

Collecting, breeding and releasing butterflies: the view of Butterfly Conservation

Introduction by Philip Hambly

Chair of Cornwall Butterfly Conservation, May 2015

I am very pleased that the membership of Cornwall Butterfly Conservation has increased so rapidly in recent years. We are delighted to have your support for our important work saving the dwindling butterflies and moths of Cornwall.

I suspect that many of you have joined because of your love of wildlife and because you want to do your bit to protect the natural world, especially its butterflies and moths. Our membership is a broad church. It includes people who are very knowledgeable about butterfly natural history and those who know little beyond the joy of seeing those bright wings of summer. Some want to get involved in conservation projects whilst others are content to provide support through their membership. Everyone's support is important, regardless.

In Cornwall we face a new situation following the formation of the Cornwall Butterfly and Moth Society (formerly Cornwall Lepidoptera Breeding Group). The county now has two distinct groups claiming to champion the cause of butterflies. On the face of it, you might wonder why that should be a problem if the two groups had similar objectives.

The problem is that the two groups pursue their objectives in very different ways. And without understanding the implications of that, members may be misled or confused. So the following statement has been produced so that you can make an informed decision as to which organisation is better placed to assure a thriving population of butterflies and moths in Cornwall now and into the future.

Cornwall Butterfly Conservation runs a wide range of activities to conserve butterflies and moths, and we are developing some exciting new projects. You can keep up to date with these on our website and in our newsletter.

Thank you for your continued support.



<http://www.cornwall-butterfly-conservation.org.uk>

Butterfly collecting, breeding and release

Joint statement by Butterfly Conservation and Cornwall Butterfly Conservation

To breed or not to breed? That is the question that goes to the heart of what distinguishes **Cornwall Butterfly Conservation** from the Cornwall Butterfly and Moth Society (formerly the Cornwall Lepidoptera Breeding Group).

Butterfly Conservation – and its branch in Cornwall – work primarily to create and manage habitats that support sustainable populations of butterflies and moths in the wild. By contrast, the Cornwall Butterfly and Moth Society breed stock in captivity, which they want eventually to release into the wild.

That is the difference. So why does it matter? Dr Martin Warren, Chief Executive of **Butterfly Conservation**, explains, “One of the problems of rearing butterflies is what to do with the progeny, even if the original aim was just to study them, as releases into the wild can cause unexpected harm. Rearing and releasing butterflies may thus seem an innocent pastime but there are some serious concerns about how it might affect natural distributions and conservation efforts.” Here are the main conservation pitfalls.

The scientific reasons against captive breeding and release

-  **Release disrupts natural distribution patterns.** Many thousands of BC members submit records of butterflies seen in the wild. This data provides objective evidence of the status of UK species and population trends. Releases may disrupt such monitoring and invalidate the scientific value of the data.
-  **Release masks environmental impact.** Widespread and repeated releases can mask underlying trends, so we have no way of measuring or understanding the needs of habitat management or the impact of climate change.
-  **Collection and release weakens wild populations.** Collecting eggs, larvae and adults from the wild may reduce natural populations. Captive-bred stock lacks genetic diversity and is weakened through adaptation to an indoor environment. Release of captive-bred stock can introduce disease and may reduce the vigour of natural populations.

You can find Butterfly Conservation’s policy guidance and list of protected species at

<https://butterfly-conservation.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/BC%20Policy%20on%20collecting%2C%20breeding%20and%20photography%202018.pdf>

It is important to be aware that there are also situations in which it can be unlawful to collect or release in the wild.

Instances where collecting and release break the law



It is against the law to collect or release the six fully protected butterfly species listed in the *Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981*



It is against the law to collect any species from or to release them into a **Site of Special Scientific Interest**



It can be against bye-laws applicable to land owned by The National Trust or Forestry Commission



It may be against the law to collect wildlife from a site without the land-owner's permission.

So can captive breeding and release ever be OK? Very exceptionally, yes: there are circumstances in which controlled and monitored release can be beneficial.



Dr Warren describes one example of good practice in Cornwall. “The re-introduction of the Heath Fritillary into Greenscombe Wood in the Tamar Valley was a great success because we complied with the principles of **Butterfly Conservation’s** policy for an attempted re-introduction: the species is a national or regional conservation priority; the causes of extinction are known; the habitats have been sufficiently restored to support a population; there is an appropriate long term management plan; the landowner has consented; and relevant conservation bodies such as Natural England have approved the plan.”

Making habitat fit for butterflies

Even with such examples of carefully planned species re-introduction, long-term habitat management is the primary means by which **Butterfly Conservation** enables wild populations to thrive naturally and sustainably. That will remain the clear focus of our efforts now and in future.

Statement on butterfly collecting, rearing and release issued May 2015

Dr Martin Warren, Chief Executive
Butterfly Conservation

Philip Hambly, Chairman
Cornwall Butterfly Conservation

Similar principles are followed by **Natural England, The National Trust, Forestry Commission** and **Cornwall Wildlife Trust**.