

conserving the Dingy Skipper in North-east England



Dingy Skipper



Common Birds-foot-trefoil

Although the foodplants of the Dingy Skipper are common and found in a wide variety of habitats, the butterfly appears to be in rapid decline. Many colonies, particularly those on brownfield sites have been lost to redevelopment, while other sites have become overgrown. As sites are lost, remaining small colonies become more isolated and vulnerable to extinction.



Horseshoe Vetch

Where can you see Dingy Skipper in North-east England?

Bishop Middleham Quarry SSSI

Disused magnesian limestone quarry managed by Durham Wildlife Trust. The site can be accessed at NZ331326, with parking for up to six cars on the adjacent roadside. The site supports one of the largest colonies of Dingy Skippers in the North-east.

Blackhall Rocks

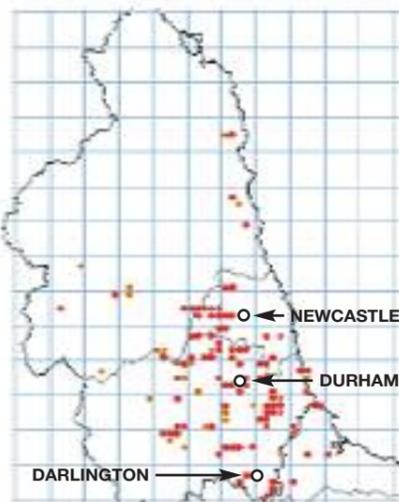
Part of the Durham Coast SSSI owned by Durham County Council and managed by Durham Wildlife Trust. Dingy Skippers may be found virtually anywhere between Blackhall Rocks and Castle Eden Dene, where Common Bird's-foot-trefoil grows. Numbers are particularly high on the old spoil heaps of Blackhall Colliery. Parking is at NZ470393.

Wingate Quarry LNR

Disused magnesian limestone quarry owned and managed by Durham County Council. A strong population of Dingy Skippers is present. Car parking is available at NZ372374.



Dingy Skippers



The Distribution of the Dingy Skipper in North-east England

The Dingy Skipper has declined nationally by 42% in recent decades. The butterfly receives no legal protection in England and this has contributed to a number of important sites being lost in the North-east.

In response to these concerns, Butterfly Conservation has initiated a project aimed at securing the future of the Dingy Skipper in North-east England. A major objective is to identify and survey all Dingy Skipper sites in the region.

This is where you can help!

The regional distribution map shows that you are just as likely to see the Dingy Skipper in or near urban areas as you are in the open countryside. Butterfly Conservation would be delighted to hear from anyone willing to help with survey work. If you would like to help assess butterfly numbers at a known site, we can provide details of the sites nearest to where you live. Alternately, you may wish to discover new sites. Any site where the foodplants are abundant is worth a visit during May or June.

Butterfly Conservation can provide a survey pack to help you. If you feel you lack the experience required to undertake survey work, we are running a series of workshops and site visits aimed at enabling you to identify the butterfly and record vital information about Dingy Skipper sites.

For information on recording packs, workshops, site locations, or any other matter concerning Dingy Skippers, please contact:

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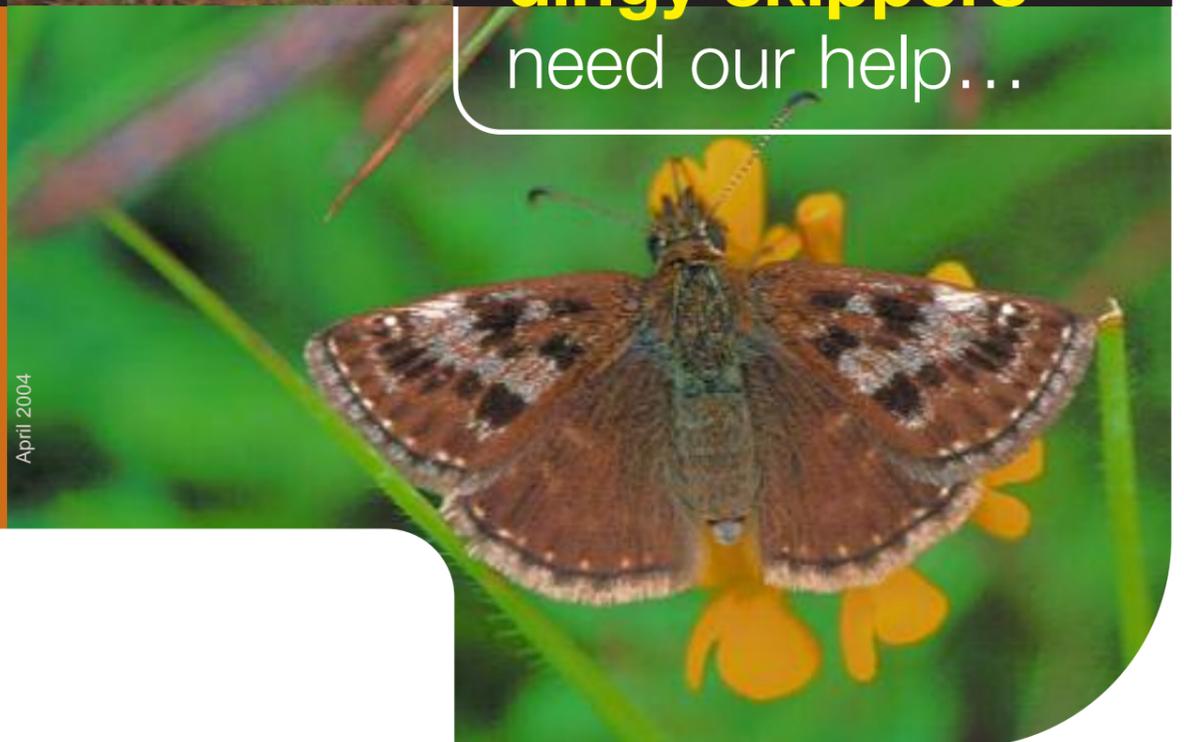
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Butterfly Conservation

dingy skippers
need our help...



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and Butterfly Conservation needs
your help if we are to **protect them**
in North-east England



getting to know dingy skippers

The Dingy Skipper is a small (average wing span is 29mm), inconspicuous, brown and grey butterfly, most commonly seen basking or engaging in rapid flights difficult to follow with the eye. It is unlikely to be confused with any other butterfly except the Grizzled Skipper, but this species is mainly black and white and rarely seen north of the Midlands. The Dingy Skipper can be mistaken for day-flying moths such as Mother Shipton or Burnet Companion, although the hindwings of both these species are much brighter.

At night and in dull weather Dingy Skippers often roost on flower heads or grasses with their wings 'folded back' in a manner similar to many moths. Although they are well camouflaged, at some sites it is possible to count them while they are roosting. The eggs of Dingy Skippers can also be found with practice. These are pale yellow when laid and turn orange after a few days.



Dingy Skippers



Mother Shipton



Dingy Skipper eggs



Grizzled Skippers showing underside

What can you do to help us?

Site Safeguard

Ideal breeding conditions for the Dingy Skipper are often found in disused quarries, railways, spoil heaps and similar disturbed sites. Such 'brownfield' sites are now perhaps the most important habitat for the butterfly in many parts of England, but are often targeted for redevelopment by housing and industry.

It is crucial to look out for development proposals on brownfield sites that support the Dingy Skipper. Where development cannot be prevented, appropriate mitigation measures, as planning conditions, may help. The aim should be to retain key breeding habitat and compensate for losses by habitat creation. Ensure habitat creation techniques focus on natural colonisation rather than specific planting.

Survey and Monitoring

Find out where the butterfly may be found near you. In May and June, you can help to monitor known populations and survey new sites. Join a training workshop to learn more about the butterfly and its habitat needs.

Habitat conservation

Join your local branch of Butterfly Conservation and help with conservation work parties maintaining occupied Dingy Skipper sites or restoring others in the region.

Seek advice

Landowners can follow management guidelines below or contact Butterfly Conservation for further help and information.

Further information on the Dingy Skipper is contained in the Species Action Plan available from Butterfly Conservation at www.butterfly-conservation.org

How do Dingy Skippers live?

The adult butterflies normally live in 'colonies', which are typically small, comprising less than 50 individuals. Most adults stay within the colony, although some may occasionally undertake flights of several kilometres.

The Dingy Skipper is usually single brooded and adults first emerge in late April or early May depending on spring temperature. At individual sites the butterfly flies for 4-6 weeks and by mid-June the flight season is usually over.

The majority of eggs are laid singly on the upperside of the leaves of Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, the main larval foodplant. Females usually position their eggs on the longest shoots. Related plant species, such as Horseshoe Vetch and Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil are occasionally used. Female Dingy Skippers often select foodplants close to bare ground, which provide warm conditions for egg development.

The tiny caterpillar emerges after about 10 days and spins a protective tent amongst leaves of the foodplant. After exhausting its immediate food supplies, it spins a new tent every few days. As the caterpillar grows during the summer, it may move into taller vegetation. By mid-August, it is usually fully grown, and constructs a more substantial tent low down in the vegetation, known as a hibernaculum. This is where the caterpillar overwinters and pupates the following spring, prior to its emergence as an adult.

What do Dingy Skippers Need?

In all habitat types the following vegetation is needed:

An abundance of one or more of the larval foodplants, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil or Horseshoe Vetch, growing in sheltered vegetation.

A sparse sward, usually including bare ground, is important for the Dingy Skipper. Patches of taller vegetation provide shelter and roosting sites. Adult Dingy Skippers are not prolific nectar feeders, but often choose the flowers of Common Bird's-foot-trefoil.

The requirements of Dingy Skippers are met in a range of open, sunny habitats, including calcareous grasslands, woodland clearings and rides, dunes, coastal undercliffs, and brownfield sites.

Large sites (more than 2 hectares), with suitable habitat will support the largest and most secure populations. Small sites, or sites that support only small populations, are only likely to persist in the long term if they form part of a network of nearby colonies. In such situations it is vital to conserve all patches of habitat, however small.

How to manage sites for Dingy Skippers.

One of the main threats facing Dingy Skipper sites is encroachment of tall vegetation and scrub, which reduces bare ground and shades out foodplants. The principal aim of management should therefore be to maintain sparse swards, but without entirely eradicating taller vegetation.

Monitoring

Monitoring numbers of adult Dingy Skippers on managed sites will enable us to establish their response to different regimes and identify the best techniques. Contact Butterfly Conservation for further details on how to establish a monitoring programme.

Brownfield sites

Common Bird's-foot-trefoil is an early coloniser of bare ground on brownfield sites and is relatively tolerant of nutrient-poor or contaminated soils. Vegetation tends to develop slowly on these sites because poor soils limit the spread of more competitive species. On overgrown brownfields, rotational ground disturbance, perhaps using mechanical plant, is a useful way of maintaining open vegetation, while scrub or planted trees may sometimes need to be removed or thinned.

Woodland rides and clearings

In woodlands, rides and other open areas provide suitable habitat for Dingy Skippers. The best areas tend to be found along track verges or the banks of ditches and rides where the foodplants can colonise stone beds or exposed subsoil. Suitable habitat can be maintained by ensuring rides do not become shaded. Rotational ride management, including vegetation cutting and periodic ground disturbance is beneficial, although best restricted to autumn and winter.

Farmland

On farmland, the Dingy Skipper largely persists on unimproved grassland. This habitat type is usually of high conservation interest, so landowners may already receive support and advice regarding management. Management regimes supported by agri-environment schemes (run by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) should be able to cater for the butterfly's requirements.

Scrub clearance

On many sites scrub will need to be routinely cleared to prevent breeding patches becoming overgrown and shaded. The bare ground exposed during scrub clearance can provide conditions required both by Common Bird's-foot-trefoil and egg-laying Dingy Skippers.

Grazing

Grazing regimes that produce a range of sward heights including breeding patches of less than 5cm are most suitable. Rotational or periodic grazing are the best regimes, as they provide a continuous supply of sparse vegetation, but allow development of the required foodplant growth form. Alternatively, grazing concentrated in autumn and winter may be used, but heavy summer grazing should be avoided, as female Dingy Skippers generally avoid laying on grazed foodplants. Cattle, which produce a less uniform sward with more bare ground, are preferable to sheep grazing. Rabbits may create ideal swards but fluctuating numbers can lead to under- or overgrazing.

Mowing

Rotational mowing in autumn can maintain Dingy Skipper sites, but should only be employed where grazing is impractical. Open conditions can be restored by ground disturbance techniques (e.g. scarification, turf stripping).



Butterfly Conservation

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