

Butterflies and moths bring beauty to our world

No hedge cutting or scrub clearance from March to September allows birds to nest safely and is good for butterflies and moths too.

Catherine Keena
Teagasc Countryside
Management Specialist.



Jesmond Harding
Butterfly Conservation
Ireland.



Butterfly life cycle

Female butterflies lay eggs in or near a food plant. This means larvae have something to eat when they emerge. Their colour either allows them to avoid detection by blending in with their foodplants, or they are a completely different colour to warn predators that they are inedible, possibly poisonous. Most Irish butterflies overwinter in their larval stage.

Larvae moult and shed their skin several times, before becoming a pupa. The adult butterfly develops inside the pupa.

Pupae usually hide deep in vegetation and blend in with their surroundings. Adult butterflies push their way out of the pupal skin from April to September and fly away after drying their wings.

Importance of hedges

There are 35 species of butterflies in Ireland and 23 of these breed on hedges. Over-management of hedges removes butterfly eggs, larvae and nectar sources for adult butterflies.



Left to right: Peacock butterfly and its caterpillars feeding on nettles growing along a hedge bank that enjoys full sun. Nettles are very important for butterflies and moths. Twenty-six of our larger moths breed on stinging nettles.



Small Copper butterfly on gorse.

All pictures by Jesmond Harding

Leaving around one-third of a hedgerow uncut each year helps butterflies, moths and many other wildlife groups.

However, three-year growth in some hedges is too strong for a flail to cut without causing damage, so where hedges are trimmed annually, it is es-

sential to leave some 'escaped' hedges on the farm.

Escaped or untopped hedges, or tree-lines which have never been topped, provide great habitat for butterflies and moths, as do the occasional individual trees allowed to mature within topped hedges. Fenced field margins alongside hedges containing native grasses and flowers increase their biodiversity value significantly, which is of critical importance in intensive agriculture.

Results from a study of the abundance of moth species showed that really good hedgerows, containing trees with fenced field margins, mitigated the impact of intensive arable farming.

Hedge species

Whitethorn is of high value, as it supports 62 species of larger Irish moths and additional wildflowers at the base, which moths on feed at night.





Left to right: Emperor moth egg cluster on Alder Buckthorn and the adult female moth.

Willow is really good for biodiversity, flowering early in spring. Brimstone butterflies, Peacocks, Comma and Small Tortoiseshells waking up from a long winter hibernation parched for nectar head straight to willow.

An amazing 115 of our larger moth species breed on willow, making it the single most important plant for moth species and that just counts the larger moths – there are hundreds of micro moths which are much smaller and a lot of those breed on willow too.

Birch supports 102 moth species.

Oak supports 72 species of larger moths and more micro moths, as well as the purple hair streak butterfly. Oak trees within hedges provide the same support as an Oak woodland, even in exposed locations.

Beech isn't native and supports less insects because it hasn't developed alongside the native fauna of Ireland. There are only 22 species of moth that breed on beech.

The herb layer at the base of hedges containing plants such as Cow Parsley and Greater Stitchwort

are brilliant areas when sunny in spring for butterfly and moth species. Insects are cold-blooded, so they need external heat from the sun to warm themselves up, so those sunny spots are really brilliant for butterfly and moth species.

Hedge banks are great because they are lower in nutrients, which allow different plants that can't tolerate high nutrient levels to grow, such as Lady's Bedstraw – a yellow frothy flower with a beautiful scent that was used to fragrance ladies' beds.

Patches of scrub are incredibly important for butterflies, especially in unshaded areas with native flora and grasses.

Other farmland habitats

Field margins, road verges and other unfarmed areas provide excellent habitat for butterflies, provided they are allowed to grow freely from now allowing them to flower – unsprayed and uncut.

These areas do need to be cut after September 1 to retain their value, but leaving some uncut (in rotation) each

year allows insects go to ground in the winter and hibernate at the base of the vegetation.

Avoid severe cutting – do not cut below 4 inches/100mm. Overly-zealous tidying of nature in the countryside is not good for wildlife.

For more information on butterflies, visit: <https://butterflyconservation.ie/wp/>

Join Butterfly Conservation Ireland at <https://butterflyconservation.ie/wp/join-us/>

See Jesmond Harding's new book – The Irish Butterfly Book at <https://butterflyconservation.ie/wp/2021/12/06/the-irish-butterfly-book/>



Left to right: The Beautiful Carpet moth feeds on bramble, raspberry and hazel and the Barred Yellow moth feeds on Common Dog-rose.