

Butterfly count begins

Many butterfly species are spreading into Scotland due to climate change creating warmer habitats, according to the leading wildlife charity dedicated to saving the colourful insects.

The charity Butterfly Conservation says data over 50 years shows a clear northward spread for species such as the Peacock, Comma and Holly Blue as climate change creates warmer conditions for them to survive in.

The once-migratory Red Admiral now overwinters and is classed as a UK resident, while species spotted in new places include the Holly Blue, which had its best ever year in Scotland in 2023, including many sightings in the Lothians.

Meanwhile, species like the Scotch Argus are retreating northwards within Scotland to stay in cooler climes.

Butterfly Conservation is calling on people across Scotland to take part in its annual citizen science project, the Big Butterfly Count to help track the spread of species.

The event, which runs until 4 August, helps to assess the health of the environment by recording the number and type of butterflies and some day-flying moths spotted around the UK.

Dr Zoë Randle, Senior Surveys Officer at Butterfly Conservation, said that while some species are thriving, others including some habitat specific species face the threat of extinction.

She said: "Thirty years ago you wouldn't have seen a Holly Blue in Scotland, now it has expanded where it lives across the UK by 34%, increasingly spreading northward.

"And the Red Admiral, which was once a migratory species most commonly seen in southern England in the summer and then leaving for Europe in the winter, is now living in the UK all year round, resulting in a three-fold increase in their numbers.

"We're also seeing other species which have previously suffered severe declines, such as the Comma, recovering, with a huge increase of 94% in where it is found.

"These highly adaptable species are all able to move into new places as the climate warms, but for habitat specific species, these trends raise serious red flags.

"Species that rely on particular habitats aren't able to move as freely as our garden favourites. This means that if climate change continues, they could become trapped in isolated fragments of remaining habitat, unable to move and – with their food plants at risk from adverse weather conditions – facing the very real threat of extinction."

Butterfly Conservation says that, with half of Britain's butterfly species already threatened or near threatened with extinction, it has never been more important to understand how they are responding to the changing climate and take action to protect them.

Last summer, 3295 people in Scotland took part in the Big Butterfly Count, conducting 5087 counts in gardens, parks, school grounds and the countryside and recording 28,042 butterflies and day-flying moths.

The Small White was the most spotted butterfly, followed by the Large White, Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell and Meadow Brown. The Red Admiral, Green-veined White, Ringlet, Scotch

Argus and Speckled Wood made up the top ten.

The Holly Blue, a relatively recent arrival in Scotland, had its best ever results north of the Border increasing by 118% on the previous year.

TV naturalist Chris Packham, Butterfly Conservation's Vice President called on members of the public to spend 15 minutes in an outdoor space counting the butterflies they see.

He said: "Butterflies are on the move, and there's no doubt that climate breakdown is behind these geographic shifts.

"We know nature is running out of time, so we need to act now. We need you to get out for the Big Butterfly Count, let us know what you spot and where you spot it.

"You will be gathering the important data we need to see what the latest impacts are on our butterflies and moths, so that we can take the action needed to protect them."

