

Comma (*Polygonia c-album*) Survey 2011

The Comma was chosen as the subject of the Butterfly Conservation Scotland postcard and online survey for 2011 following several years with an increasing number of sightings north of the border. The adult butterfly is very distinctive, with its bright colouration and obvious scalloped edges to the wings, combined with a white 'comma' mark on the underside.



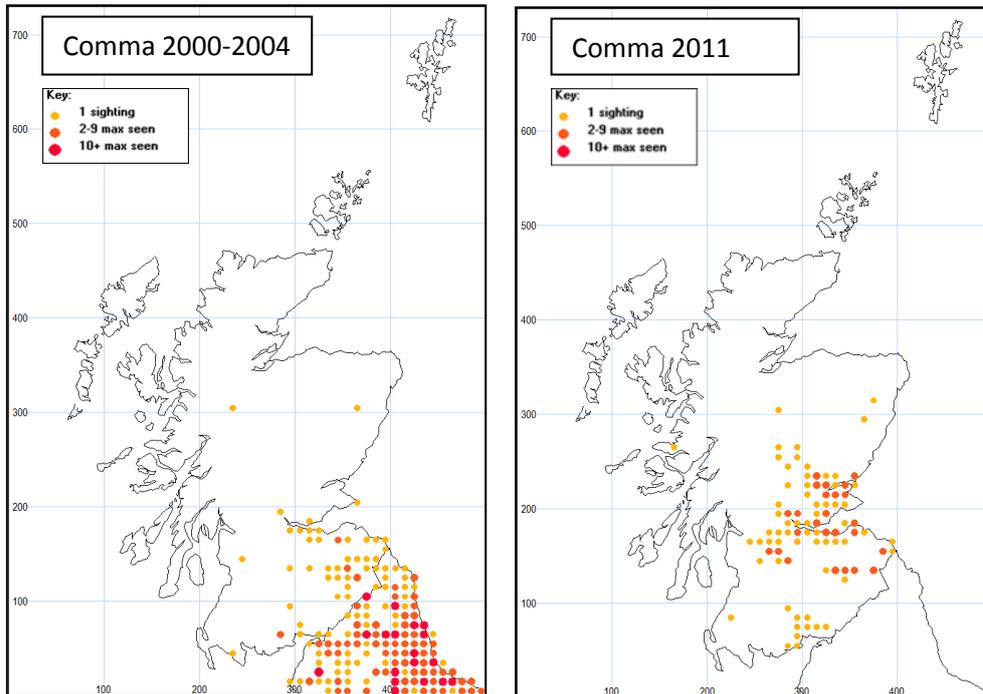
The distribution of the Comma has undergone periods of dramatic contraction and expansion over the years, at one time being restricted to a few locations in the south-east of England and the Welsh border counties, but recently having regained its former status as widespread and common over much of the southern half of Britain. By the beginning of the 21st century, records of adult butterflies were being received from numerous locations in southern Scotland, with occasional sightings much further north, but it was not until 2006 that evidence

was found that the Comma had once again become established as a breeding species in Scotland, for the first time since around 1870, when a caterpillar was discovered in the Borders. The fully-grown Comma caterpillar is very distinctive; tan-coloured and spiny, with a splash of bright white on its back, closely resembling a bird dropping. Eggs are laid singly, and the caterpillars are not gregarious, making them harder to find than those of Peacock or Small Tortoiseshell, but once seen they are instantly recognisable. Since 2006, several more larvae have been found, the latest in 2011 feeding on a traditional old English variety of hop (*Humulus lupulus* var. *Goldings*) in a garden in Fallin, near Stirling, just a few miles from a 2010 record of a caterpillar on elm (*Ulmus* sp.). Caterpillars have also been found on common nettle (*Urtica dioica*) in Scotland, suggesting that the continued expansion of the Comma will not be hampered by lack of suitable larval food plants.



As a result of the survey, 39 postcards and 85 online responses were received, the majority from the east of the country, the most northerly from Banchory in Aberdeenshire. A single record from the Ardnamurchan peninsula suggests that occasional individuals can be quite mobile (there have been a few previous sightings in Argyll and the Highlands), but, combined with other records sent to branch butterfly recorders, it seems that the Comma is now well-established in the Borders and the central belt, with an increasing presence further

north into Perthshire, Angus and south Aberdeenshire. In the west, the Comma is spreading more slowly into the Clyde valley and the Trossachs.



Data provided from the Butterflies for the New Millennium project run by Butterfly Conservation and CEH.

We would love to continue to receive records of both adult Comma butterflies and their caterpillars, so please send in any sightings to Butterfly Conservation Scotland by postcard or e-mail scotland@butterfly-conservation.org or contact your local branch recorder.

Heather Young

Key References:

Asher, J. et al. (2001). *The Millennium Atlas of Butterflies in Britain and Ireland*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Fox, R. et al. (2006). *The State of Butterflies in Britain and Ireland*. Information Press, Oxford.

Mercer, J. et al. (2009). *Butterfly Atlas of the Scottish Borders*. Atropos Publishing, Holmfirth.