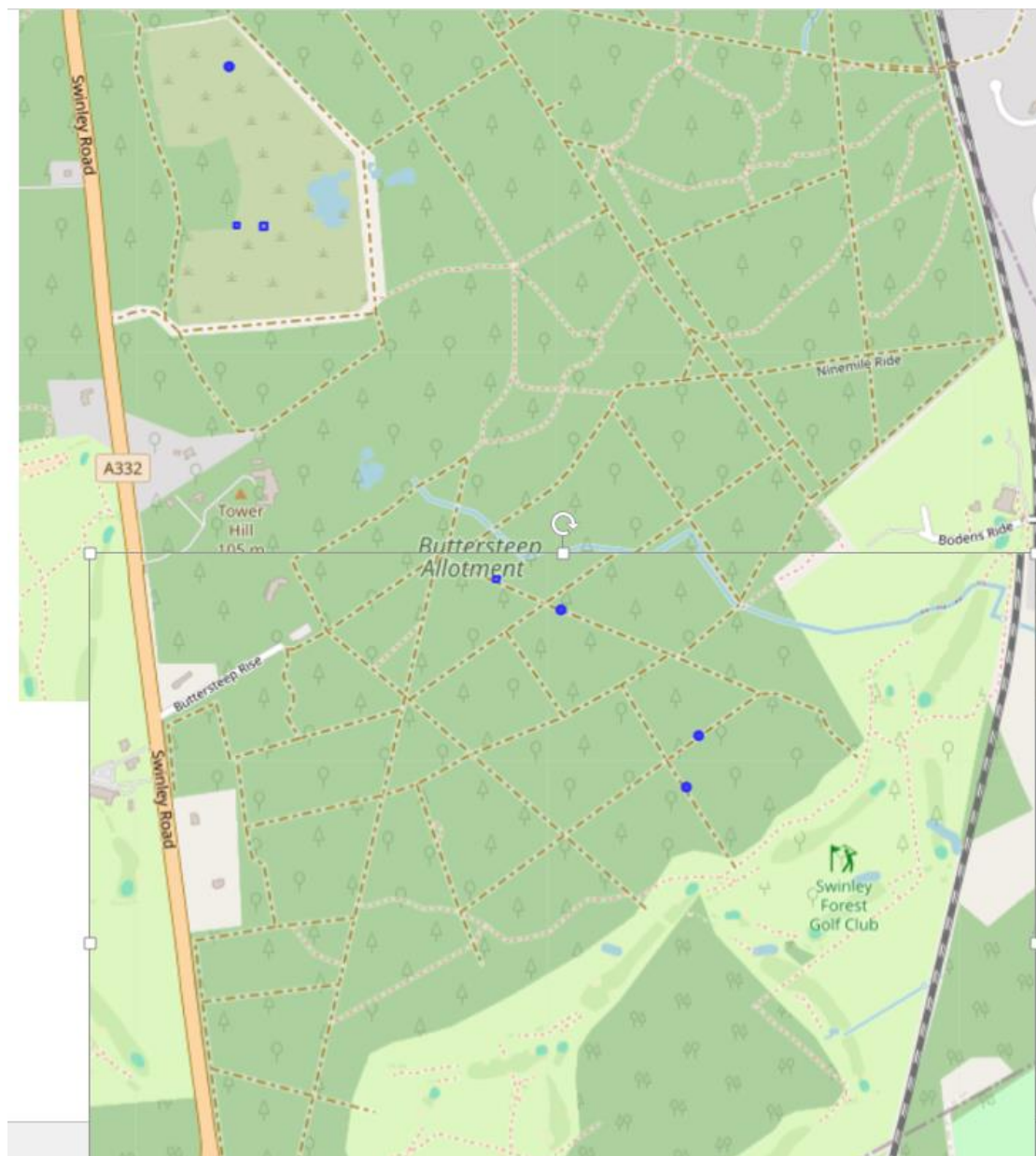
Map 1b Swinley Forest and Barossa 2016-2020 (data from iRecord)



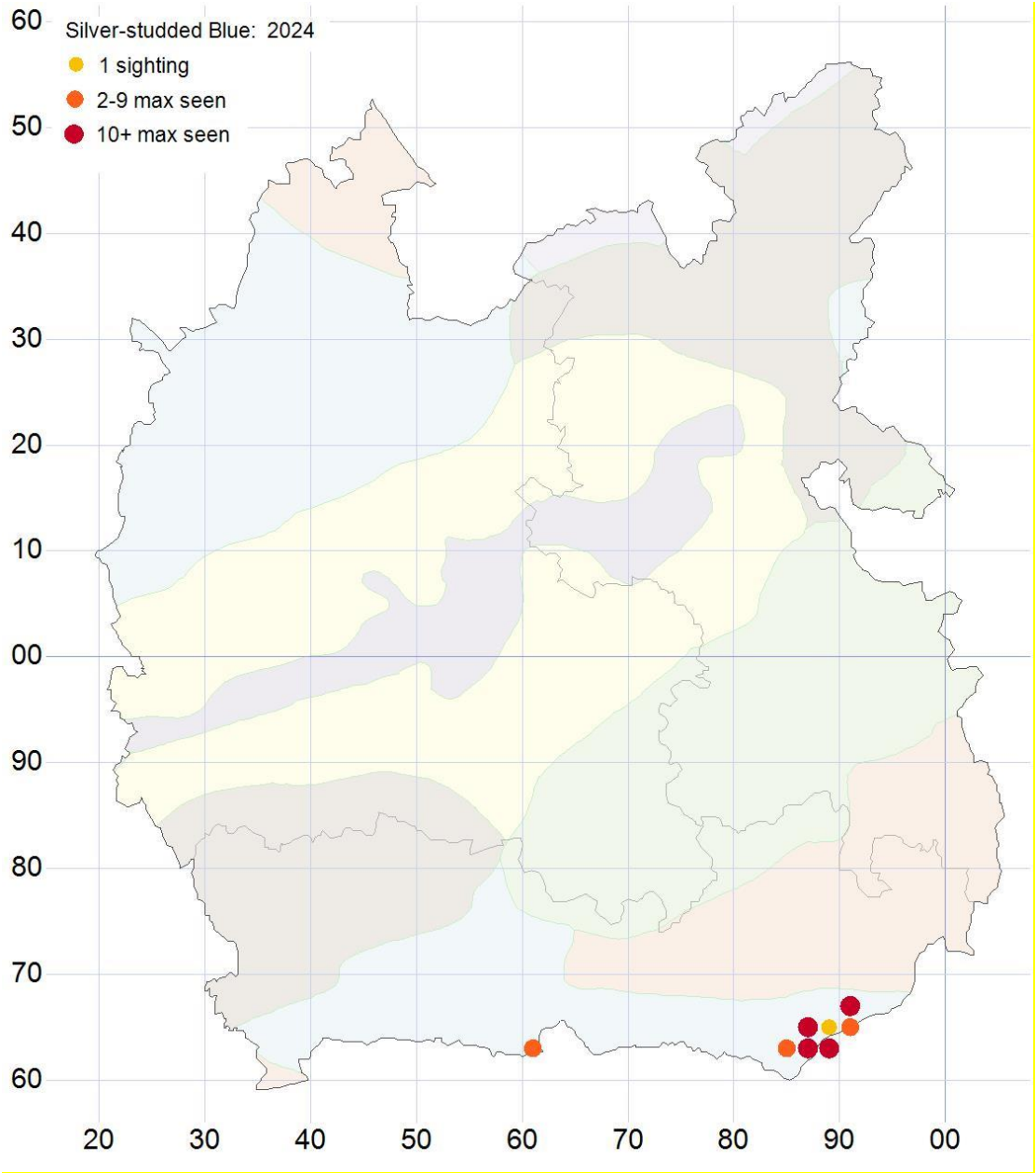
Map 2a Buttersteep Forest 2021-2024 (data from iRecord)



Map 2b Buttersteep Forest 2016-2020 (data from iRecord)



Map 3 SSB in Berkshire: 2024 data at tetrad (2x2 km) resolution



Map 4 SSB in Berkshire last 5 years: 2020 -2024 data at monad (1x1 km) resolution

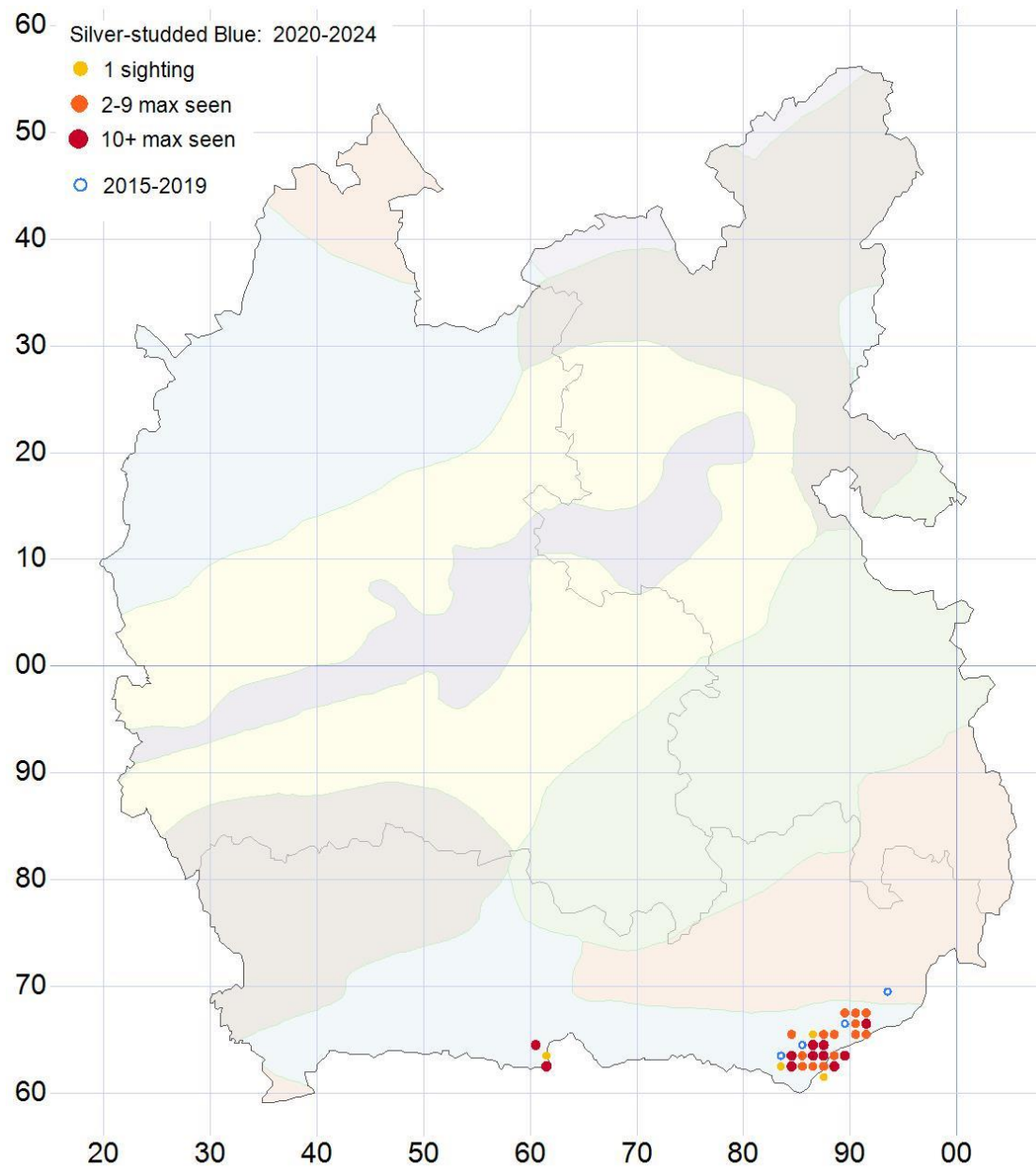


Table 1. Recent trends in Silver-studded Blue recording in the UTB area 2015-2024

Year	Number of records	Number of recorders	Total SSB counted	Highest count	Number of occupied tetrads	First recorded date	Last recorded date	Recorded Flight period (days)
2015	12	4	36		4	17/06		
2016	23	4	130	50	3	19/06	10/08	53
2017	33	10	43	3	5	14/06	14/08	62
2018	41	11	334	110	6	17/06	17/07	31
2019	31	8	87	17	5	22/06	04/08	44
2020	39	11	155	20	7	07/06	30/07	54
2021	238*	15	628	33	8	26/06	26/07	31
2022	180*	18	1010		6	02/06	17/07	46
2023	135*	14	396		8	12/06	22/07	41
2024	192*	12	534		8	12/06	01/08	51

All figures are from the data we had available, and some have been rounded to our best estimate.

*significant contribution of group survey visits by the SSB Crew to the records.

2021. 205 of the 238 records were from the 'SSB Crew' survey at Barossa on 18/07.

2022. 139 of the 180 records were from the 'SSB Crew' survey at Barossa on 26/06.

2023. 53 of the 135 records were from the 'SSB Crew' survey at Barossa on 30/06.

2024. 136 of the 192 records were from the 'SSB Crew' survey at Barossa on 23/06.



A SSB settled to roost overnight - Des Sussex

Table 2. Tetrads from which Silver-studded Blue has been recorded 2015-2024

Tetrad	Site/sub site	Notes	Present 2015-2020	Present 2021-2024
SU46	Woodhay	Records from 1908, 1950	No	No
SU5662	Wasing	Record from 1972	No	No
SU6062	Silchester Common & Pamber Heath. Decoy Heath NR	Decoy Heath	Yes	2021, 23
SU6064	Aldermaston	Records from 1977, 78	No	2021
SU6262	Silchester Common		Yes	Yes
SU6464	East of Cowpiece Pond	Single record from TVERC 2006	No	No
SU8262	Wellington College, Wildmoor NR (W)	Wildmoor W is mainly woodland	Yes	No
SU8462	Wildmoor NR (E), Broadmoor Bottom NR (BBOWT)		Yes	2021, 22, 23, 24
SU8464	Crowthorne Woods, Buckler's Forest, Hut Hill		No	2022
SU8660	RMAS		No	No
SU8662	Wishmoor Bottom and Poppy Hills		Yes	2021, 22, 23, 24
SU8664	Swinley Forest- Lower Star to Caesar's Camp		Yes	2021, 22, 23, 24
SU8862	Wishmoor Bottom to Surrey (Old Dean/Poors)		Yes	2023, 24
SU8864	Swinley Forest - Rapley	Last record 1990	No	2023, 24
SU8866	Swinley Park, Tetrad also includes Berkshire Golf Club (Private)	1990, then 2017	Yes	2021
SU9064	Buttersteep South and Dukes Hill, Tetrad also includes Swinley Forest Golf Club (Private).		Yes	2021, 22, 23, 24
SU9066	Buttersteep North – includes Kings Ride and Swinley Brick Pits	Regularly recorded with some high counts in 1990's. Then very few records last 20 years	Yes	2021, 2022, 23, 24
SU9266	South Ascot	A few records in 1991	No	No
SU9268	Silwood Park		Yes	No
Total occupied			11	12