

**THE SMALL SKIPPER *THYMELICUS SYLVESTRIS* PODA  
(LEP.: HESPERIIDAE) IN NORTH-EAST ENGLAND:  
HISTORY AND CURRENT STATUS**

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**Introduction**

THE PURPOSE of this paper is to draw attention to the dramatic change in distribution of the Small Skipper *Thymelicus sylvestris* which has occurred in north-east England during recent years. As a result of this change the commonly held view, that *T. sylvestris* is absent from the northern parts of Britain (Howarth, 1973; Thomas, 1986; Thomas & Lewington, 1991) and reaches its northern limit in County Durham (Emmet & Heath, 1989), is outdated.

**Early history**

*T. sylvestris* does not appear in any of the early lists of butterfly records for north-east England (County Durham, Watsonian VC 66 and Northumberland, VCs 67 & 68) (Wallis, 1769; Selby, 1839; Wailes, 1857; Robson, 1899) and was still unrecognised in either county or in Berwickshire in publications around the middle of this century (Long, 1959; Gardner, 1962).

**Recognition in County Durham**

Writing in 1986, Dunn & Parrack were able to refer to rare sightings in 1979 in Fulwell Quarry, Sunderland and to the unexpected finding by Mr R. Quigley of flourishing colonies at the Low Barns Reserve Near Witton-le-Wear in 1985.

Subsequently I found the species to be common along the course of several dismantled railways converted to walkways in County Durham (Bishop Auckland Walkway near Spennymoor, July 1990 and the Castle Eden Walkway near Wolviston, August 1992), in disused magnesium limestone quarries (Wingate Quarry, July 1992 and Bishop Middleham Quarry, July 1993), and elsewhere (Ellis, 1991; 1993a; 1993b).

During the last five years the species has become more widespread and frequent throughout County Durham. Some idea of this spread may be gained from the fact that over the period 1995-1997 the local Butterfly Conservation Recorder, Ian Waller, received records for more than seventy different tetrads in County Durham.

*T. sylvestris* now occurs in very large numbers at some locations in County Durham; for example, in Hamsterley Forest on a sunny day during August 1998 it was possible to see many hundreds of the butterfly, with a dozen or more nectaring on individual burdock *Arctium* plants, mating pairs and ovipositing females.

**Recognition in Northumberland**

In spite of the remarkable upsurge in the fortunes of *T. sylvestris* in County Durham, initially there was still no evidence that the species was extending its range across the River Tyne and into Northumberland (Cook, 1990). Then, commencing in 1994,



reports began to appear of sightings at a few locations in the southern-most part of Northumberland near Ebchester (Eales, 1995) and on the south and north sides of the River Tyne near Wylam (Dawson, 1995, 1996).

I first saw *T. sylvestris* in Northumberland in August 1995. This was a solitary and worn specimen near the coast at Seaton Sluice (NZ 338768), but I did not report it at the time. During 1996 I was pleasantly surprised to encounter two established colonies of *T. sylvestris* further north at Big Waters Nature Reserve, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and on wasteland around an old pit heap – Weetslade Pit Heap near Wide Open, North Tyneside (Ellis, 1997).

During the 1997 season, whilst making a special survey in south-east Northumberland of old dismantled railways, old pit heaps and industrial wastelands, I recorded *T. sylvestris* in seven additional locations at Tynemouth, North Shields, Wallsend and further north at Cramlington, Bedlington and Hartford Bridge (Ellis, 1998a).

During 1998, between July and September, I recorded *T. sylvestris* at five further locations in Northumberland – near the coast at Hartley Links, South Blyth (NZ 321789) and inland at Stannington (NZ 182813), Ingoe Moor at Wallridge (NZ 059766), Prestwick Carr north of Ponteland (NZ 184742) and in Slaley Forest (NY 975551).

In addition there have been occasional sightings from further north in Northumberland, as, for example at Pauperhaugh near Rothbury in August 1996 (S. Hackett, *pers. comm.*).

### Discussion

It is clear that *T. sylvestris* is now widespread and well-established in County Durham and has spread to Northumberland, where it is already established and flourishing at several localities.

*T. sylvestris* seems to have followed in the “flight path” of the Wall Brown *Lasiommata megera* and the Large Skipper *Ochlodes venata* butterflies which have successfully extended their ranges throughout County Durham and subsequently in Northumberland during the past twenty years (Ellis, 1994; Ellis, 1998b).

The reasons for these welcome changes are not fully understood, but improving climate, reduced atmospheric pollution and availability of a suitable habitat may have all contributed (Ellis, 1998b).

Many of the present *T. sylvestris* sites in the north-east are along the courses of dismantled railways, on old pit heaps, in abandoned quarries and on other derelict land. Some of these, which have already been converted to walkways and reserves, should provide a stable environment for years to come, but some are currently under threat, as at Weetslade Old Pit Heap, Wide Open, where work to “clean-up” and “improve” the site appears to be imminent. This is largely unavoidable since some of these old industrial sites are a potential hazard once public access is permitted. At least they have provided a temporary base from which further expansion of the species can occur, and there is always the hope that following the reclamation work parts of the sites might retain and support permanent colonies.



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