

**dingy skippers**  
need our help...

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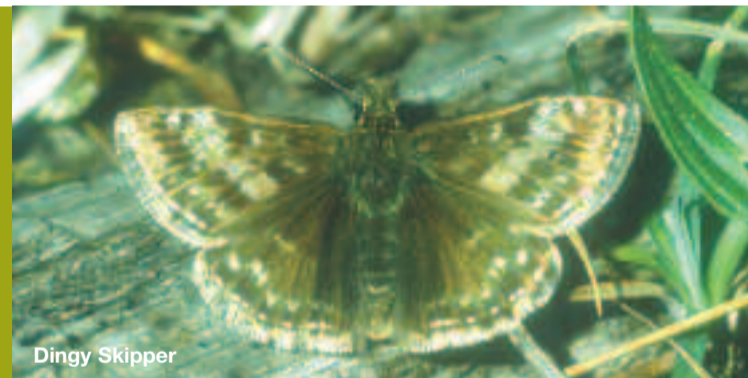
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and Butterfly Conservation needs your help if we are to **protect it** in the East Midlands

# conserving the Dingy Skipper in the East Midlands



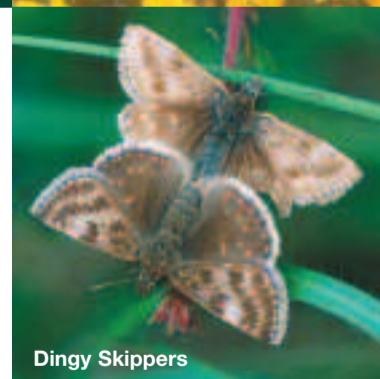
Dingy Skipper



Common Birds-foot-trefoil



Horseshoe Vetch



Dingy Skippers

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.

## Where can you see Dingy Skippers in the East Midlands?

### Leicestershire Brown's Hill Quarry

This is a Leicestershire & Rutland Wildlife Trust reserve and is a Regionally Important Geological Site. It contains a fascinating variety open grassland plants which are colonising old spoil heaps and Common Bird's-foot Trefoil is abundant. The reserve is to the east of Holwell village, 5 km north of Melton Mowbray and access is at grid reference SK 742234 (OS Landranger 129).

### Rutland Ketton Quarry

This is another Leicestershire & Rutland Wildlife Trust reserve which is also a SSSI and part is a Regionally Important Geological Site. By continued management, scrub is cleared from parts of the site to maintain open calcareous grassland alongside other habitats. To access the site, take the A6121 through Ketton and turn north along Pit Lane at the east end of the village. The entrance is on the left about 400 m further on, grid reference SK 977053 (OS Landranger 141).

### Derbyshire Brierley Wood/Sheepbridge

A former brownfield site which has woodland and grassland - some areas have very thin soil and old spoil heaps where Bird's-foot Trefoil is widespread. The area holds two colonies, one at the bottom of the hill where the grassland is fairly deep, the other on the edge of Brierley Woods (SK 367757) is a larger colony. Take the A61 north from Chesterfield, turning off on the B 6057; then park at SK 372753 (OS Landranger 119) and follow path through the gate.

### Nottinghamshire Teversal/Pleasley Trail

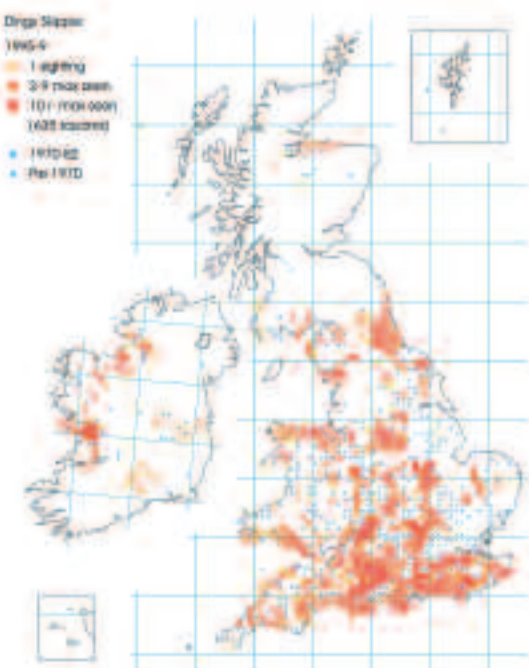
The site for Dingy Skippers is in the deep cutting section of the Nature Trail at SK 486634 (OS Landranger 120). Details can be found at the Teversal Trail's Visitor Centre at SK 479613. The whole trail is approximately five miles long and is level walking on disused railway tracks.

## The Dingy Skipper is a priority species in Butterfly Conservation's Regional Action Plan for the East Midlands (including Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire & Rutland and S Derbyshire).

In the years leading up to 2003, records were received from only a handful of sites across the region, although a few widely scattered sites held healthy and protected colonies. Records from Nottinghamshire were particularly sparse - the only cause for optimism here being some new colonies on former coal mining sites, but these, of course, may be easily lost.

So a major survey was completed over 2003-04 during which nearly all known recent sites were visited to check on the current situation. At over half these sites no Dingy Skippers were seen, confirming the serious extent of the losses.

Having identified where colonies of the Dingy Skipper still exist in the region, the next steps are to safeguard them and to set up monitoring schemes so that their fortunes can be followed in the future.





# 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 the latter 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



Burnet Companion



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.

### 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](http://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**

Saving butterflies, moths and their habitats