Butterflies of Scotland

Butterflies shown at life-size, but there is some natural variation in size.

**KEY**

- **Vanessids and Fritillaries**
  - Comma
  - Marsh Fritillary
  - Pearl-bordered Fritillary
  - Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary
  - Dark Green Fritillary

- **Browns**
  - Peacock
  - Meadow Brown
  - Speckled Wood
  - Gypsy

- **Whites**
  - Small Tortoiseshell
  - Large White
  - Small White
  - Green-veined White

- **Hairstreaks, Blues and Copper-Whites**
  - Orange-tip (male)
  - Common Blue (male - female)
  - Holly Blue (male - female)

- **Skippers**
  - Scotch Argus
  - Mountain Ringlet
  - Small Heath
  - Large Heath
  - Large Heath
  - Large Heath
  - Mediterranean Skipper
  - Small Skipper (male - female)
  - Chequered Skipper
  - Small Blue
At the time of publication in 2020, Scotland has 35 butterfly species which regularly breed here. The caterpillar foodplants (indicated by FP in each account), main flight period and distributions described apply only to Scotland. More details on distribution and descriptions of life cycles can be found on the Butterfly Conservation website, and in the ‘Life Cycles of British and Irish Butterflies’ written by Peter Eeles, and the accompanying UK Butterflies website.

There are occasional sightings of three other species (Gonepteryx rhamni, Beesoon’s Green (Espana Yellow) but they are not included as they are not yet known to breed in Scotland.

Comma: Polygonia c-album. The wings have a distinctive ragged outline. Mostly found near woodland edges and gardens. Overwinters as an adult, and prior to this can be found searching for foodplants. FP: mostly Stinging Nettles.

Small Tortoiseshell: Aglais urticae. Widespread, and one of the commonest visitors to gardens. FP: mostly Stinging Nettles. Mostly April – September but can be seen at almost any time of year. The caterpillar is found on a variety of foodplants, including bramble, nettle and fields of fallow in late summer. FP: mostly Stinging Nettles.


Painted Lady: Vanessa cardui. A migratory species, the Painted Lady cannot overwinter in the UK. Each year, migrants arrive from southern Europe and Africa; FP: mostly Thistles. May – Sept.

Red Admiral: Vanessa atalanta. A widespread species. The butterfly can breed in Scotland and possibly overwinters in some parts, but most of the adults we see are migrants from the south. FP: mainly Stinging Nettles. May – Oct.

Marsh Fritillary: Euphydryas aurinia. Found in damp grassland in South Lochaber, Argyll and the Inner Hebrides. A priority species for conservation work due to large declines across Scotland, with a few colonies at rocky inland sites such as Caithness. FP: Devil’s-bit Scabious. June – Aug.

Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary: Boloria selene. Uses several species for conservation work due to large declines across Scotland, with a few colonies at rocky inland sites such as Caithness. FP: Devil’s-bit Scabious. June – Aug.


Small Heath: Coenonympha pamphilus. Widespread, found in almost all of mainland Scotland and most islands in areas of tall grassy vegetation. The adults are active on warm days, but the wings are closed quickly on settling. Very similar to Large Heath, only slightly smaller. FP: fine-leaves grasses including Fescues, Bents and Meadow-grasses. Mid June – mid Aug.

Large Heath: Coenonympha tullia. A more localised species than the Large Heath, mostly found on raised bogs in the lowlands or blanket bog in the Uplands. Two sub-species are recognised in Scotland: the polydama sub-species is found in southwest Scotland, has large spots on the underside of the wings and flies in June and July; the sactica sub-species is found to the north and west, has no (or very small) spots on the underside of the wings and flies in July and August. The sactica sub-species can be separated from Small Heath, FP: mostly Hare’s-tail Cottongrass.

White Large: Pleasra rapae. Widespread but absent from mountainous areas and parts of the north. Numbers boosted by migrants from southern parts of the UK and Europe each year. Often found in gardens and allotments. Can be separated from Small White by the black tips extending in both directions along the upper wing tip. FP: cultivated brassicas such as cabbage and broccoli. May – Sept.

Green-veined White: Pleris napi. Found over most of Scotland, in a wide range of habitats such as meadows, riverbanks and woodland edges. The grey tips to the wings are broken along the outer edge, and the underside is very distinctive, with thick grey lines over white or yellowish-green. FP: a variety of wild plants in the family Compositae including Cuckoo-flower, Garlic Mustard, Hedge Mustard and Charlock. May – Aug in two broods.

Orange-tip: Anthocharis cardamines. A species which has recently spread throughout most of Scotland, but still absent from the far north and islands. Females are similar to other white butterflies, but both sexes have a unique mottled-green and white underwing. FP: Mostly Cuckoo-flower and Garlic Mustard. May – June.

White-letter Hairstreak: Strymon w-album. Only recently found breeding in Scotland after extinction in 19th century, with populations near Coldstream and other parts of the Borders. Flies high in tree tops, difficult to see unless it comes down for nectar. FP: Elm – June, July.

Green Hairstreak: Callibrych phlales. A widespread species found mostly on moorland, woodland edges and bogs easily overlooked. The upperwings are brown, but this butterfly closes its wings immediately on landing revealing the bright green undersides. FP: Mostly Bilberry. May – June.

Purple Hairstreak: Favonius quercus. A very patchy distribution across SW and central Scotland, but probably under-recorded as the adults fly at the tops of mature oak-trees and are mostly active in early evening only rarely descending to ground level. FP: Oaks. July – Aug.

Common Blue: Polymnoma icarus. The most widespread of the blue butterflies found in Scotland, but absent from mountainous areas. Found in short grassland, heathland, coastal grassland and waste ground. Female upperwings can vary from blue to grey. FP: Common and Greater Bird’s-trot Fritilary. June – Aug.

Holly Blue: Celastrina argiolus. Known regularly only from a small number of sites in the SW, Borders and East Lothian. Superficially similar to Common Blue, but underside of wings are mostly plain blue-grey with black dots, and found in different habitats such as garden gardens and graveyards. FP: Holly, Ivy. April – July.

Small Blue: Cupido minimus. The UK’s smallest butterfly. In Scotland most of the adults are found on sand and dune coastal grasslands on the east and north coast, with just a few inland colonies. FP: Kidney Vetch. May – early July.

Northern Brown Argus: Aricia artaxerxes. Patchy distribution in Scotland, with a few populations in Dumfries and Galloway, but mostly on the East Coast from Fife to Sutherland. Usually found on sunny south-facing slopes and coastal areas. Can appear similar to female Common Blues, but no hint of blue in the uppersides. FP: Common Rock-rose. Late May – July.

Small Copper: Lycaena phlaeas. Widespread, but absent from parts of the north and mountainous areas. Found in open habitats with short vegetation, including grassland, wasteland and disused quarries. Often seen basking on bare ground, south-facing banks and rocks. FP: Common Serotonin and Sheep's Serotonin. May – Sept in two broods peaking in June and Aug.

Essops Skipper: Thymelicus lineola. Present in Scotland as a single colony near Lockerbie. Very similar to Small Skipper, but separation is possible by noting the colour of the front tips of the antennae (black in Essops Skipper and orange in Small Skipper). FP: various grasses, including Cock’s-foot, Common Couch and Meadow Footail. June – Aug.

Small Skipper: Thymelicus sylvestris. A species spreading quickly through southern and central Scotland. Males and females differ slightly, with males having a diagonal dark line on the underside of the forewings. Found in habitats with tall grass. FP: Grasses including Yorkshire-fog, Cock’s-foot and others. June – Aug.

Large Skipper: Ochlodes sylvanus. Only slightly larger than the Small Skipper, but has a faint chequered pattern on both sides of the wings. Found in grassy areas, where foodplants grow in sheltered, often damp, situations and remain uncultivated. Currently only found in southern Scotland, but slowly expanding northwards. FP: Cock’s-foot Grass. June – Aug.

Dingy Skipper: Erynnis tages. This rare butterfly is only found in northeast and south west Scotland. In the north east there are small colonies around the Moray Firth and Loch Nevis, and there is a small but established population in Strathpey. In the south west it is often associated with mine bings and forestry tracks. It is found in sunny, sheltered places with bare ground. FP: Bird’s-foot Trefoil. May – June.

Chequered Skipper: Carteoccephalus palaemon. Restricted to Lochaber and North Argyll, where it can be found in damp, sheltered woodland edges or clearings but also associated with more open sites where foodplants grow beneath Bog Myrtle. FP: Purple Moor-grass. Late May – mid June.

Your sightings of butterflies can help us understand how their populations are doing. Send them to us using the (Record Butterflies app (available for Android and Apple devices) or email scotland@butterfly-conservation.org for more information on recording butterflies.

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