

2016 was officially a dismal year for butterflies. December 2015 was a very wet month which set the trend for a wet and mild winter. A similar pattern over spring and summer resulted in rapid and abundant grass growth that out-competed the lower growing herbs. This pattern explains why the average turf height for the end of August was 24.9cm – the highest since Andy Barker began measuring in 1993. Grazing pressure on the reserve will increase accordingly in future years to keep the growth in check.

So how did the butterflies on our Hampshire Reserves fare? On the Original transect, Brimstone dipped to 148 in 2016 having previously enjoyed its best ever year at Magdalen Hill Down in 2015 with 245 recorded.

Chalkhill Blue was notably down nationally in 2015, and continued to decline in 2016, with just 294 recorded on the Original transect, an all-time low since records began in 1990, but on the plus side, MHD Original still ranked 3rd place for this species in the rankings across 130 Hampshire transects. Common Blue (another species suffering national declines) ranked 4th, and Gatekeeper came in at a comfortable 3rd.

Small Tortoiseshell had a poor year, although 2016 was still the 2nd best year since 2004 making MHD still a good place to see this butterfly.

Small Blue beat its best count on transect up by one from 65 in 2015 to 66 in 2016, with MHD holding 2nd and 3rd place across 130 transects with all five transects in the top 10. Marbled White and Meadow Brown had their second best year since 1995, although counts on the Original for these species ranked 13 out of 26 years of recording, and Orange-tip rose to rank 2nd with 26 records on the Original.

The highlights of the year were Brown Argus and Grizzled Skipper (MHD original) holding the No.1 spots. This is excellent news and shows that they responded favourably to targeted habitat management over the winter months.

Red Admiral, another winner at MHD, ranked top spot across all 5 transects since records began with 58 recorded. Good numbers were seen in July and September. Comma had its 3rd best year since 2004, with Speckled Wood ranking 5/27.

A new transect was set-up in 2016 to monitor Tree & Shrub east, an area under habitat improvement for the possible introduction of Duke of Burgundy in the future. It is a good place to see Green Hairstreak.

2016 saw the arrival of five semi-feral Exmoor ponies, a hardy breed that readily eat thistle, clematis, bramble and hawthorn, making them ideal animals to use in conservation grazing. The Rare Breeds Survival Trust list the Exmoor pony as endangered. The Skylark continues to be a success story at Magdalen Hill Down, with the total area of potential suitable nesting habitat on MHD estimated at 75 ha. It's probable that more than 8 pairs of birds successfully nest over the season (D. Stewart, 2015).