

The East Midlands Brownfields Project

Barry Prater, Butterfly Conservation

Butterfly Conservation has as its primary aim the conservation of butterflies, moths and their habitats - it therefore differs from many other wildlife groups which often have a focus on recording and the study of the natural world. Of course, we also do these and many other things as well.

The need for this conservation effort in the East Midlands is well demonstrated by the figures. The UK now has 59 resident species of butterfly - in the past 100 years five have become extinct. In the East Midlands we now have 32 resident species; a hundred years ago there would have been a dozen more. Many of those that remain are in decline in terms of both distribution and numbers. There is a similar story for moths.

The reasons for these losses are the usual suspects - intensification of agricultural practices, changes to the ways woodlands are managed and the general development of land for urban and industrial uses. Dramatic losses of semi-natural habitat have resulted and what remains is often very fragmented.

Fortunately, some of the threatened butterflies are showing themselves able to adapt to live on a variety of brownfield sites - such as quarries, railway lines, colliery spoil heaps and landfills - where the generally poor soil conditions create suitable environments and support the right plants for them to lay their eggs on. However, many of these are under threat from development or simple neglect.

The Brownfields Project we are working on forms part of the EU Countdown 2010 programme which aims to halt the loss of biodiversity across Europe by that date. The overall project is much wider than the East Midlands and extends across the West Midlands to Shropshire and south to Herefordshire. It focuses on key species for biodiversity action in many different landscape areas. For us there are two such areas - the Notts/Derbyshire Coalfield and the Ketton Limestone region. Both have witnessed the colonisation of brownfield sites by some of the region's most threatened butterflies and moths.

The project started in April and will last for two years; initial emphasis has been mainly on the former coal mining sites where some really good progress is being made, but next year there will a shift to the Ketton area, which is interpreted quite broadly and work may take place some distance from Ketton itself. All of this involves working with our partners - Butterfly Conservation alone cannot achieve the objectives.

The key species are the Dingy and Grizzled Skipper butterflies (both now UK BAP Candidate Priority Species) and the Four-spotted and Chalk Carpet moths (both of which are already Priority Species). All need to be and can be helped in the Ketton Limestone area.

Activities in the project include:

- training in species survey work and habitat assessment
- advising on the management of sites with existing colonies
- restoration or creation of suitable habitat
- establishment of demonstration sites for habitat management.

All of this is being done with an eye on the larger landscape scale so that colonies can be linked and interact, thereby giving them a greater chance of long-term survival.

Some more detail of what has been done so far and what is planned are in the two project updates which are available.

There is one very specific issue which we need local help with. I mentioned the importance of railway lines for some species. It's often the case that land adjacent to lines has suitable habitat as well and we really need to explore disused lines and areas near active lines, both in Rutland and further west towards Leicester. These lines also provide the corridors needed to link up the fragmented habitat. To be able to explore them we must talk to the landowners and seek access. Is there anyone willing to take on the task of investigating both land ownership and general access to such sites? We would be able to pay some travelling expenses if that would help.

Finally, I would like to return in a year or two to give details of what has been achieved in the project.