

Painted lady round-up from Andy Brazil of Norfolk Butterfly Conservation

This email I received sums up the story so well I think it's worth placing it here on www.honeyguide.co.uk lock, stock and barrel. Note contributions from Honeyguide's Paul Tout

Chris Durdin, 29 May 2009

Apologies for the bulk email - as you'll appreciate I've had a lot of correspondence to reply to! Here's what I have gathered so far - sorry it's so long. I'll quote from various emails I've had:

Unseasonal rainfall over the Atlas mountains in North Africa produced a bumper crop of food plants over the winter. This allowed Painted Lady populations to build up to huge numbers and resulted in the usual spring migration being quite large. However, it also seems to have allowed a second brood to have been produced which has also migrated. The first migration wave arrived in the UK in late April/early May in small numbers. These individuals were described as very pale and "washed out".

"A friend of mine has just returned from holiday at a locality east of the Pyrenees...In the last week of April there were P. Ladies everywhere'. They were very abundant but difficult to see since 'they were almost all badly faded'. This was c.60Kms inland, N. of the Med"
R Lane

"On 13 May there was a very good fall of Painted Ladies in the extreme NE of Italy in the Region Friuli Venezia Giulia (bordering Austria and Slovenia). I would say many hundreds of thousands present in an area of c.8000km. Over the following days (they were mostly on stopover, hanging around flowers and patches of bare ground) they moved on."
P Tout

On 16th May this first wave arrived in Norfolk:

"Reports of PL coming in from most coastal locations in Norfolk today. No large numbers at any one spot but widespread - from Titchwell in the North-west to Yarmouth in the East. Most reports comment on their pale and washed-out appearance." A Brazil

These reports were of tens of butterflies and by the 18th no more reports were received. Also reported across the south coast but mainly singles.

The second wave however, was much larger: Reports of large numbers came from southern Europe.

"Two weeks ago, we recorded 'unbelievable' numbers of PAINTED LADY butterflies migrating north across the Atlas Mountain region in Northern Morocco (North Africa). The migrating insects spanned at least 100 kilometres of road and involved many 'millions' of insects (thousands were getting run over by vehicles)."
Lee Evens (400 Club) posted 27th May

"we saw thousands heading north in central Spain early May." A & C Dawson

" I had a 'phone-call from a colleague just back home from Spain who reports '100's of thousands' heading N. through Spain, last week." R Lane posted 23rd May

"Two bird ringers operating on the islands of Gorgona (24.4.2009) and Ponza ('first week of May') wrote and mentioned that large numbers passed the Med. about a month ago." P Tout

"near Gorizia I counted c.10 butterflies a minute moving north on a front of about 100 metres, all at 0.5m - 5m above ground, same story from Udine, and Pordenone as well as the nearby Veneto... we are talking about many, many millions of Painted Ladies moving north on a front at least 100km wide (and probably much more). What struck me as odd was that the butterflies were in a wide range of conditions from fairly fresh (but pale and small) through to ridiculously tatty, so it would seem that more than one generation is involved." P Tout 20th May

"Yesterday's 'front' extended to the whole 'Pianura Padana' ('The Plain of Padua') stretching from the Adriatic coast right across to the area south of Milan (huge numbers visible crossing the enormous and dead-flat areas of rice-fields near Vercelli and on to Turin (total of about 500km)." P Tout 21st May

"Also on Malta, on the days of 20th - 22nd (May), hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of V.c. passed through." M Sammut

"Here in Brittany (near Plenee Jugon) I have seen loads of PL's heading west through the garden" 24th May P Allen

"PL in steady stream through Calais towards sea today" 20th May L Goodyear

"Have just received an e-mail from a colleague out in the Balearic Islands. He says that there are massive numbers of Painted Ladies there." M Honey 21st May

These butterflies began to hit the UK on the 20th " did a 6-mile walk over Romney Marsh near Rye today and found lots of Painted Ladies,... maybe 100+." P Bonham 20th May

"stopped counting at 50 in under 3 hours over my garden in Verwood Dorset today." C Court 23rd May "'scores' of P.Ladies were on and around St.Mary's (Isles-of-Scilly) with hundreds flying north" R Lane 23rd May

and reached a peak on Sunday 24th across the whole county.

"1000's of Painted Ladies flying west in off the sea along the east coast this morning, I have had c100 per hour in Beccles Nearby Mutford is counting 164 in an hour! " C Jacobs

"a steady stream of single individuals crossing our garden from East to West. I gave up counting but certainly saw more than 100 in that time." M Palles-Clark Tunstead

"a large migration of Painted Ladies moving across the Sprowston area ... I counted 200+ in a 30 minute stroll " M Riches

"Some 3 - 400 per hour passing northwards through gardens near Halesworth, Suffolk this morning " J Goldsmith

"Today at Strumpshaw Fen RSPB Norfolk Painted lady migration was well underway. A sample count of one minute totalled 26 individuals which equates to 810/hour." T Court

"Field trip to Foulden Common today am TL7699 and was amazed by the number and behaviour of PL's coming through. They were coming through at a rate of 10 per minute." P Childs

" we counted 1200 per hour flying north over the river bridge at Great Ryburgh." J Welton

"Hundreds in Thetford Forest today - most seemed to be very pale. " D Leech

"Innumerable ones at Hunstanton today. Lots flying over the beach towards the Wash and Lincolnshire"

"a major influx of Painted Ladies with over 500 counted during the afternoon, all going west" NOA Holme Dunes

"...Some recent counts from Scolt Head, Sunday May 24th - minimum of 18,000 west through between 1200-1800hrs, ...The true total was probably much higher as insects were moving on a broad front, out to sea and south over the inter tidal sand. Monday May 25th - c12,000 west 0900-1100, when low cloud rolled in and migration ceased."

and elsewhere

"A steady stream of Painted Ladies have been passing through Grayshott (SU8635), ...we have just done a count and got 56 through the garden in 30 minutes, and they're still coming.... They range from the decidedly tatty to those that look quite fresh."

"On Lancing Ring, west sussex there were Painted ladies passing over about 1 every 10-15 minutes, from the coast heading north."

"at Henley on Thames, west of London. ...I reckon there were atleast 30-40 Painted Ladies all going SE->NW purposefully. Many faded / no colour."

"I saw about 50 on my bike ride on Sunday (24 May) between central Peterborough and Helpston (to the north west)."

"A large passage through the Chilterns yesterday"

But by the 25th it was all over

"At least 25 Painted Ladies were still around the reserve but the westward passage of these migrating butterflies through the area seemed to have stopped" Holme NOA

Some other migrants were also associated with the movement. Isolated reports of Clouded Yellow from Essex, plus Silver-Y's (*Autographa gamma*), Dark Sword grass (*Agrotis ipsilon*) and Rush Veneer (*Nomophila noctuella*). The main moth however seems to be the Diamond-back moth (*Plutella xylostella*), with many thousands reported.

In conclusion, some web links

http://www.butterfly-conservation.org/article/9/100/butterfly_migration_is_biggest_for_years.html

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/8068050.stm>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2009/may/26/wildlife-conservation>

<http://www.honeyguide.co.uk/paintedladies.htm>

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