

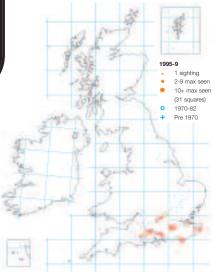
This rare skipper is restricted to chalk downs in southern England where it can be seen darting low over short turf, stopping frequently to bask on bare ground or feed on flowers such as Dwarf Thistle. It can be distinguished by the numerous silver-white spots on the undersides of the hind wings, which can be seen quite easily when it rests with wings in a characteristic 'half-open' posture. The species has declined rapidly over the last 50 years but has re-expanded substantially since 1980.

## Life cycle

The butterfly is single brooded with adults flying from late July to early September. Eggs are laid singly on leaf blades of Sheep's-fescue or occasionally on adjacent plants, where they pass the winter. Females lay most of their eggs on small tufts of foodplant growing in short turf (1-4 cm tall) and often next to small patches of bare ground which provides warmer conditions for the developing larvae. Most eggs are laid next to animal tracks, old rabbit scrapes, or where there is some erosion on steep slopes or due to grazing animals. The pale cream eggs are quite conspicuous and careful searches have enabled some breeding areas to be mapped accurately. The larvae hatch in early spring and feed in small silken webs around the foodplant. They pupate at ground level, deep within small grass tussocks and surrounded by loose silken cocoons.

## **Colony structure**

Although this butterfly is highly colonial, adults have reasonable powers of colonisation. Since 1980, it has colonised several new sites within 1 km of existing populations and occasionally sites up to 8.5 km away. However, large and nearby areas of habitat are more likely to be colonised than small ones. Small populations have also been shown to have high emigration rates and cannot be regarded as self-sustaining colonies. The butterfly is thus thought to form metapopulations covering relatively large areas of countryside within which it breeds in numerous discrete habitat patches. Some of these are larger and permanently occupied core sites while others are temporary.

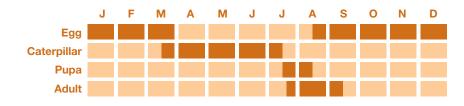


## **Foodplants**

Sheep's-fescue Festuca ovina is the sole foodplant and the butterfly breeds only where this grows as small tufts in short or broken turf.

## **Habitat**

The butterfly breeds in open chalk grassland that contains patches of short, sparse turf typically on thin soils. It also occurred formerly on limestone grassland in central and northern England. Warm, south facing slopes are preferred, but colonies increasingly occur on slopes with other aspects, including some gently north-facing ones.



# Habitat management for the Silver-spotted Skipper

## The overall aim is to maintain a short turf (1-5cm), ideally with small patches of bare ground or broken turf. Grazing

Best results are achieved by a rotational grazing regime, for example by sheep grazing in spring/early summer (but not after June) and cattle grazing in autumn/winter. However, simpler systems can still be effective. Some sites are currently maintained purely by rabbit grazing, but livestock grazing should be reintroduced wherever possible as rabbit numbers are unpredictable and may be reduced by disease outbreak in future.

Sheep Grazing

Grazing by sheep alone can create suitable conditions, providing there is little or no grazing in late summer (to prevent overgrazing of the foodplant) and high enough stocking levels at other times to break up the sward and create bare patches. Where there are steep slopes or high rabbit numbers the stocking density required to break up the turf will not be so high.

#### **Cattle Grazing**

very important.

Because of their larger size, cattle naturally break up the turf to create suitable bare patches, and unlike sheep do not need to be taken off in late summer. Reasonably high grazing levels are required to achieve the short turf, though lighter levels can be suitable on steep, low productivity sites. Little is known about best times of year for cattle grazing, though autumn/winter regimes are known to be good at creating the light poaching that provides suitable breeding conditions.

Grazing levels
The exact grazing levels needed to create suitable conditions for the butterfly will depend on local rabbit numbers. With high rabbit numbers there is some leeway in the stocking density and a reduced need for heavy grazing, but where rabbits are absent or present in low numbers the level of grazing by livestock is

#### Scrub control

The presence of scattered patches of scrub may be beneficial to the Silver-spotted Skipper as it provides shelter and slightly warmer conditions for breeding on adjacent downland. However, scrub removal may be needed on some sites, especially where periods of light grazing have allowed scrub invasion. A proportion of the scrub should be removed leaving some strategically placed small patches for shelter. Stumps should be treated with herbicide to prevent regrowth where necessary and all cut material removed.

#### below Position of eggs on foodplant



below Ideal habitat in short grazed turf, with bare patches and paths used for egg-laying





Saving butterflies, moths and their habitats

**Head Office** Manor Yard East Lulworth Wareham Dorset BH20 5QP Telephone: 0870 774 4309 Email: info@butterfly-conservation.org

# www.butterfly-conservation.org

Compiled by Martin Warren and Tom Wigglesworth. Photographs by Martin Warren.

Butterfly Conservation is a registered charity and non-profit making company, limited by guarantee.

Registered Office: Manor Yard East Lulworth Wareham Dorset BH20 5QP.

Registered in England No. 2206468 - Registered Charity No. 254937



This leaflet has been sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Details of Defra's Environmental Stewardship Scheme can be found at www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/schemes/es/default.htm

The scheme includes Higher Level Stewardship, which supports management for targeted butterflies, moths and other biodiversity.