The Grizzled Skipper is a characteristic spring butterfly of southern chalk downland and other herb-rich grassland habitats. Its rapid, buzzing flight can make it difficult to follow, but it stops regularly either to perch on a prominent twig or to feed on flowers such as Common Birdsfoot-trefoil or Bugle. It can then be identified quite easily by the black and white checkerboard pattern on its wings. The butterfly occurs across central and southern England, and in South and North East Wales, commonly in small colonies, and has declined in several regions, especially away from chalk soils.

**Life cycle**

The Grizzled Skipper is generally single brooded with adults flying from the end of April until mid-June. In warm springs this may be as early as mid-March, and in late years can fly until mid-July. In some parts of the country there can be a partial second brood in July and August. The eggs are laid singly on foodplants growing in warm positions, next to either bare ground or short vegetation (5cm). The larvae build a series of tents, formed by spinning together the edges of leaves, which protect them as they grow. They leave these tents periodically to feed. They overwinter as pupae, which are formed within cocoons of leaves and silk amongst low vegetation (under 30cm).

**Population structure**

Population structure is influenced by a number of factors, including the size and quality of habitat patches and the structure of bordering vegetation. In optimal habitats with high foodplant density, colony boundaries tend to be well defined. Populations in small or sub-optimal habitats with only minor barriers to dispersal tend to have a more open structure and are more closely linked with other nearby patches. Populations are typically small (10-100 adults seen at peak) but some can contain as many as 1000 adults.

**Foodplants**

A variety of plants from the Rosaceae family are used, mainly Agrimony, Creeping Cinquefoil, Wild Strawberry, Barren Strawberry, Tormentil, Salad Burnet, Bramble, Dog-rose, Rosa canina, and Wood Avens Geum urbanum.

**Habitat**

Three main habitats are used:

1. Woodland rides, glades and clearings.
2. Unimproved grassland.
3. Abandoned industrial sites, such as disused mineral working spoil heaps, railway lines and even rubbish tips.

Occasionally it also breeds on heathland, damp grassland and dunes.
Habitat management for the Grizzled Skipper

Woodland rides, glades and clearings
Aim to maintain a continued supply of open habitat (ride, glades or clearings) that contain foodplants growing over bare ground in sunny conditions with varied vegetation nearby.

Woodland and Ride Management
Conditions can be provided by clearing woodland plots (e.g. by coppicing) and ride management. Occasional disturbance of wide sunny rides is beneficial, creating areas of bare ground for breeding. This can be achieved by cutting low to the ground through scarification of the surface or general disturbance by machinery. Coppicing ride edge vegetation on a short rotation may also be helpful where no substantial area can be managed as coppice. A network of open, sunny rides and glades is beneficial and may be essential to link clearings in high forest woodland.

Unimproved grassland and abandoned industrial sites
Aim to maintain a mosaic of short herb-rich grassland with patches of bare ground for breeding, taller vegetation for shelter and roosting, and scrub for mate-location and as foodplant habitat.

Grazing
Suitable conditions can be maintained by low to moderate stock grazing, especially winter cattle. This creates patches of bare ground as well as short vegetation. Sheep grazing is only likely to be successful if bare ground is created simultaneously through scrub clearance or animal disturbance. Heavy spring grazing is to be avoided as it eliminates nectar sources, which appear vital for the butterfly. Heavy grazing by stock or rabbits is generally detrimental as it creates a uniform short sward which is not favoured.

Moderate rabbit grazing and burrowing can result in suitable conditions but populations need to be carefully monitored. A contingency plan needs to be established to implement stock grazing in the event of a crash in rabbit populations, or alternatively rabbit control or fencing in the event of a population explosion.

Scrub Control
Patches of scattered young scrub (<5-10 years old) should be retained and ideally managed so that a proportion is cut each year on rotation.

Scarcification and Topsoil Stripping
Periodic scraping to create bare ground can also lead to ideal conditions and is often the preferred management technique on abandoned industrial sites where grazing is rarely an option. Topsoil stripping inhibits the growth of vigorous plants, allows colonisation by the foodplants and creates patches of bare ground.

Habitat Creation
Suitable habitat can be created by either turf stripping or importing inert, low nutrient status substrates. Suitable materials include crushed limestone, railway ballast, crushed concrete, crushed brick, pulverised fuel ash and steel slag. Natural colonisation is preferable to reseeding, but results should be monitored to ensure desirable foodplants are present. Where reseeding is needed it should be a maximum of 50% of the area and only seeds of local provenance should be used. Foodplants will take several years to reach the required size.

Butterfly Conservation
Saving butterflies, moths and their habitats

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