Butterfly notes for May

By Jerry Dennis, our county butterfly recorder

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May has been a disappointing month for butterflies. Numbers recorded are lower than average for the species that have emerged so far, now totalling 26. Why is this? The most obvious explanation is that butterflies spending winter in adult, pupal and larval stages don't like the sort of wet and windy winter and spring that we experienced this year. Higher-than-average mortality may have been a consequence of getting repeatedly soaked. We have yet to see how it affected those species passing winter in the egg, but the appearance of the first of these, the Silver-studded Blue, is imminent and we shall soon see.

I'm going to focus on the fritillaries this time. We are lucky to have 6 of the 8 British species here in Cornwall and they are all rather special.



A Pearl-bordered Fritillary at Pendrift in 2022. *Photo by J. Dennis*

Our three early fritillaries have now been seen. First to fly was the lovely Pearl-bordered Fritillary and this is one of Cornwall's most endangered species and is now only found in three areas. Numbers seen this year are following the trend of all other species and are lower than average.

Second to emerge was the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, usually 2-3 weeks later than the 'Pearl'. It is very similar to the Pearl, and you can only really confirm which species it is when the butterfly is stationary. Alas there are few sites where this is a problem. The Small Pearl is currently flying and please keep an eye out for it. It likes scrubby areas with gorse and bracken and where common dog-violets grow.



A male Small-Pearl-bordered Fritillary at Poldhu Cove. *Photo by J. Dennis*

I had a lovely walk this week between Church Cove Gunwalloe and Poldhu Cove where there are several small Small Pearl colonies. I was delighted to see nine individuals including two females.



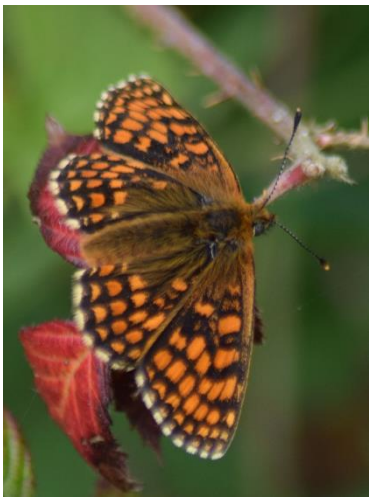
A female Small-Pearl-bordered Fritillary at Poldhu Cove. *Photo by J. Dennis*

If you are lucky to see one, you may be able to tell which sex it is. The males are a rich orangey brown colour. The females are variable, but typically have heavier black markings around the wing edges and lighter coloured infill between those black diamonds and chevrons (if that makes sense). A picture paints a thousand words, and so I've included a photo of a female that should help!



A Marsh Fritillary at Predannack Cliff in 2019. *Photo by J. Dennis*

The third fritillary is the Marsh Fritillary, also one of our rarest and best-looking Cornish butterflies. It has its stronghold in the Bodmin area but is also found on the Lizard and in Mid Cornwall. The first sighting was made this week and late May to mid- June will be the best time to try and see one. It is a super butterfly and worth the effort. One of the best locations is Predannack Cliff south of Mullion.



A Heath Fritillary at Greenscoombe Wood in 2019. *Photo by J. Dennis*

The next Fritillary to emerge will be the Heath Fritillary that occurs at only one site in the east of the county, at Greenscoombe Wood. This is a nationally endangered species that has been saved from extinction in the few places that it remains in the south of England. Cornwall Butterfly Conservation runs an annual field trip to see this rarity and this year's event in on 9th June. See our website for details https://www.cornwall-butterfly-conservation.org.uk/events.html

After these small and medium-sized fritillary species have had their moments, we get the big aircraft, the Dark Green Fritillary and the Silver-washed Fritillary, the latter being the biggest butterfly on the wing in Cornwall. More on those in a later note.

I haven't forgotten about the Orange-tip quest I set last month, and I can see that you have been busy with recording them this year and thank you for that. When the brood is finished, I will update you on the coverage we managed this year.

Best wishes

Jerry