

Spring butterflies

Butterflies are among the earliest insects to catch our attention in spring and will be tirelessly active throughout May. If you are lucky, you may notice an enigmatic silvery-blue shimmer this month, dashing high along the hedgerows. This will be the holly blue butterfly. This insect is fiercely territorial, seldom straying far from its home range. It lays its eggs on holly blossom. A second generation of holly blues appear in August to lay their eggs on ivy, as by then, holly flowers are absent. The holly blue is a common insect, although in some years it can be a rare sight. It passes winter as a chrysalis, but its fortunes are relative to the abundance of the parasitic wasp *listrodomus nycthemerus*. This tiny, cuckoo-type wasp relies solely on the holly blue as a host, laying its eggs in first instar caterpillars. The adult wasp emerges from the dying chrysalis the following spring. Wasp populations can take up to seven years to reach their peak, when up to 99% of holly blue caterpillars will be carrying larval wasps, causing the host population to crash.

The green-veined white might at first appear to be just another white butterfly, but on close inspection of its wings, subtle grey-green veins are apparent on the yellowish undersides. During copulation, males inject females with the chemical compound methyl salicylate along with their sperm. The smell of this compound deters other males to ensure the first male's paternity of the eggs. Also, after mating the female will adopt a male-refusal posture, at the same time releasing the methyl salicylate as an anti-aphrodisiac to repel any courtship attempts. Males are sensitive to both postural and chemical variations and can differentiate between a virgin female and an unreceptive mated one. Green-veined white butterflies lay their eggs on crucifers like garlic mustard and watercress.

The orange-tip is ubiquitous during April and May, but after this month will not be seen again until next spring. It is a fast-moving, erratic insect, darting here and there in its diligent search for nectar. In flight the male appears to be white, with eye-catching orange flashes as it flutters its wings. These animated flickers are the tips of the forewings, tinged bright orange. The female is not so conspicuous with rather dull-grey wing tips.

Eggs are laid on cuckoo flowers or garlic mustard. A female orange-tip will lay only one egg per food plant, at the same time excreting a pheromone to put off other females from depositing their eggs on the same flower. The caterpillars eat the developing seeds within the flower head and do not move to another plant. One caterpillar will devour another if it tries to share the same food source. Orange-tips over-winter as pupae, hatching into the attractive adult butterfly the following April, to once again charm us with its tantalizing orange-flickering flight.

477 words

Colin Varndell April 2025