Sapperton Wilder Butterfly Report 2026

It was an extraordinary year for many butterflies. While some species thrived in the heat and drought, others suffered or moved off transect to shadier areas in the landscape. At Sapperton, the herbal leys and wildflower areas are coming into their own, grassland restoration is in process, cattle have been integrated - slowly building the herd and learning how to best use them as a management tool while measuring their impact. The agroforestry trial plot is in its third year. The big highlight of the year was how well the herbal leys supported huge numbers of butterflies, especially the Common Blue. Read on for more details.



Marbled Whites on Knapweed. Photo: Chenie Prudhomme

Methods – What did we do?

This is the third year as part of the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (UKBMS). Transect sections were established in 2024 to cover the range of management types across the farm. The sections were walked once a week for 26 weeks, from 1 April to end of September.

Table 1: Section Length (in meters) and land management

Section	Length (m)	Field(s)	Management
1	873	Beech, Kite	Wildflower margins, public footpath, grassy corners, herbal leys
2	647	Otter	Wild Bird Food
3	734	Newt	Full Wildflower
4	622	Oak	Fallow
5	998	Badger	Herbal ley with wildflower margin
6	1795	Bishops Walk, Butterfly, Hawthorn, Buzzard	Mix of fallow and grassland restoration
7	1242	Fox	Herbal ley with wildflower margin, grazed by cattle since November 2025
Total	6785		









Results – What did we find?

Highlights in Numbers - 2026

3
Number of Years in the Scheme

7.2
Kilometres walked each week

8
Number of people involved

26
Number of species recorded

2952
Highest Weekly Count (6 July)

9524
Highest species count (Meadow Brown)

20,442
Total butterfly records

In total, **26 species** were observed during the transects, with over **20,000 total records**. Compared to last year with 26 species and 11,749 total records. 25 out of 26 weeks were viably counted.

Winners: Common Blue, Brown Argus, Small Heath, Small Copper

New Species: Green Hairstreak

'Losers': Small Tortoiseshell, Cabbage Whites

Best Week: Week 14 with 2952 compared to
2025: Week 15 with 1823
2024: Week 16 with 900

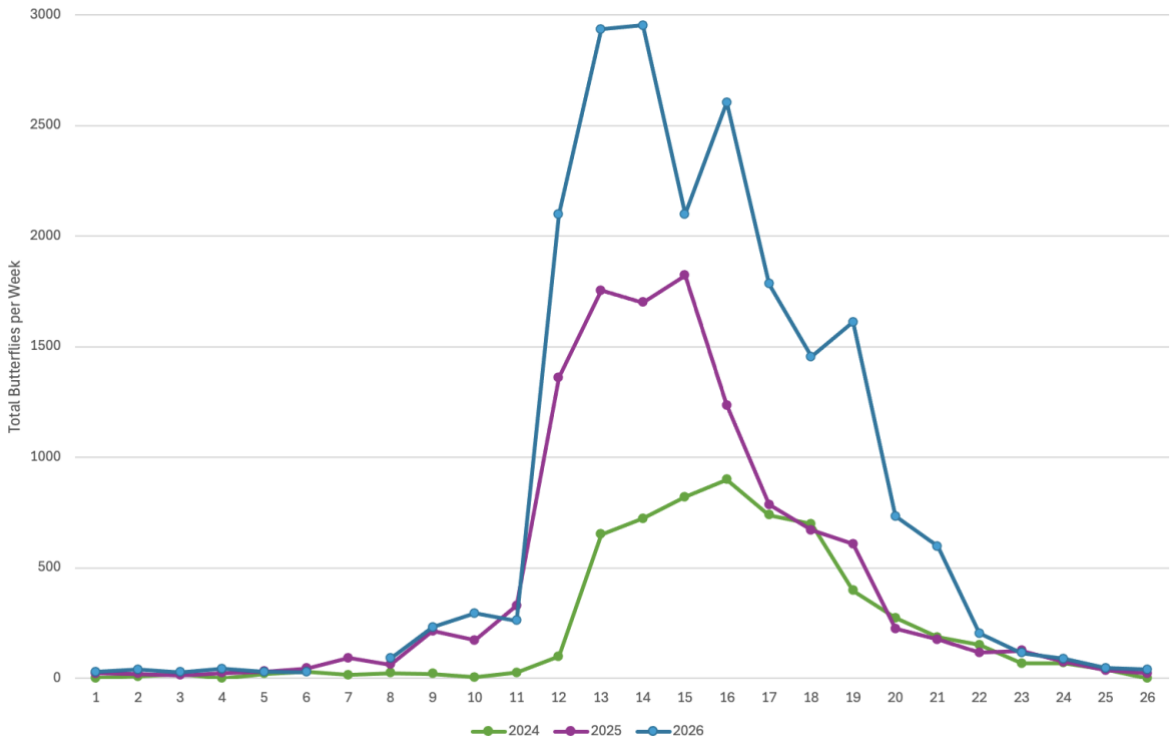


Figure 1: Sapperton Wilder UKBMS Weekly Totals 2024-2026

Figure 1 shows the total butterfly counts per week during the UKBMS survey season. Numbers peaked to nearly 3000 in Week 14 (6 July). What the graph shows is not only the huge growth in total numbers, but also the shifting of the peak landing earlier each year.



Left: Green Hairstreak, Right: Holly Blue

Photos by Chenie Prudhomme

Table 2: Total records by species by year

SPECIES	2024	2025	2026	TREND
Brimstone	13	22	24	-
Brown Argus	**74**	**283**	**1355**	↑↑
Clouded Yellow	**0**	**6**	**89**	↑↑
Comma	3	18	7	↓
Common Blue	**213**	**1041**	**4405**	↑↑
Dingy Skipper	9	15	17	-
Gatekeeper	360	676	443	↓
Green Hairstreak	0	0	1	New
Green-veined White	42	41	31	↓
Holly Blue	**4**	**3**	**48**	↑↑
Large Skipper	50	89	27	↓
Large White	55	304	32	↓
Marbled White	**517**	**575**	**1586**	↑↑
Meadow Brown	**3639**	**7141**	**9524**	↑↑
Orange Tip	37	24	18	↓
Painted Lady	**17**	**11**	**116**	↑↑
Peacock	37	93	114	↑
Red Admiral	37	29	31	-
Ringlet	376	353	114	↓
Small Tortoiseshell	2	4	4	-
Small/Essex Skipper	**417**	**438**	**1287**	↑↑

Silver-washed Fritillary	3	8	7	-
Small Copper	**3**	**52**	**127**	↑↑
Small Heath	**9**	**162**	**871**	↑↑
Small White	73	347	163	↓
Speckled Wood	12	14	1	↓
White-letter Hairstreak	0	2	0	↓

*The species in **bold** have seen significant growth from previous years

By Section

As sections were different lengths (see Table 1), butterfly counts needed to be standardised by distance (100 meters was chosen) to be able to compare them. Figure 2 shows the increase in total numbers in every section this year. Appendix 1 at the end of the report shows where the sections are across the site.

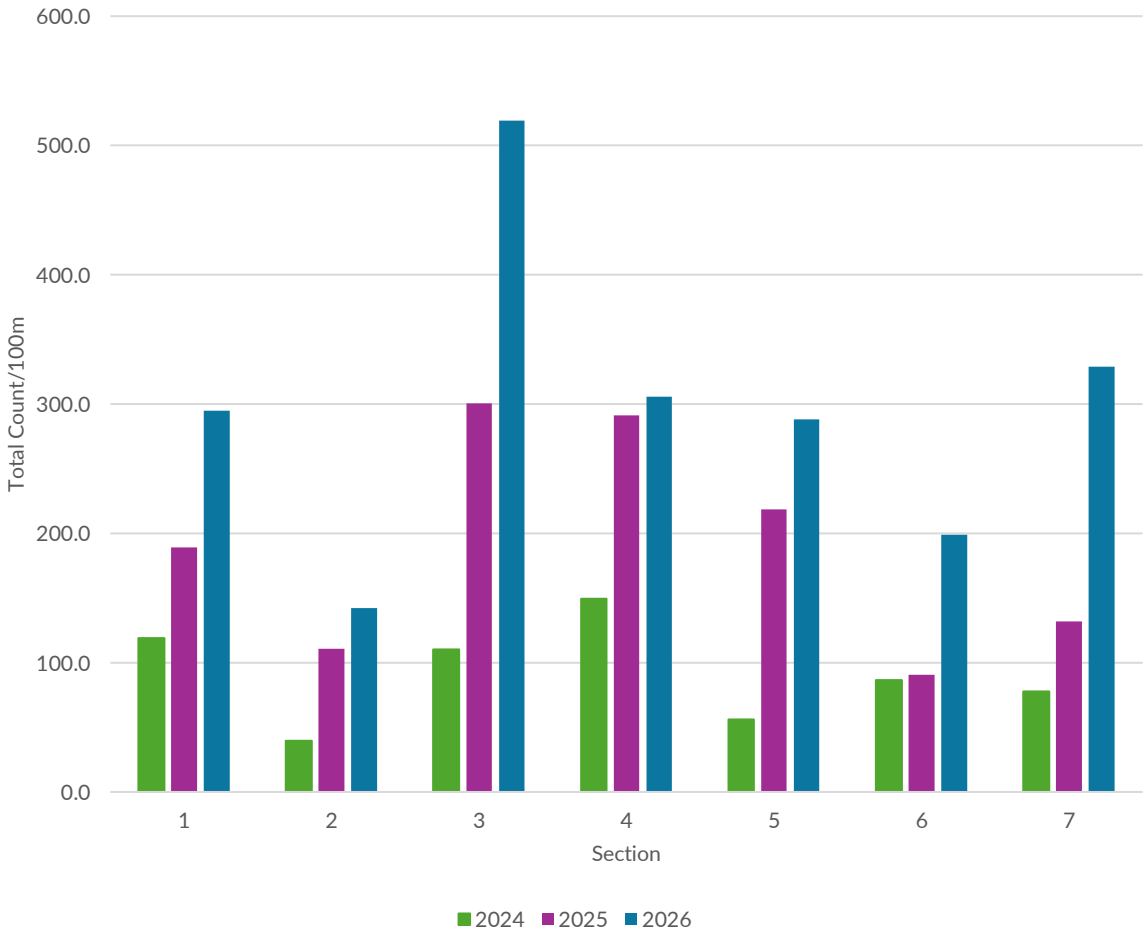


Figure 2: Change in total number by section each year

Single Species Count – Marbled Whites

A total of 715 Marbled Whites were recorded by local volunteers over 6 weeks this year, compared to 595 in 2025 and 294 in 2024. Numbers again peaked late June, much earlier than the peak in 2024. This earlier peak was likely due to a warm and dry Spring and early Summer, which saw these butterflies having a stable but very short season. Click here to read the full report.

Discussion – What does it mean?

The total counts this year far eclipsed the last two years' numbers. This can likely be contributed to two factors – regenerative management and weather. The drought and heatwaves caused earlier and shorter flight seasons for many species. Some species like Ringlet, Speckled Wood, and Comma seek shadier areas, so they would not have been captured in the Sapperton Wilder transects which are all field based rather than woodland or glade based. Once our agroforestry trees mature and scrub is encouraged back into the landscape, some of these species might increase on site.

In contrast, butterflies like Brown Argus, Common Blue, Meadow Brown, Small Copper and Small Heath are all species that do well in hot summers and their numbers showed this. However, if these droughts continue, the impacts on the caterpillar food plants are yet to be understood. As the results show from the Big Butterfly Count 2026, "heatwaves help butterflies but could kill caterpillars; adult butterflies love hot summer weather…but what matters far more is what's happening on the ground, to the butterflies' caterpillar offspring and the plants they depend on." Only time and continued monitoring will tell.

Research is ongoing on how landowners can create microclimates to help species buffer against the effects climate change. Led by the University of Cambridge's Insect Ecology Group and the Wildlife Trusts, E-shaped butterfly banks are being built to create varied sun exposure, shade and wind shelter which can be easily monitored. Sapperton Wilder has just created four E-shaped banks in Stoat field (see Appendix 1 map) as part of this wider research project. Long-term monitoring will help us understand how butterflies and other insects use these banks. To read more, visit our Butterflies page: https://www.sappertonwilder.co.uk/nature/butterflies/.

We saw some declines in several species like the Cabbage Whites (Small, Large and Green-veined Whites). This could be contributed to their caterpillar foodplant dying off in the drought and/or an increase in the parasitic wasp that parasitises the caterpillars of these species.

The migratory species of Painted Lady and Clouded Yellow fared very well this year. Painted Ladies lay their eggs on thistles, but as much of the fields are in herbal ley, wildflower, grassland restoration or crop, there aren't many thistles at Sapperton Wilder, so they would've moved on through the landscape to find this plant. Clouded Yellows have had an extraordinary year with a mass migration, naming 2026 as a "Clouded Yellow Year". They were seen mostly in the herbal leys, laying eggs on Sainfoin, Clovers and Bird's-foot Trefoil.

The difference in numbers in different transect sections are slightly more difficult to interpret. Figure 2 shows an increase in numbers in every section, although there is the greatest increase and total number of butterflies in Section 3. This field is in a full AB8 wildflower mix under Countryside Stewardship which has been in for three years. The diverse mix of forage and foodplant options, as well as it's protection from prevailing winds on two sides (South and West) of the field made it a haven for butterflies. Conversely, numbers were lowest in Section 2, which is in an annual AB9 Winter Bird Food mix under Countryside Stewardship. This seed mix is intended to flower later and provide over-winter seed for birds. The nature of its annual sowing means it's not an ideal field for larvae to feed, although it does provide later flower nectar for wandering adults.

The extraordinary increase in Common Blues and Brown Argus in the herbal leys has certainly been the highlight of this year's results. This is very important data that needs to be fed back to government as evidence of the importance of funding for Countryside Stewardship and SFI, supporting farmers to include things like herbal leys in their rotation. We are working on finding the avenues in which to feed this data back to our representatives and DEFRA. As the project progresses, this will increasingly be an aim of the wider project.

Future species to watch for:

- Dark Green Fritillary – requires hairy violet
- Grizzled Skipper – requires wild strawberry and agrimony
- Chalkhill Blue – requires horseshoe vetch
- Small Blue - requires kidney vetch (naturally colonising in Section 6)
- Brown Hairstreak – requires young blackthorn growth

Acknowledgements

A massive thank you to Mark Taylor for all your tremendous help getting the monitoring done this year. Also thank you to Matthew Oates for your data interpretation, advise on land management, and general support of the project. And a huge thank you to all of those who helped with transects and the single species counts: Becky, Tom, Ned & Fynn Robinson, Fergus Dignan, Frankie Shaw, Mally Findlater, and Mick Peacey.

Appendix I: Map of Transect Sections

