

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Chalkhill blue and small copper butterflies feeding on dung—That butterflies visit unusual food sources such as faeces and urine after the minerals and salts which they cannot easily get from nectar or honeydew is a phenomenon well-known to entomologists. But apart from the odd excursions of the purple emperor to dripping exhaust pipes and puddles fertilized by the call of nature, it seems to be an observation infrequently noted of British species—most reports of this behaviour are of exotic and tropical butterflies.

I was therefore intrigued to find a specimen of the chalkhill blue feeding on dog dung recently. On 25.vi.1997, while visiting the hilltop Chilterns woodlands of the National Trust's Sharpenhoe Clappers, in Bedfordshire, I took a few minutes to photograph marbled whites and chalkhill blues resting between bursts of flight as the scattered clouds occasionally shaded out the sun. During one pursuit, a blue landed on a piece of dog dung in the short limestone turf. The dung appeared rather dry, not fresh and aromatic, and thinking that it was simply resting on a suitable perch I took several pictures of the butterfly. However, it soon became apparent that the butterfly was not resting, it was feeding; its proboscis was extended and it was clearly probing with it (Fig. 1). The area it was probing does appear moist in the subsequent photographs. The butterfly continued feeding like this for several minutes before flying off. The hilltop path here is a popular dog-walking route and looking around it was obvious that there was a plentiful supply of the dung. I waited a short while, but no further blues, or other butterflies, visited the abundant canine droppings.

Having made a mental note of this behaviour, I then recalled a similar observation made several years ago. On Tunstall Heath, Suffolk, on 25.viii.1993, I stalked a small copper after a close-up photograph. When it finally came to rest, it was settled on a pile of rabbit pellets and spent some time wandering about (Fig. 2), apparently examining this potential food source. As is usual with rabbit droppings, the dung was



Fig. 1. Chalkhill blue butterfly feeding from dog dung.

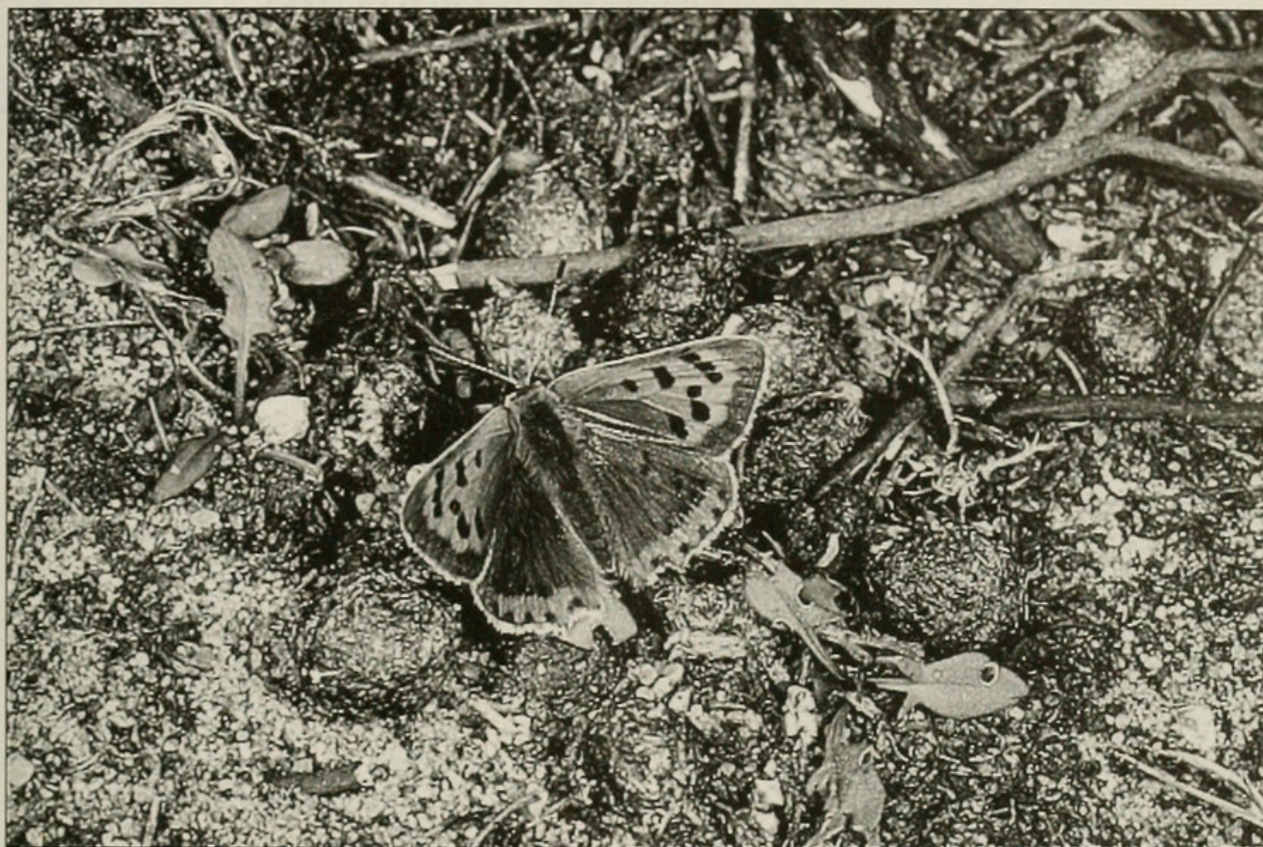


Fig. 2. Small copper butterfly "feeding" on rabbit dung.

dry and crumbling, not at all fresh or moist as one might expect of something attractive to butterflies.

As an entomologist with a particular interest in beetles, I find dung a perfectly healthy habitat to examine closely. True, this interest in excreta has been described in varying degrees from disgusting to eccentric, but it is certainly an important and oft overlooked pabulum. I have found many surprising and unusual creatures that share my enthusiasm for dung, but in 35 years of looking, I have only found two British butterflies.

Thanks to the two National Trust officers, Keith Alexander of the NT biological survey team who suggested I look at the Chilterns site, and Graeme Cannon, chief warden of the NT Ashridge Estate, who administers it and confirmed permission to collect insects there.—RICHARD A. JONES, 135 Friern Road, East Dulwich, London SE22 0AZ.

BOOK REVIEWS

World Catalogue of Insects Volume 1, Hydraenidae (Coleoptera) by Michael Hansen. Apollo Books, 1998, 168 pages, hardback, Danish Kroner 290,00 excl. postage. Volume 2, Hydrophiloidea (s. str.) (Coleoptera) by Michael Hansen, Apollo Books, 1999, hardback, Danish Kroner 690,00 excl. postage. Both available from Apollo Books, Kirkeby Sand 19, DK-5771 Stenstrup, Denmark.

Up to date and accurate catalogues are an essential tool of the taxonomist, especially for those working in species rich groups like Coleoptera, where new species are constantly being described and existing species re-assessed. There is a great need for new catalogues for almost all groups of Coleoptera and many other groups of insects.



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