

Yew Hill 2016

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2016 saw a decline in numbers of butterflies recorded on transect – down from 2527 in 2015 to a low of 1776. Although 29 species were seen, they were in lower numbers than previous years notably Common Blue and Brown Argus, the former following a national trend of decline. The Chalk-hill Blue continued to drop to an all-time low of 25 seen on transect. Meadow Brown and Marbled White held their own, while Gatekeeper increased slightly from 226 the previous year to 285 in 2016. The most notable species were Comma, Green Hairstreak and Red Admiral with Small Blue and Dingy Skipper having their 7th and 8th best years, respectively, out of 27 years recording on the reserve. Yew Hill is a relatively small site with a short transect, so it has done very well to be ranked 5th place for Gatekeeper and 6th for Marbled White across all Hampshire & Isle of Wight transects.

There is still plenty of rabbit activity at Yew Hill, which provides the patches of bare ground required for the foodplant of the Dingy Skipper - Common Bird's-foot-trefoil - to grow in a sparse sward, preferably in a sunny, sheltered situation.

For reasons mainly relating to land tenure, Yew Hill was not entered into the new Natural England Countryside Stewardship agreement that began in January 2016, due to the current lease falling short of the required minimum 5 year tenure. The popular scheme allows farmers and land managers the potential to earn an amount per hectare for environmental management to (among other criteria) look after wildlife, species and their habitats. The outcome of not entering into the agreement is that the Branch no longer receives an income towards managing the reserve. With environmental funding becoming harder to secure, this will inevitably have a negative effect on what we are able to achieve. The answer is simply that we need more volunteers to take an active role in helping us to carry out practical habitat management.

The Hampshire Conservation Volunteers continue to provide us with a solid service, and in 2016 they cleared the fence lines around the reserve from invading hawthorn and clematis, followed by cutting and raking the small area known as the Reservoir front which can only be managed by hand. The livestock continue to graze the site and 2016 saw 5 steers plus a flock of 21 sheep seemingly very happy on Hill top over the winter months. The Reserve had a break from winter grazing, but will be pulse grazed in Jan/Feb 2017 for a short time.

If you are a keen bee expert, do keep your eyes peeled for the specialist cleptoparasite Cuckoo-bee *Sphecodes spinulosus*, which was recorded at Yew Hill by Mike Edwards in 2015 when he was undertaking a comparative re-survey of the 2003-2004 invertebrates on Magdalen Hill Down, Extension. Please send us your records.