

Country Notes for July 2015

One of the glories of being out and about in our beautiful countryside is the fact that at any time it is possible to stumble upon the unexpected. This happened to me a few years ago when I was walking on the downs in Hollingbourne and saw a white, but not completely white, butterfly fly past. As I had seen these before in other places I knew for sure that this was a Marbled White butterfly. I don't think that they could be described as rare but their range is certainly limited to certain habitats – and this was the first time that I had seen one in Hollingbourne.

When at rest it is clear as to how they got their name. The white background on all four wings is mottled with black and white marbled squares. They really are very elegant butterflies. The chalkland downs are the perfect habitat for them – but I was very surprised just over a year ago to see one in my garden. This was unusual – and shortly afterwards I saw one more in another unlikely place when visiting Hatfield House. Perhaps there was a population explosion that year, causing them to extend beyond their normal habitat areas.

The habitat that they favour is unimproved chalk downland, meaning those little areas on our downs which, although possibly grazed by cattle, have never been ploughed or fertilised. There are certainly little pockets like this on the downs in our village. The plants that they favour include Wild Marjoram, Field Scabious, thistles and knapweeds. The caterpillars favour Red Fescue. Interestingly the eggs are laid in flight, which means that there must be an element of chance about where they land! Adults may be found at night resting, with wings closed, on grass stems.

These butterflies really are worth looking out for as you wander through our village countryside in July. If you see one, you will be glad that you did!

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