

conserving the dingy skipper in eastern England



Dingy Skipper



Horshoe Vetch

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.



Horshoe Vetch

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 A421 at Marston Moretaine. OS Explorer 208 grid reference 006429

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 A1304 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 on the road between King's Lynn and Gayton and keep to marked footpaths and tracks. OS Explorer 236 grid reference 676198

Suffolk Chalk Lane King's Forest

Wide forest ride on chalk soil with numerous wildflowers managed by Forest Enterprise. Follow B1106 between Wordwell and Elveden to the King's Picnic Place. OS Explorer 229 grid reference 823752

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.



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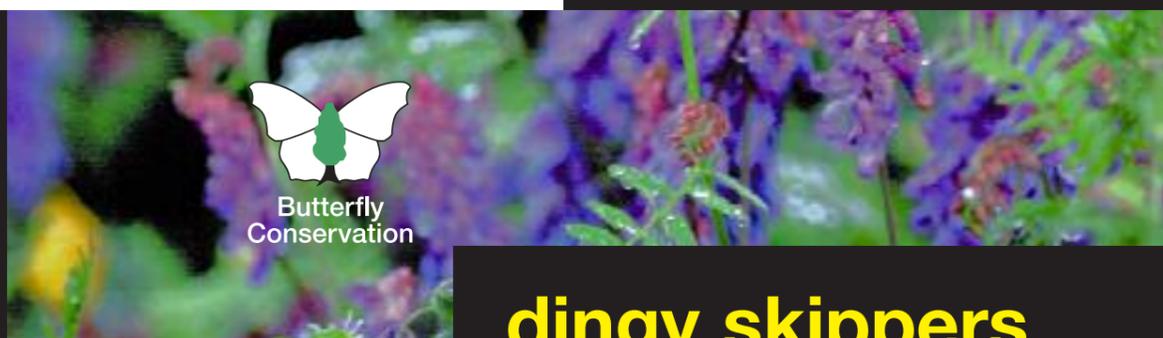
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dingy skippers
need our help...



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and Butterfly Conservation
needs your help if we are to
protect it in eastern England



getting to know dingy skippers



Dingy Skippers



Mother Shipton



Dingy Skipper ova



Grizzled Skippers showing underside

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. Many people are more likely to mistake the Dingy Skipper for a day-flying moth such as the Mother Shipton or Burnet Companion.

The hindwings of both these species are much brighter than those of the Dingy Skipper, although getting a close up view may be difficult. 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.

What can you do to help us?

Site Safeguard

Brownfield sites are now perhaps the most important habitats for the Dingy Skipper in many parts of England. Disused gravel workings, railways, spoil heaps and similar disturbed ground sites can often present ideal conditions- habitats where housing and other development work is currently being targeted.

Look out for development proposals at brownfield sites. At sites supporting Dingy Skippers and where development cannot be prevented, appropriate mitigation measures such as planning conditions may help. The aim should be to retain key habitat already occupied by the butterfly and compensate for losses by creating new areas. Ensure that habitat creation techniques focus on natural colonisation rather than specific planting and the new habitat is within colonising distance of existing colonies so they can be inter-dependent.

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 to 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 from Butterfly Conservation at www.butterfly-conservation.org

How do Dingy Skippers live?

The adult butterflies normally live in “colonies” (aggregations of adults in discrete habitats), 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 single brooded and adults emerge in late April or early May depending on how warm the spring has been. 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 leaves of foodplants. Common Bird’s-foot Trefoil is the foodplant most commonly used, although eggs are sometimes laid on related plant species, such as Horseshoe Vetch and Greater Bird’s-foot trefoil. Female Dingy Skippers often select hostplants growing in proximity to bare ground. These situations provide a warm micro-climate 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, the larva spins a new tent every few days. As the caterpillars grow through the summer, they may move into taller vegetation. By mid-August, the larva is usually fully grown, whereupon it constructs a more substantial tent, known as a hibernaculum, low down in the vegetation. This is where the larva overwinters. In spring, the larva pupates within the hibernaculum prior to its emergence as an adult. The pupal stage normally lasts for 30-36 days.

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 Horseshoe 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 is not ideal.

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 (more than 2 hectares), sheltered and sunlit sites containing substantial quantities of Bird’s-foot Trefoil, with predominantly, 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 species and bare ground become scarcer. 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. Bird’s-foot Trefoil is often one of the first plants to colonise bare ground and is relatively tolerant of nutrient-poor or contaminated soils. Vegetation tends to develop slowly on sites of this nature, as poor soils rarely favour large, vigorous plants. On more overgrown brownfield sites, occasional disturbance of the ground, perhaps using mechanical plant on a rotational basis, is a useful way of maintaining open areas, while scrub or planted trees may sometimes need to be removed or thinned.

Woodland and Rides

Forest rides often provide suitable habitat for Dingy Skippers. The best areas tend to be found along track verges or the banks of ditches and rides. The exposed subsoil or stone beds of tracks can be the key element in providing the microhabitat they require. Colonies situated 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 prove beneficial, 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 well have other nature conservation interests, meaning that landowners may already receive support and advice regarding management. An important conservation measure for the Dingy Skipper is ensuring that management regimes supported by DEFRA under agri-environment schemes cater for its needs wherever appropriate.

Grazing

Rotational grazing, which provides a fresh supply of successional habitats, but allows development of the required growth form of the hostplants, is the best regime. Alternatively, grazing concentrated in autumn and winter may be used. Cattle are preferred to sheep, as cattle grazed swards tend to be less uniform and contain more bare ground. Grazing regimes that produce a range of sward heights including patches of less than 5cm for breeding are most suitable, although heavy summer grazing should be avoided. Rabbits may create ideal conditions but their numbers are notoriously difficult to manage and often fluctuate. This can lead to under-grazing or over-grazing of swards.

Mowing

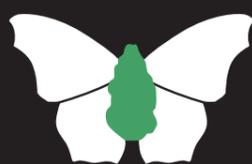
Rotational mowing in autumn can maintain sites for Dingy Skipper, although should only be employed in situations where grazing is impractical. It may be beneficial to restore open areas by scarification.

Scrub Clearance

On 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 Bird’s-foot Trefoil and egg-laying Dingy Skippers.

Monitoring

Relatively little is known regarding the best techniques for site management. It is therefore important that adult numbers of Dingy Skippers on managed sites are monitored in order to establish their response to various regimes. Contact Butterfly Conservation for further help.



Butterfly Conservation

Saving butterflies, moths and their habitats