

Butterflies in danger

Scotland's butterflies are in danger of disappearing without urgent action, it has been claimed, after an annual count this summer returned the lowest numbers on record.

Participants in this year's Big Butterfly Count spotted just five of the colourful insects on average, one fewer than last year and the lowest in the event's 14-year history.

Butterfly Conservation, which organises the survey each summer, has declared a national "Butterfly Emergency" due to the "hugely concerning decline".

The wildlife conservation charity has also written to the Government asking them to declare a "Nature Emergency" and ban butterfly-killing neonicotinoid pesticides "before it's too late".

In Scotland, there were 22,818 butterflies spotted in total, down more than 5000 or almost 20% compared with 2023.

Of the 17 butterflies and day flying moths included in the count north of the Border, 12 (71%) showed a reduction in numbers compared with 2023.

Species including the Small Tortoiseshell, Painted Lady, Red Admiral and Scotch Argus all had their worst year in the history of the Big Butterfly Count.

The Green-veined White had its second worst year, while the

Holly Blue, which had its best ever summer in Scotland in 2023, was down by 42%.

Peacock butterfly numbers fell a staggering 94%, after the species had its best summer since 2018 last year.

The Ringlet was found to be the most abundant butterfly in Scotland, ahead of the Small White and Meadow Brown.

It was one of only five species to show an increase on last year (+123%), along with Meadow Brown (+28%), Speckled Wood (+67%), Common Blue (+75%) and Six-spot Burnet (+34%).

The Ringlet appeared to do well this summer, however, experts say even it suffered a poor summer.

The Ringlet has only a short flight period which is usually in its latter stages before the snapshot survey starts. This year it is thought to have emerged later due to the wet spring and cold summer, to coincide exactly with the count and present in larger numbers as a result.

Over the course of the whole summer it would also appear to have fared worse than usual.

Dr Richard Fox, Head of Science at Butterfly Conservation, said: "Our butterflies are in trouble. They are in decline and while it's brilliant that so many people get out there and help us count them we can't just keep counting while they dwindle away. We need to take some action whether that is as individuals or our governments.

"Often Scotland bucks the trend and does better than down south, but there is nothing in the results this year to suggest that. The average number of butterflies seen per count in Scotland was only five, which is the lowest it's been since the count started.

"Unfortunately even the species that increased didn't necessarily have a good summer.

“People saw lots of Ringlets in the Big Butterfly Count in Scotland. It is number one in this year’s chart but sadly that doesn’t mean that it had a good summer.

“We are confident that the Ringlet actually had a poor summer and the reason why people saw lots of them was that the timing of the count happened to coincide with the peak emergence of the species, as a result of the cooler summer and Ringlet emergence being delayed.”

Across the UK, more than 85,000 people took part in the Big Butterfly Count from 12 July – 4 August, submitting 143,241 counts.

Just over 935,000 butterflies and day-flying moths were recorded, down almost 600,000 – equivalent to more than a third of the 2023 total.

For the first time in the citizen science programme’s history, over 9000 counts were logged as seeing zero butterflies.

A third of the species recorded had their worst year on record, and no species had their best.

In Scotland a total of 5,620 counts were submitted by 3,587 people.

Dr Fox said: “Butterflies are a key indicator species. When they are in trouble we know that the wider environment is in trouble too.

“Nature is sounding the alarm call. We must act now if we are to turn the tide on these rapid declines and protect species for future generations.”

Butterfly Conservation is writing an open letter to Steve Reed, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, calling for the Government to act now by declaring a “Nature Emergency” and banning toxic neonicotinoid pesticides “once and for all, with no exceptions, before it is too late.”

Dr Fox said: “When used on farmland, these chemicals make their way into the wild plants growing at field edges, resulting in adult butterflies and moths drinking contaminated nectar and caterpillars feeding on contaminated plants.

“Many European countries have already banned these chemicals, it’s time for the UK to follow suit and put the natural world first.

“If we don’t act now to address the long-term drivers of butterfly decline, we will face extinction events never before seen in our lifetime.”

He added: “If every single person who helped with the count this summer in Scotland signs our letter to the Government, we could prevent the very real and pressing threat of species becoming extinct in our lifetime.”

To sign Butterfly Conservation’s letter to the Government asking them to declare a “Nature Emergency” and ban butterfly-killing neonicotinoid pesticides visit: <https://butterfly-conservation.org/emergency>

Signing closes on Sunday 13 October 2024.

* BIG BUTTERFLY COUNT RESULTS in SCOTLAND 2024

Scotland totals:

BBC 2024: Scotland		Abundance	Average per count	% change from 2023
1	Ringlet	4,689	0.96	123
2	Small White	4,123	0.84	-29
3	Meadow Brown	3,778	0.77	28
4	Large White	3,299	0.68	-11
5	Green-veined White	1,850	0.38	-16
6	Speckled Wood	1,089	0.22	67

7	Common Blue	784	0.16	75
8	Small Tortoiseshell	688	0.14	-79
9	Red Admiral	609	0.12	-79
10	Six-spot Burnet	559	0.11	34
11	Scotch Argus	481	0.10	-64
12	Peacock	221	0.05	-94
13	Small Copper	169	0.03	-46
14	Silver Y	148	0.03	-18
15	Holly Blue	132	0.03	-42
16	Painted Lady	104	0.02	-62
17	Comma	95	0.02	-74
	Totals	22,818	4.67	-26