



Prees Heath Common Reserve

Why are butterflies important?

Butterflies are amongst the most beautiful and popular groups of our wildlife. They respond rapidly to change and are good indicators of the health of the environment. They are also an important food source for many animals such as birds. In recent years the numbers of butterflies in the UK have significantly declined. We need your help recording butterflies so we have up-to-date information on the locations of butterfly colonies to help us direct conservation priorities and action. If you would like to get involved then please contact us.

Join Butterfly Conservation

Butterfly Conservation is the UK charity taking action to save butterflies, moths and their habitats. We work with a wide range of partners to carry out this important work. You can directly support us in this vital work by joining Butterfly Conservation. With an annual membership you will receive an interesting and informative welcome pack, a colourful magazine *Butterfly* three times a year and membership of your local branch of Butterfly Conservation. The West Midlands Branch carries out practical conservation work as well as running public moth and butterfly events. For a membership form or for further information, please contact us or visit our website.

Butterfly Conservation

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Butterfly Conservation is a registered charity and non-profit making company, limited by guarantee.

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A Butterfly Conservation Reserve

Butterfly Conservation is conserving the last sanctuary in the Midlands for the threatened Silver-studded Blue butterfly, restoring the land to heathland and grassland for the benefit of both wildlife and visitors.



Butterfly Conservation's reserve comprises just under half of Prees Heath Common, covering the 60 hectares (148 acres) that lie between the A49 and the A41, two miles south of Whitchurch in North Shropshire.



Mating pair



Female

The Silver-studded Blue butterfly flies in the second half of June and throughout July. It can be seen on the heathland and grassland parts of the reserve, especially the old airfield runway and perimeter road.



Rights of Common to graze animals, and in some cases to remove dead wood and sand, are registered with nine local properties. Commoners have found it difficult, however, to exercise their grazing rights for many years because of the busy roads, the arable cultivations and the overall neglect of the Common. This situation will now improve greatly on the reserve area.

The Common is now also Open Access land under the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000. All parts of it, not just designated footpaths, are open to walkers for enjoyment and quiet recreation. Unauthorised vehicles, including motorbikes and caravans, are not permitted. No shooting or camping is allowed, and no unauthorised fires. Dogs should be kept under control, especially from 1st March until 31st July to protect ground nesting birds.

The yellow line on the aerial photograph shows the reserve boundary - the compound containing the old airfield hangars bordered in blue is not part of the reserve.

Certain parts of the reserve, principally those areas which were not subject to the cultivations that started in the 1970s, provide heathland and acidic grassland habitat for the Silver-studded Blue. These areas are legally protected as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.



The old airfield control tower on the reserve



Male



Egg on heather

Each adult butterfly lives for just a few days, and they rarely venture very far from where they emerged, spending their time mating, taking nectar from flowers and, in the evenings and in cooler weather, gathering in shrubs in communal roosts.

After mating the females lay eggs singly on heather, or sometimes on bird's-foot trefoil or gorse, close to the ground. The eggs hatch in the following spring, with the caterpillar feeding on the heather leaves. It is protected from predators by ants in return for giving them sugary secretions. The caterpillar will spend time in the ants' nests, and will pupate before emerging as a butterfly early in a summer morning.

It climbs a grass stem and, still protected by the ants, pumps up its wings before it is ready to fly. The Black Ant, *Lasius niger*, is crucial to the survival of this butterfly on Prees Heath, and so management of the habitat must cater for its needs as well.



The butterflies at home on heather

The Silver-studded Blue is so-called because of the tiny silvery marks to be seen in the middle of the black spots near the edge of the underside of the hindwing. On the uppersides of the wings, as well as being a darker blue colour, the males have a thicker black band towards the edges than the Common Blue, which is also present on the site, and the females have smaller orange markings.



Stirling on the A49 after overshooting the short runway



History of the Common

Also known as Whitchurch Heath, Prees Heath has a fascinating past. Bronze Age people chose the place for burial mounds. Both the A49 and the A41 are former Roman roads.

The common was a muster point for King John's army in the thirteenth century for his invasion of Wales to fight Llewellyn and his rebels, and also for Royalist troops under Prince Rupert in the Civil War.

Gallows for public hangings used to be situated at Gallowstree Bank by the A41, where it is believed that one of the last public hangings in England took place here.

In World War One the Common was used as a trench warfare training camp for infantry soldiers, with huts covering much of the site, accommodating around 25,000 people. Many went from here to fight and die in the trenches on the frontlines. Amongst those stationed at the camp was the father of reggae singer Bob Marley, Captain Norval Sinclair Marley. The camp was also used as a huge army 'demob' centre at the end of the war.

World War Two saw the Common become the site for the tents of an internment camp for foreign nationals, and then in 1942 a bomber training airfield called RAF Tilstock. Stirlings, Whitleys, Wellingtons and Halifaxes were all based here, and Horsa gliders used in the D-day landings. Several servicemen stationed here were killed in airplane crashes in the area and further afield.

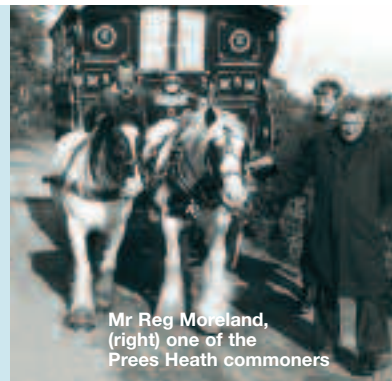
After the war the airfield was decommissioned, although the concrete runway remained in place until the 1970s when it was broken up to prevent illegal motor vehicle use. Not all the pieces of concrete were removed however, and this prevented the runway and the perimeter road from being ploughed up in the same way as much of the rest of the site, thereby preserving some heathland habitat for the Silver-studded Blue.



Above
Postcard from 1916

Heritage of Prees Heath

The Common has been used for many years as a public space for people to enjoy the open air, and as a cross-roads it has been a meeting-place for people for centuries.



Mr Reg Moreland, (right) one of the Prees Heath commoners

Gypsies with horse-drawn wagons used to be a regular feature of the Common, always leaving the site in good condition. In the early 20th century horse races and family picnics took place on the Common, which would have been much more peaceful before heavy traffic began to use the A49 and A41. It was reinstated after WW1 but not after WW2, and the Prees Heath commoners found it increasingly difficult to exercise their grazing rights as much of the land was let for intensive farming. The old painting (above) pre-dates WW1 and shows how it was open heathland.

When a planning application for the extraction of sand and gravel from the Common was submitted in the early 1990s, local people, conservation organisations and the Prees Heath commoners established a 'Save Prees Heath Common' campaign that achieved national publicity. A book entitled 'Who Killed Prees Heath?' by Eleanor Cooke was published, poetically describing the place and ways of life that had all but vanished.

A public appeal to purchase part of the Common as a reserve was launched by Butterfly Conservation, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Cheshire Wildlife Trust. With the support of the Prees Heath commoners, local residents and Landfill Tax Credit Scheme funding through GrantScape, the reserve was finally purchased by Butterfly Conservation in 2006 after many setbacks and frustrations. The restored reserve area will enable people to enjoy the open heathland that Prees Heath once was, and allow common grazing rights to be exercised again.





Small Copper



Small Heath



Deep ploughing to 3 feet

The Natural History of the Common

The foundations of the heath were laid down around 16,000 years ago when sand and gravel was deposited at the end of the last ice age.

Restoring the Heath

Large parts of the reserve, and the rest of the Common, lost its heathland through cultivation over 30 years ago.



Heath Dog-violet

Lowland sandy heaths were once numerous in North-east Shropshire, but Prees Heath is one of the few surviving remnants, most having been converted to agriculture, forestry or simply built upon.

Apart from the Silver-studded Blue, the reserve has much of wildlife interest. Uncommon plants such as Pyramidal Orchid, Slender St John's Wort and Heath Dog-violet can be found. Two species of heather are present - Bell Heather, which flowers in midsummer when the Silver-studded Blue can often be seen sipping nectar from its pink flowers, and Ling or Common Heather, whose purple flowers can be seen in late summer and autumn. Small Copper and Small Heath butterflies and a number of day-flying moths are present. Clouded Yellow butterflies, migrants from the continent, are seen in good years.



Pyramidal Orchid

A great variety of birds use the Common. You can see Buzzards, Kestrels, Hobbies and Sparrowhawks overhead, and in summer hear Skylarks as they rise. Declining farmland birds such as Yellowhammers rely on these habitats, as do Curlew which nest nearby. In winter, flocks of Lapwings, Starlings, Redwings and Fieldfares use the Common. Green and Great-spotted Woodpeckers are also present, and we hope one day to see a Nightjar on the heath.



Yellowhammer

Foxes use the site, and rabbits are in abundance, grazing the grassy areas and curbing scrub invasion, but in places also preventing heather from regenerating. Polecats, stoats and common lizards are all present.

In recent years the application of large quantities of chicken manure has greatly enriched the soil, thereby making reversion to heathland and acid grassland, which need nutrient-poor soils, a very challenging project.

With expert guidance and thanks to funding from GrantScape and Natural England, Butterfly Conservation has embarked on the long-term project of re-creating heathland and grassland habitats on these cultivated areas. The aim is also to improve and extend existing habitats for the Silver-studded Blue and for wildlife in general. A crucial first step has been to invert the soil profile to effectively bury the enriched topsoil and bring the sand and gravel subsoil to the surface.

Ragwort and thistles, both valuable nectar sources and foodplants for many insects, thrive on these enriched soils, but they are 'notifiable agricultural weeds' and have to be controlled.

The excess nutrients should be more readily lost from such a surface, providing much better conditions for heathland plants and grasses. Wildflower and grass seed of local provenance has been sown, and heather brash from Cannock Chase is being applied as a seed source. The project also includes plans to re-create an area of wetland, such as those that were drained when the airfield was built.



Ragwort on the reserve in 2006



Butterfly Conservation West Midlands Branch volunteers clearing the rubbish

Existing remnants of heathland are threatened by birch and gorse scrub, and invasive plants have become established in places. The site has also suffered from fly-tipping and travellers' encampments for many years. The restoration work therefore also involves gradually clearing away what is not wanted or needed, and a Reserve Support Group, comprising Butterfly Conservation West Midlands Branch members and local volunteers helps undertake this vital work. An impressive start has been made, but a lot more remains to be done and new volunteers are always welcome. Thanks to your help, and the efforts of many supporters, this part of Prees Heath Common will be renewed.