conserving the dingy skipper in eastern England

Although the foodplants of the Dingy Skipper are common and are 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, the isolation of neighbouring colonies increases. This increases their vulnerability, as it has been shown that small and isolated sites are least likely to support the butterfly on a long term basis.

The Dingy Skipper is a high priority in Butterfly Conservation’s Regional Action Plans for the Eastern Region (including Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk). Hertfordshire may have 8 sites but only 3 have been confirmed since 2000. In Bedfordshire there could be up to 16 sites with most of these on disused quarries and chalk grassland. In Cambridgeshire there are a couple of sites near Peterborough where individuals have been recorded but, the best site is Devil’s Dyke near Newmarket with 27 adults recorded in one visit. There are less than 6 sites for the butterfly in Suffolk with very low numbers recorded at most locations. There were only four places where Dingy Skipper was recorded recently in Norfolk but further recording may locate new sites. The butterfly has not been recorded in Essex since 1990.

A major objective of the project is to identify and survey all Dingy Skipper sites in the region.

This is where you can help!
Butterfly Conservation would welcome anyone willing to help with survey work. If you would like to help assess butterfly numbers at one or more of the many known sites in eastern England, Butterfly Conservation is able to provide details of the sites nearest to where you live.

Alternately, you may wish to discover new sites. Any site where the foodplants are abundant is worth a visit during May. We can provide a survey pack to help you identify the butterfly and record important details such as adult numbers and site condition.

If you feel you lack the experience required to undertake survey work, Butterfly Conservation is running a series of workshops and site visits aimed at enabling you to identify the Dingy Skipper and its foodplants and understand their requirements. Survey methods will also be explained.

Where can you see Dingy Skipper in eastern England?

Bedfordshire Marston Vale Millennium Country Park
At this large site managed by Marston Vale Trust, the Dingy Skippers are usually best seen along the edge of Stewartby Lake. Access the site off the A42 at Marston Moretaine. OS Explorer 208 grid reference 306429

Cambridgeshire Devil’s Dyke
This dramatic chalk embankment is a scheduled ancient monument and site of special scientific interest. Access to the public footpath along the top of the Dyke can be found at the July Racecourse. From the A134 at the Stetchworth Toll roundabout (horse statue) go past the entrance to the National Stud and the Dyke can be seen ahead. OS Explorer 210 grid reference 619614

Hertfordshire Aldbury Nowers Duchies Piece
Situated on the Chiltern escarpment and adjoining the Ridgeway Path this chalk grassland habitat is managed by Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. From Tring town centre take station road to Tring station and Aldbury. Just beyond the railway bridge bear left and the reserve entrance is about 1km further along. OS Explorer 181 grid reference 953135

Norfolk Bawsey Pits
 Owned and managed by WBB minerals this area of sand pits is a haven for wildlife. Park at Car Park at Park at Car Park on the ... road between King’s Lynn and Gayton and keep to marked footpaths and tracks. OS Explorer 216 grid reference 876198

Suffolk Chalk Lane King’s Forest
Wide forest ride on chalk soil with numerous wildflowers managed by Forest Enterprise. Follow B1106 between Wodwell and Elveden to the King’s Picnic Place. OS Explorer 229 grid reference 923752

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and Butterfly Conservation needs your help if we are to protect it in eastern England
The Dingy Skipper is a rather inconspicuous brown and grey butterfly. It is most commonly seen basking or engaging in rapid flights that are difficult to follow with the eye. It is unlikely to be confused with any other butterfly, except perhaps the Grizzled Skipper. However, Grizzled Skippers are mainly black and white and are unlikely to be seen north of Yorkshire.

What do Dingy Skippers Need?

In all habitat types the following vegetation is needed:

- An abundance of one or more of the following larval foodplants: Common Bird’s-foot Trefoil, Greater Bird’s-foot Trefoil and Horsebeam Vetch, growing in sheltered vegetation. A sparse sward, usually including bare ground, is important for the Dingy Skipper. Females lay their eggs on long shoots of the foodplant, so heavy grazing or mowing in spring/summer should be avoided.
- Although short, sparse swards interspersed with bare ground are important, patches of taller vegetation provide shelter and roosting sites.
- Adults are not prolific nectar feeders. Nevertheless, good Dingy Skipper sites are often rich in wildflowers. On the rare occasions that they do feed, adults will often choose the flowers of Common Bird’s-foot Trefoil.

The requirements of Dingy Skippers are met in a range of habitats. Brownfield sites are especially important, although calcareous grasslands, woodland clearings and rides, dunes and undercliffs and heathland may all support colonies.

- Large areas of 2 hectares), sheltered and sunny sites containing substantial quantities of Bird’s-foot Trefoil, with predominately, although not exclusively, short vegetation and patches of bare ground will support the largest populations. Sites are more likely to persist in the long term if they form part of a network of colonies. This is especially true of small sites or sites that support only low adult numbers.

How to manage sites for Dingy Skippers.

One of the main threats facing Dingy Skipper sites is the development of tall vegetation and scrub. Some tall vegetation is often beneficial, as it provides shelter and roosting sites. However, if sites become too overgrown, conditions become shaded and hostplant supplies of bare ground become scarce. The principal aim of management should therefore be to maintain hostplants and bare ground without entirely eradicating taller vegetation.

Brownfield Sites

- Disused quarries, railways, spoil heaps and waste ground often constitute ideal habitat. Nevertheless, good Dingy Skipper sites are often rich in wildflowers. Undercliffs and dunes need to be removed or thinned. While scrub or planted trees may sometimes be avoided.

Waste Ground and Rides

- Forest rides often provide suitable habitat for Dingy Skippers. The best areas tend to be found along drainage ditches or the banks of woodland rides. The exposed subsoil or stone beds of tracks can be the key element in providing the microclimate they require. Colonies growing in woodland rides can be maintained through ensuring that rides do not become shaded. Rotational cutting of vegetation and periodic ground disturbance is likely to promote a healthy microclimate, although this work is best restricted to autumn and winter.

Clearings in woodlands are a much-reduced habitat for many butterflies. The best conditions for Dingy Skippers occur in the first few years following felling or coppicing. Rotational felling allows Dingy Skippers to move into patches as they become suitable.

Farmland

- Most colonies persisting on farmland are found on unimproved or semi-improved grassland. This type of habitat may have other nature conservation interests, meaning that landowners may already receive support and advice regarding management. As important, good Dingy Skipper sites are often rich in wildflowers. In this nature, as poor soils rarely favour large, vigorous plants. On more open farmland, occasional disturbance of the ground, perhaps using mechanical plant on a rotational basis, is a good way of maintaining rides, white scrub or planted trees may sometimes be avoided. Rabbits may create ideal conditions but their numbers are normally difficult to manage and often fluctuate. This can lead to under-grazing or over-grazing of swards.

Mowing

- Rotational mowing in autumn can maintain sites for Dingy Skipper, although should only be employed in situations where grazing is impractical. It may be beneficial to restore open areas by scarification.

Scrub Clearance

- On managed farmland, 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 suited both by Bird’s-foot Trefoil and egg-laying Dingy Skippers. Monitoring relatively little is known regarding management. An important measure for Dingy Skippers is ensuring that management regimes supported by DEFFRA under agri-environment schemes cater for its needs wherever appropriate.

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Survey and Monitoring

- Find out where the butterfly may be found near you. In May and early June, help to monitor known populations and survey new sites. Creating new habitat near existing colonies is an important conservation measure. Join a training workshop to learn more about the butterfly and its habitat needs.

Habitat conservation work

- 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. Contact Butterfly Conservation for further help and information www.butterfly-conservation.org

Further information on Dingy Skippers is contained in the Species Action Plan available at www.butterfly-conservation.org