

# Whippendell & Beyond

The Butterflies of The Watford Area

## Part 1: January - May



Brimstone

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### Covering the areas of:

Cassiobury Park & Whippendell Woods, Fishers Field, Radlett Road Playing Fields, Merry Hill, South Oxhey Playing Fields, Croxley Moor, St Mary's Church & St Mary's Road and more.

# 2024 Report

Rick Vickers and Pete Fewell

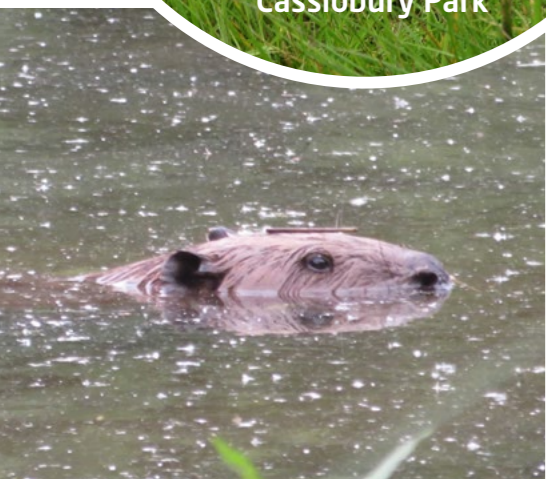
# Introduction



Whippendell Woods



Some of our planting in Cassiobury Park



**W**elcome to our 2024 Report on the Butterflies of the Watford Area. The idea this time is to highlight what butterflies are to be found, and where, in our vicinity, along with other wildlife, including what can be found outside your back door too. Hopefully this document will encourage more local people to get out and enjoy the wildlife that is on our doorstep.

As many of you will have noticed, 2024 was not a good year for butterflies. The numbers of most species, when we could get out to see them, were way down on previous years. The weather didn't help - us or them. Many days when we tried to get out it seemed to follow a pattern of pleasant start to the day, nice clear evening and a lot of cloud inbetween! - not butterflying weather at all. It also encouraged us to stay local.

This past year has been a rather busy one for us though, what started as a quiet excuse to get out and enjoy some sunshine and nature has become a full time obsession. We held a few stalls this year, at the Green Market Takeover and WildFest in Watford, and a little further afield at Horsenden Hill, as an added bonus there were reintroduced beavers near by. We got a good lot of interest, and we'll probably be about again next summer.

We again conducted our regular Spring and Summer Butterfly Walks in Whippendell woods, though this time we also held an experiment to try and lure a Purple emperor from the tree tops, unfortunately, that was a bit of a disaster, the place was right (and we made a good stink) - just our timing was wrong. We'll give it another go next season, hopefully we will get the date right then!

We have also been planting wild flowers in Cassiobury Park and St Mary's Church, these will be benefitting butterflies as well as bees and other insects. as well as adding a bit of colour to the areas, I'll let Pete elaborate on this at the end of Part 2.

Orange tip



Meadow brown on Ricks finger



Common blue



There are also contributions from Malcolm Hull and Liz Goodyear, of The Hertfordshire & Middlesex Branch of Butterfly Conservation, on two species of interest. Firstly, the Small tortoiseshell, which used to be one of our most commonly seen butterflies, but has unfortunately seen a dramatic decline in recent years, I only saw one in county this year. The other species to be featured is the Brown hairstreak. It is expanding its range, and where we used to go as far-a-field as Dorset to see them, they can now be seen within walking distance. Following a winter of egg searching in potential locations, this year we got the first sighting of the adult insect in Hertfordshire for 25 years.

As you may have noticed, we've split the report into three parts. The first two are from our logging of species, and some other things of interest, at the places we've visited, including my garden. It's small but very busy, also, it's the place I see most. Unfortunately seeing the concentration in that little oasis, it does make you realise how empty some of our woods and wild spaces are. But, as a positive, it also shows that it doesn't take much to encourage wildlife back into our surroundings, some native plants and some scruffy bits is a good way to start.

The third part is a collection of charts and maps, showing flight times of what was in our area and when this past year, life-cycles, larval food plants and nectar sources. The maps are of the general area to show the proximity of each to the other, and most of the places mentioned - with entrances and areas of interest marked on them.

Hope you find something of interest, and maybe we'll see you out and about soon!

**Rick Vickers  
December 2024**



Small copper

# January



Strawberry Fields and Camilla Corner, following the removal of diseased trees, and thinning of the bramble patch

## January

### 07 January

Meeting at **St Mary's Church** about the wilding of the churchyard - **The Green Heart of Watford**. Lots of enthusiasm and ideas for it, lets hope we can get something going...

### 14 January

As it was a rather fine day, off to the **Park and Woods**, good to get some fresh air.

Anna and HMWT (Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust), have been busy around **Strawberry Fields**. It's going to be a lovely sunny clearing and let's hope a haven for butterflies again.

Camilla Oak still to be pruned.

### 20 January

After a cold week, a chilly walk along the **Colne** with the **Wilder Watford Group**, a look along the other side than the one I'm used to, always something new to discover - and there's a small lake/large pond there too!

Then a walk through **Whippendell Woods** with Pete to look at the other bits that have been cut. It's a shame that so many trees have been lost to Ash die-back, but there is going to be a lot more light (and life) coming to the woodland floor.

### 21 January

Storm Isha.

Notes predominantly taken from Rick's log (joint and solo expeditions) with additions, and for some missing days, from Pete.

Some of the names of places in Cassiobury Park and Whippendell Woods are our own names for them which have stuck with us over the years. Just so you know what we are on about, they are marked on the maps in Volume 3, along with charts of flight times, life cycle, larval and nectar plants

### Rick and Pete

### 23 January

Storm Jocelyn.

### 27 January

Fine day, if a bit cooler, at about 10° (has been 12°-14° recently).

14.00 Into **Whippendell Woods** - no noticeable damage following the two storms this past week, so we went to see the spread

of honeysuckle, and then through Dell Wood, which has a greater concentration of the plant. We will definitely have to check it out properly in Summer; last year the weather wasn't on our side.

### 28 January

Nice day, clearish sky.

First Wasp (**Garden, St Mary's Road**).

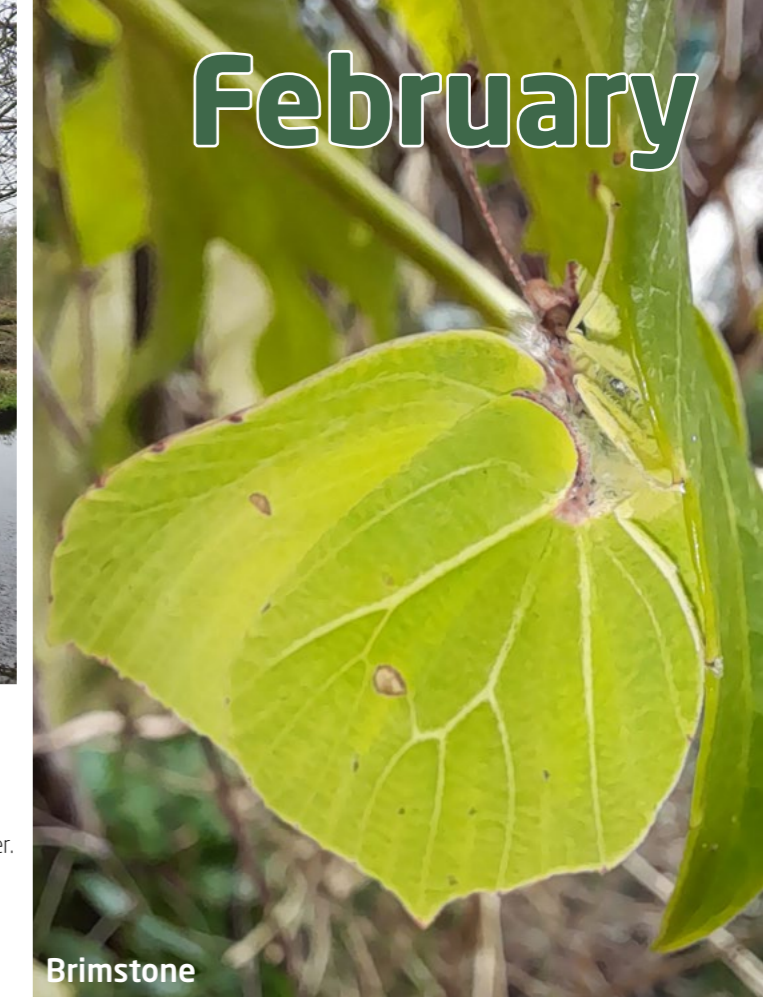


Cleared ash trees at the bottom of the Avenue with a chilly Pete

# February



Cassiobury Wetlands



Brimstone

## February

### 02 February

Ground hog Day - early Spring predicted.

### 03 february

Dull day, First Forsythia flower.

Bird feeders that went out last Tuesday are being regularly visited by: Robins, Blue tits, Great tits - and today a Blackcap came in.

### 07 February

Sustainable meeting with Friends of the Earth and Watford Council.

### 08 February

First Bullace flower.

### 10 February

Chinese New Year: Year of the Dragon.

### 12 February

Bullace and Forsythia are in full bloom.

First Hoverfly.

Another mild sunny day, then a cold night.

### 15 February

Lovely mild day - good enough to sit outside and watch the grass grow... as I was looking about, fluttering in the corner of my eye, a glorious herald of Spring to come...

Brimstone x 1 (**Garden**)

The Season begins!

As I was taking a picture, one of the local foxes trotted behind me as if I wasn't there.

Also first Honey bee.

**Garden Flora:** Forsythia, Bullace, Daisy

### 17 February

Dull day after the last few sunny ones, and a bit cooler.

Afternoon, up to **Bentley Priory Nature Reserve** to examine the Blackthorn, Pete found one egg. That's all we needed to know they were there, as it was getting dark and the Blackthorn was well hidden amongst the other branches. Let's hope the Brown hairstreaks (BHS) are better at locating them than we were.

Brimstone has not moved since settling down the other day. It blends very well under the Fatsia.

Then followed a dull, damp week.

### 24 February

Dull and not very warm (it is February), but at least dry.

Afternoon: After a walk round **Cassiobury Park** and Wetlands, off to **Fishers Field** with Pete, to check the Blackthorn for eggs; we didn't find any there. Then to the **Golf Course** adjacent: no BHS eggs, but we did spot 3 x Blue Bordered Carpet moth eggs and 1 x unknown.

Also seen: Frog spawn.

Full Snow Moon.

### 25 February

Afternoon, back through the Park to **Whippendell Woods** - there has been a lot more tree felling behind Strawberry Fields up the Avenue to Foxglove Glade and also along Top Avenue. There is going to

be a lot of sunlight reaching the ground. Four or five Muntjack about.

### 27 February

Dry day, quite pleasant.

Since our egg hunt the other week, more eggs have been found at **Old Reading** and **Croxley Common Moor**, it is now time to fill in the bits between the bits, and venture towards **South Oxhey**.

Some Blackthorn along **Hampermill Lane**, but no eggs spotted, then into **South Oxhey Playing Fields** where I did find 1 egg! With Merry Hill off to one side and Croxley Moor the other, this seems to be about their limit so far. It's going to be an interesting summer...

Checked the rest of the Blackthorn that I could find but no more eggs.

### Frog and spawn



# March



Comma



Peacock

## March

### 01 March

First day of Meteorological Spring, a wet start to the season...

### 03 March

The egg hunt still goes on, this time from **Hampermill Lane** and along the **Ebury Way**. It was flooded in places and impassable, but we looked and found a pair of Blue Bordered Carpet Moth eggs but no Brown Hairstreak eggs - a place to look next season, if possible.

### 16 March

Following a mixed week of sun and showers (mostly showers) off to **Whippendell Woods!** Not a day for butterflies, more a day to look at potential spots following the tree felling. Some celandines and violets out but not very much, and not much else.

### Garden Flora:

Bitter cress, daisy, stocks, speedwell, nectarine, dandelion, alkanet, bullace, forsythia, blackthorn, forget-me-nots.

### 23 March

Windy day and a bit cooler than the past week has been, but a bit sunny at least, so...

... off to **Whippendell Woods**, and track route on phone to see how far we usually wander.

Hail at 15.00.

It was 7.5 miles from the front door and back again.

Then, while enjoying a beer in the garden, Fox came in for a snack. If neighbour hadn't come out I'm sure she would have come closer to me, which is pretty cool, as I haven't seen her since autumn.

### 24 March

Trip up to **Incombe Hole** and **Ivinghoe Beacon**. Not a day for butterflies, as it was rather windy.

### 25 March

Full Moon, but a dull day.

### 26 March

Nice start, then came the clouds and rain.

Brimstone x 1 **(Garden)**

### 27 March

Walkabout in the afternoon: Through **St Mary's Church Yard** then along the Colne up to the Pond/Lake, then over to **Fishers Field**. The grass has been cut, but it's probably a good time to do it, the mounds and some other bits have been left. Then home - three miles all round.

Not very flowery just yet, but things are beginning to bloom. More blackthorn found along the route.

### 29 March Good Friday

Pleasant afternoon, after Storm Nelson yesterday.

Sat in garden in evening and shared a chicken

### Peter Eels at the Butterfly Conservation AGM



leg with Fox: another lovely experience, and she got closer.

### Garden Flora:

Herb robert, daisy, forget-me-not, stocks, honesty, common vetch, snakes head fritillary, speedwell, white dead nettle, daffodil, primrose, dandelion, alkanet, blackthorn, forsythia.

### 30 March

Lovely sunny day. Pottered in garden in morning, first bee fly and...

Peacock x 1

Then off to Oxhey Park to meet Pete, and on to **South Oxhey Playing Fields**.

Peacock x 4

Brimstone x 1

Comma x 3

Then through **Carpenders Park Cemetery Woodland Walk**, and up to **Merry Hill**, a bit late for butterflies, but was a chance to see the full extent of the blackthorn as it was in flower. Back along Haydon Hill and a stop at the Railway Arms for lubrication.

Home, and Fox, who spent no time in appearing as I put some scraps out!

### Speckled wood



## April

### 01 April

Nice start to the day, but then it clouded over in the afternoon. 15.45 off to **Whippendell Woods...** and waited in the car until the rain stopped.

Then on an aimless wander.

### 05 April

Sunny warm day, though getting windy as the next Storm approaches.

Orange tip x 1 **(Garden)**

Again the garden is full of bees, hoverflies and ladybirds, - also first Nursery web spider for a few years.

### 06 April

Sunny but windy start to the day as Storm Kathleen does her thing.

Peacock x 1 **(Garden)**

Then to **Butterfly Conservation AGM at Greenwood Community Centre**. An excellent day with talks from Malcolm Hull, Liz Goodyear and Peter Eeles and a trip to the chalk bank (that we couldn't find the last time we were there).

### 07 April

Windy day, as going to town...

Holly blue x 2, at the end of **St Mary's Road**

# April



Small tortoiseshell

### 11 April

After a wet and windy few days, a calmer and warmer day today, it was nice when the sun came out.

Brimstone x 1 **(Garden)**

### 12 April

Nice day once the clouds thinned. **Garden** full of bees, they have been examining the holes in the bee blocks. Also, hoverflies, bees and others - the 'Cloud' is returning.

Holly blue x 1, Brimstone x 1

14.30 Walkabout, first through **St Mary's Church Yard**, daisy, dandelions, and alkanet in flower - then along to the **Colne**, at the bottom of **Radlett Road Playing Fields**.

Orange tip x 1, Peacock x 5, Green-veined

white x 1, Comma x 1, Small Tortoiseshell x 1

Then over Link Road/Park Avenue to **Fishers Field**. Again, daisies and dandelions and a few other things in flower.

Peacock x 4, Holly blue x 1, Brimstone x 1, Speckled wood x 3, Comma x 1

A lovely day, apart from the wind, which picked up in the afternoon.

Fox came to see me in the evening.

### Garden Flora:

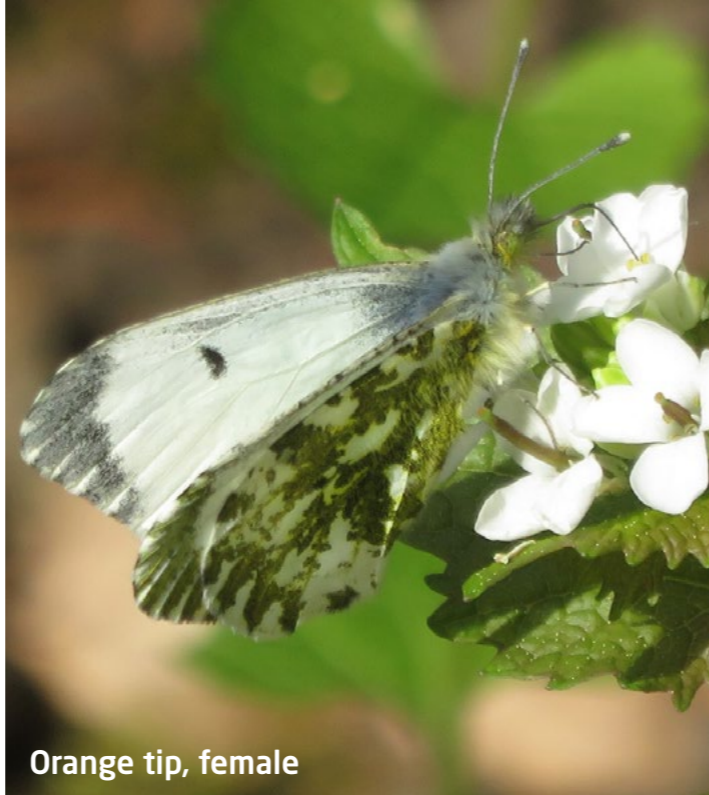
Herb robert, lily of the valley, bluebell, garlic mustard, forget-me-not, daisy, stocks, broom, common vetch, apple, dandelion, red campion, primrose, daffodil, alkanet, cow parsley, cranesbill, buttercup, white dead-nettle, honesty, spirea, blackcurrant.

### Garden - Early April





Green veined White



Orange tip, female



Holly blue



Small white

## 13 April

20°

Lovely sunny day and warm, with very little wind.

Holly blue x 1, Orange tip x 1 (Garden)

13.30 off to **Cassiobury Park**, taking the RH path from Rickmansworth Road.

Orange tip x 1, Brimstone x 1

Then out on to the grasslands from the bandstand to **Small Oak Copse**.

Holly blue x 1, Peacock x 2

Then right at the bottom of the Park to the **Nature Reserve**

Speckled wood x 1, Comma x 3, Orange tip x 2, Brimstone x 1, Peacock x 4

Up to **Lock 76** and over the **Canal** and up a different path than usual, along the far side of the **Golf Course**.

Comma x 1, Speckled wood x 2

And arriving at the Top Car Park, down to the Junction and Avenue. Picnic at the fallen Birch along **Frit Freeway**, then up and

down Frit Freeway.

Peacock x 8, Orange tip x 7, Green veined white x 1, Comma x 2, Brimstone x 2, Large white x 1 (probable)

Back along the Avenue to **Camilla Corner** Peacock x 6

Leaving Camilla Corner and back down the **Avenue**.

Orange tip x 1, Peacock x 1

Then home after a brief excursion to **The Earl of Essex Skipper Arms**.

## 20 April

Sunny (occasionally), but chilly day... time to go wandering,

15.30 **St Mary's Church Yard, floral count.**

Dandelion, grape hyacinth, daisy, wild garlic, dead nettle, stork/cranesbill, speedwell, alkanet, forget me not, cow parsley, garlic mustard, shrubs, pansies.

Through Town to Waterfields Park and down by the **Colne** along Radlett Road Playing Fields, up to the Lake.

Green veined white x 1

**Fishers Field, floral count.**

Cow parsley, forget me not, dandelion, bluebell, cherry, herb robert, hawthorn, daisy, buttercup, primrose, garlic mustard, lady's smock, ragged robbin, stitchwort.

Again, not a day for butterflies, but good to get out.

Home and a few beers for Pete's birthday, and Fox came in for a snack again. She's getting used to me, and waited for neighbour to go in before trotting up.

## Small tortoiseshell

Small Tortoiseshells are in trouble in Hertfordshire. Until recently regarded as one of our most common garden species, they all but disappeared from the county this year. Numbers recorded on the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme in the county declined 90% compared with just two years ago. The adults hibernate over winter and each year I monitor the numbers in my outdoor shed in St Albans. Over the last ten years the average number of hibernators each year has been 20. This year there are none.



The reasons are not fully understood, but climate change and attacks by a range of parasites are the likely causes. Warmer and more volatile weather can cause havoc with their patterns of hibernation and breeding. Like many species Small Tortoiseshell caterpillars can be vulnerable to attack by parasitic flies and wasps. Warmer weather has encouraged the parasites.

But the species is now thriving in Northern England and Northern Ireland where conditions are slightly cooler. Like most insects it can bounce back quickly and this species has the ability to migrate in large numbers, so it's quite possible that it will return. I have recorded it in warmer climates in several Mediterranean countries, so I'm hopeful we will still see it locally, though maybe not in such numbers as before

**Malcolm Hull, Branch Chair and Acting Treasurer, Hertfordshire & Middlesex Branch Butterfly Conservation**

## Garden - late April



## 26 April

Brightened up in the afternoon.

Small white x 1, Brimstone x 1 (Garden)

Heard the Cubs up the back alley in the evening; mum came in for a snack and dad had the scraps.

## 27 April

Off to **Cassiobury Park** in the afternoon.

The weather was dull, but we managed to get some plants in (red campion, marjoram and field scabious) and managed to find a few that we had previously planted as well.

Wet evening.

## 30 April

Sunny but windy. The **garden** is full of flowers.

Peacock x 1, Small white x 1

14.30 off to **Cassiobury Park**.

Holly blue x1 by the Ricky Road entrance, then down RH path and onto Grasslands as it clouded over.

Holly blue x 1

Then over to **Nature Reserve 1**

Orange tip x 2, Peacock x 1, Comma x 1, Holly blue x 1

then over the bridge and into the **Woods**, and out onto **Frit Freeway**

Peacock x 3, Comma x 1, Green veined white x 1, Orange tip x 1

Then along from the **Junction to Camilla Corner**.

Peacock x 1, Orange tip x 1, Brimstone x 1

**Camilla Corner** and **Strawberry Fields**

Peacock x 2, Brimstone x 1

Then back home and first Fox cub seen.

## Peacock on bluebells





Orange tip, male

Some of the delights to be found at Incombe Hole



Duke of Burgundy



Grizzled skipper



Dingy skipper



Orange tip cat

## May

### 01 May

Mixed day; sunny in the morning and warm.

Brimstone x 1 **(Garden)**

Holly blue x 1 **(St Mary's Church)**

### 04 May

A nice day, after a couple of dull wet ones.

Brimstone x 1, Holly blue x 1 **(Garden)**

14.40 off to the **Woods** - as it clouded over...

Peacock x 5+, White x 1, Orange tip x 5+, Brimstone x 1

Then through **Merlins Wood** and the other nearby Woods, but it was nearly 6 o'clock and way past butterfly bedtime.

Two cubs in the evening.

### 05 May

Nice sunny start - then into the Park for the **Butterfly Walk**, 14.00 - not a bad number of people but unfortunately the weather didn't last and there was only one butterfly to be seen!

Orange tip x 1

Also, we heard later, a Red admiral was spotted.

### 07 May

After a dull, grey, wet bank holiday the sun came out. **Garden.**

Holly blue x 1, White x 1, Brimstone x 1,

### 08 May

Lovely warm day again. Where was this at the weekend!?

Lots of bees, hoverflies, aphids and ladybirds in the **garden.**

Holly blue x 1, Brimstone x 2, Green-veined white x 1

Cubs again in the evening.

### 09 May

Another lovely day, **(Garden).**

Small white x 2, Brimstone x 1, Holly blue x 1

### 10 May

Still lovely! **(Garden).**

Orange tip x 1 (female on garlic mustard), Peacock x 1

### 11 May

Another fine sunny day.

Red admiral x 1 **(Garden).**

14.30 off to **Incombe Hole**

Brimstone, Dingy skipper, Grizzled skipper, Peacock, Brown argus, Duke of Burgundy, Small heath, Comma, Orange tip, Holly blue.

### 12 May

Another lovely day. **(Garden)**

Brimstone x 1, Holly blue x 1

Mum fox came in during the evening. She's limping (again), and has a couple of ticks.

**Merry Hill** (Pete solo) 13 Brimstone, 6 Small Heath, 2 Orange-tip, 7 Peacock, 2 Whites.

### Garden Flora:

Herb robert, lily of the valley, forget-me-not, daisy, red campion, sage, buttercup, common vetch, bell flower, rose, garlic mustard, geranium, speedwell, alkanet, cow parsley, wood ruff, rib wort plantain, rhododendron, wild strawberry, cranesbill, white dead nettle, goats beard

### 17 May

21°

Sunny day, **(Garden)**

Small white x 1, Red admiral x 1, Holly blue x 1

Fox in the evening, she's looking better than last week. Not sure what has happened to the cubs, I've not seen them for a while (reviewing trail-cam, last sighting of one was 16/17 May).

### 18 May

Off to Stafford Road Open Space to check on the returned Brown hair-streak eggs. We found six and all had hatched: that sounds like success to me!

### 19 May

19°

Sunny start, **(Garden).**

Holly blue x 1

Broad-bodied chaser x 1

15.00 off to **Whippendell Woods** with Pete, starting from Newlands Spring Car Park.

White x 1, Brimstone x 2, Peacock x 2, Holly blue x 2, Green veined white x 1, Orange tip x 1

Followed by more planting in the Park (when we could get in the Main Car Park).

### 23 May

Full Moon, sat with Fox in the garden for about 40 minutes.

### 24 May

Nice day, lots of bees.

The two Orange tip caterpillars are still on the Garlic mustard pods.

Sat with Fox for about an hour, she even had a lie down for a while half-way along the garden, and dog fox came in briefly.

### 25 May

Nice day, after a foxy start to the day (she came in at midday for a while), then off to **Incombe Hole** 15.00

Small heath, brimstone, common blue, Duke of Burgundy, Orange tip, Dingy skipper and two butterfly hunters (other than us).

Shame it was a cloudy afternoon, after such a promising morning...

### 26 May

To **St Mary's Church** in the afternoon for a **Green Heart of Watford** meeting. Managed a plant count (someone else took notes), just before the heavens opened.

Wet afternoon and evening.

### 27 May

Not a bad start to a bank holiday!

Robins are on the nest, and going back and

forth with full beaks, Not heard the chicks but I guess they must be in there.

Orange tip cats still growing.

### Garden Flora:

Herb robert, wood avens, sage, buttercup, daisies, garlic mustard, roses, geranium, red campion, forget-me-not, salad burnet, red baron, birds foot trefoil, common vetch, speedwell, alkanet, cow parsley, kidney vetch, musk mallow, bell flower, goats beard, hawks bit, jasmine, bramble, grasses.

## Continued in Part 2 for the Summer months



Fox in overgrown garden