

Sussex Butterflies: Purple Emperor Trail

4th July 2025
Led by Kat Dahl



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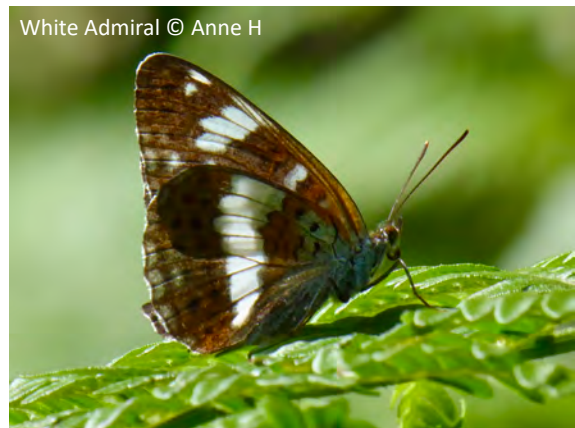
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The weather forecast was promising: warm, mostly sunny, with a little cloud and breeze, becoming a little gusty in the afternoon. The Purple Emperor flight period was well underway, the first male having emerged at Knepp on 15th June, and numbers in the area were indicative of a bumper year. We set off from Burgess Hill train station at 9.15am and headed to Marlpost Wood, in Dragon's Green.

Marlpost Wood is part of Southwater Forest, a hotspot for Purple Emperor, as well as White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary. It is owned and managed by the Dragons Estate, who allowed the wood to regenerate naturally following the destruction of a conifer timber crop in the 1987 storm. It still contains a few conifers, but is now mostly deciduous, with a mix of species, most notably several mature Wild Service Tree, a lover of clay soils that is now rare in the wild and is an indicator of ancient woodland; and, of course, it contains plenty of willow and mature oak for the Purple Emperor. It was these woods where Matthew Oates, Britain's foremost Purple Emperor expert and author of 'His Imperial Majesty: A Natural History of the Purple Emperor', first saw and fell in love with this magnificent butterfly when he was a boy at Christ's Hospital School, nearby.

Just feet from disembarking the minibus at Marlpost, we saw a female Silver-washed Fritillary, as well as Large Skipper, Small/Essex Skipper, Comma *hutchinsonii* and fresh Gatekeepers. Then just a few yards further on, there were several female Silver-washed Fritillary nectaring on bramble, including an *f. valezina*, an unusual bronze-green colouration seen only in females. There were also a couple of fresh-looking White Admirals gliding around and perching on bracken. Almost every good-sized patch of bramble throughout the wood held Silver-washed Fritillary and often White Admiral, and there were also



White Admiral © Anne H

several flying down the rides. Further into the wood was a freshly emerged Purple Hairstreak drying out its wings on the ground before flying up into the oaks. The sky clouded over a little as we reached a small meadow glade, but we still saw a few Gatekeeper, Ringlet, Small and Large White and Peacock here, and a Painted Lady breezed through. There were also several bumblebees, mainly Common Carder and Buff/White-tailed workers, and a female Broad-bodied Chaser dragonfly perching on a twig and darting out to hunt. As we headed towards a large pond, a male Emperor dragonfly flew up the ride past us, and we watched a pair of Silver-washed Fritillary in their courtship dance down the ride ahead of us. As we approached the pond, there were several Azure Damselies perched on the brambles, and at the pond, a male Emperor



Cinnabar moth larva © Anne H

dragonfly was hawking over the water while a female was laying eggs, dipping her abdomen into the water. A female Black-tailed Skimmer was also trying to lay eggs but was being mobbed by males. In the reeds, there were also mating pairs of Azure Damselies, a Four-spotted Chaser dragonfly perching and hunting, and several exuviae, the larval cases of dragonflies. Around the pond were Marbled Whites and black-and-yellow-striped Cinnabar moth caterpillars on Ragwort. We headed back towards the minibus up a different ride where we saw a Speckled Wood in shade, a mating pair of Silver-washed Fritillary just above head-height in the

scrubby edge and another wonderful Silver-washed Fritillary courtship dance up and down the ride around us, with two further males in tow.

We left Marlpost for the Knepp Wildland, a pioneering 3500-acre 'rewilding' project, just south of Southwater Forest. When the current owner, Charlie Burrell, inherited the Knepp Estate from his grandparents in 1987, it was a struggling, unprofitable farm on poor clay soil. Charlie tried his best to make it more sustainable, intensifying and diversifying, fertilising and using pesticides, but after thirteen years, it had only been profitable in two of those years, and the Burrells were now over a million pounds in debt and simply could not continue. Realising how devastating their use of agrochemicals had been for the land, and inspired by their love of the wildlife they had seen elsewhere and the work of pioneering ecologists, they decided to return the land to nature and give it a chance to regenerate. They installed stock-proof perimeter fencing and ripped out all the internal fencing, and then introduced large herbivores – deer, cattle, ponies and pigs – to 'manage' the vegetation. Twenty-five years later, it is a nationally significant haven for several wildlife species, such as Nightingale and Turtle Dove, and is globally recognised as a leading project in the 'rewilding' movement. It also holds by some considerable distance Britain's largest population of Purple Emperor, thanks to massive regeneration of willow, its larval food plant, and great numbers of mature oaks, the males' favoured territories.

As we parked in the car park, the first thing we saw was a fresh Red Admiral on Buddleia, which boded well. We headed into the heart of the project, walking amongst Small Heaths as a Common Blue flew by. We approached our first feeder tree – an oak tree with sap runs popular with feeding Purple Emperor – to find a female sitting low on the bramble near the tree. After admiring and photographing her for a while, we moved on to the part of the estate where all the fabulous footage of the Purple Emperor in David Attenborough's 'Wild Isles' was filmed. Here was another feeder tree, where about half a dozen empresses were enjoying



Purple Emperor © Anne H

a hen party and perching on the low leaves to recover and avoid the males in the tree-tops. We walked on to a small woodland planted in the 1990s, where several 'Browns' were floating about the bramble and Ragwort, as well as several territorial Comma f. *hutchinsonii*. Two Purple Hairstreaks came down to nectar on bramble, a freshly emerged Common Darter dragonfly perched on the willow just above us, and a couple of Silver-washed Fritillary buzzed through. After examining another feeder tree, we headed down into the lagg (a Sussex Weald word for a floodplain meadow) to see the recent Beaver activity – a dam and felled tree. Here were Banded Demoiselle on the Flag Iris leaves. We crossed the lagg to reach another feeder tree, where we watched three females and a male gorging themselves and floating drunkenly about our heads. As we turned to head back, a very obliging Purple Hairstreak came down onto Ragwort to feed. We wandered back to the minibus, watching a couple of males patrolling their tree-top territories as we did so, and stopping one last time at the hen party tree again to watch females enjoying their best life. We returned to the minibus and back to Burgess Hill station, hot and tired, but full of Purple Dreams!

Species List

Butterflies

Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes sylvanus</i>
Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris</i>
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>
Purple Hairstreak	<i>Favonius quercus</i>
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>
White Admiral	<i>Limenitis camilla</i>
Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>
Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura iris</i>
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
Peacock	<i>Aglais io</i>
Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>
Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>
Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>
Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>

Moths

Cinnabar (larvae)	<i>Tyria jacobaeae</i>
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Other Notable Insects

Southern Hawker	<i>Aeshna cyanea</i>
Emperor Dragonfly	<i>Anax imperator</i>
Common Carder Bumblebee	<i>Bombus pascuorum</i>
Buff/White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus terrestris/lucorum</i>
Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>
Beautiful Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx virgo</i>
Azure Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>
Broad-bodied Chaser	<i>Libellula depressa</i>
Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>
Black-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>
Common Darter	<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>
Bumblebee Hoverfly	<i>Volucella bombylans</i>
Cossus Hoverfly	<i>Volucella inflata</i>

Photo Gallery



Banded Demoiselle © Greenwings



Purple Hairstreak © Anne H



Ringlet © Anne H



Silver-washed Fritillary © Greenwings



© Anne H



Small Heath © Greenwings