

Butterflies and Moths



Butterflies and many of our larger moths are very beautiful and constitute an important part of the UK's wildlife. They are highly sensitive indicators of the health of the environment and play key roles in the food chain, in addition to being vital plant pollinators.

Butterflies and moths are closely related and belong to the same insect group. However there are structural and behavioral differences that are easily recognised. Butterflies are generally more colourful and hold their wings vertically when resting whereas, with exceptions, moths are duller (but see the picture of the attractive garden tiger moth above) and their wings are held flat when not in flight. Also the antennae (feelers) of the slender bodied butterflies are clubbed but generally uniformly thin and feathery in the broader bodied moths. Although some moths may be seen flying during the daytime, most are active only during the night, in contrast to butterflies which are day-flyers.

In this country there are 59 species of butterflies and around 2,500 species of moths. They are found in all habitats where the caterpillars of butterflies and most moths feed on the leaves of particular plants, avoiding all others. The exceptions are those moth species that eat roots, lichens, algae, wood, wool and fur.

Over the last century, nearly 70 UK species have become extinct (4 butterflies and 65 moths). Recording programmes show that around two-thirds of species are declining and over 170 species are threatened and listed as Priority Species in the *UK Biodiversity Action Plan*.

Within the last three years a major report by *Butterfly Conservation* in collaboration with the *Centre for Ecology and Hydrology* highlighted the continuing decline of UK's butterflies. The report is based on millions of records collected by over ten thousand volunteers contributing to the *Butterflies for the New Millennium Recording Scheme* and the *UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme*. To quote just two of their findings:

- For the first time, a significant decrease in the total numbers of wider countryside butterflies has been recorded. It was reported that the abundance of these common, 'garden' butterflies dropped by 24% over 10 years.
- Overall the findings confirm that the 2010 European Union target to halt the loss of biodiversity was not met for the UK's butterflies. A huge challenge remains to achieve the same aim by 2020.

As natural habitats decrease due to building and changes in land use, our gardens are becoming increasingly important for the survival of butterflies. We all like to see these pretty insects flying around in our gardens so need to provide the right plants to attract them. Some plants like buddleia attract a variety of butterflies, to the extent that it is commonly called the 'butterfly bush'. Many other common garden plants are valuable sources of nectar for butterflies, such as aubretia and lavender. However, we need to know their requirements as not all butterflies feed on flowers alone. Some, like the Red Admiral, are also attracted to tree sap and rotting fruit while others, such as the Speckled Wood, favour honey dew, the sugary liquid produced by greenflies and blackflies.

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