

## Sussex Purple Emperors

3rd July 2024  
Led by Kat Dahl



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## Sussex Butterflies: Purple Emperor and other Woodland Wonders

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As for much of June, the weather forecast was, unfortunately, breezy, with showers in the morning and overcast in the afternoon, not the most conducive conditions for Purple Emperor; but their flight period was well under way and numbers in the area had been good. We set off from Burgess Hill train station at 9.15am and headed to our first stop.

It 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.

As we arrived, we were greeted by the plaintive call of a Bullfinch and we soon saw a Meadow Brown, unphased by the gloomy conditions. We headed for a White Admiral lekking spot Kat had checked only two days before, only to discover with horror that it had been flayed only the day before. Once recovered from this disappointment, we walked on to a meadow glade in the centre of the wood and soon saw more Meadow Brown, as well as Ringlet, Small Skipper, Large Skipper and Marbled White. There were black and yellow striped Cinnabar moth larvae on Ragwort, and larvae on Woodland

Marbled White © David M



Germander that were later identified as Silver Y moth. A female Broad-bodied Chaser was zigzagging over the grasses at head height, hunting for insects, and we could hear Green Woodpecker, Long-tailed Tits and Blackcap. Heading into the wooded edge of this glade, thick with oaks and willows, to look for Purple Emperor, Richard and Kat saw a White Admiral flit by; there was plenty of Honeysuckle, their larval food plant, draped over the trees and other plants and even over the woodland floor. We checked the woodland ride of oaks and willows but to no avail. We continued down a wide, grassy woodland path and, just as Pete was asking whether we

Silver-washed Fritillary © David M



might see any fritillaries, and Kat was responding that there were Silver-washed Fritillary in this wood but she didn't hold much hope of seeing them in the current weather conditions, there was a yell of "Silver-washed Fritillary!" behind us from Richard and there indeed one was, and posing beautifully! It floated about gracefully for a few minutes, pausing to pose at regular intervals, and affording everyone a wonderful close-up view. When it eventually fluttered away into the wood, we carried on down to a pond, normally good for dragonflies. David spotted (!) a big group of magnificent, tall spikes of

Common Spotted Orchid and Kat found a large dragonfly larva crawling through the undergrowth which she later identified as an Emperor, Britain's largest species. We started to loop our way back and found several tiny frogs and toads just emerged from the water, and a magnificent Southern Hawker dragonfly hunting up and down the ride.

We left the site and stopped at a service station for facilities and lunch, and were excited to see a Riband Wave moth on the wooden fence next to the minibus! Refreshed, we drove on to 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 13 years it had only been profitable in 2 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. 24 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, some of the cattle, brown and cream Old English Longhorns, were grazing nearby, and as we walked into the 'Wildland', we were greeted by a ginger Tamworth sow and her four adorable piglets, as well as a few of the White Storks. We headed straight for the part of the estate where all the fabulous footage of the Purple Emperor in David Attenborough's 'Wild Isles' was filmed. Here, in spite of the gusty, grey conditions, we saw our first Purple Emperors, territorial males high in the oaks, as well as Purple Hairstreaks. We also saw rare White-letter Hairstreaks in a small English Elm and adjacent Field Maple. Moving on, we saw plenty of male Purple Emperor activity high in the oaks as well as 'sallow-searching' – hunting for freshly emerged females in the willows. Heading on down the track, we saw a fairly obliging female resting near the top of a small willow quite near the track. Eventually, we returned along the track, stopping to see some more male action on the way back. Naturally, as it was almost time to leave, blue sky and sunshine finally appeared! At our final stop for Purple Emperor spotting, there was a Gatekeeper lurking in the hedge and a punky-looking Knot Grass moth larva munching the undergrowth (many apologies for not recording and crediting the spotters of these!). Then we returned to our vehicle and headed back to Burgess Hill train station.



Purple Emperor © David M

## Species Lists

### Butterflies

Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>
Purple Hairstreak	<i>Neozephyrus quercus</i>
White-letter Hairstreak	<i>Satyrrium w-album</i>
Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>
Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura iris</i>
Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>
White Admiral	<i>Limenitis Camilla</i>
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>
Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>
Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>

Red Admiral  
Large Skipper  
Small Skipper

*Vanessa Atalanta*  
*Ochlodes sylvanus*  
*Thymelicus sylvestris*

### **Moths**

Knot Grass moth larva  
Silver Y larvae  
Riband Wave  
Cinnabar larvae

*Acronicta rumicis*  
*Autographa gamma*  
*Idaea aversata*  
*Tyria jacobaeae*

### **Other notable insects**

Southern Hawker  
Red-tailed Bumblebee  
Fleabane Tortoise Beetle  
Broad-bodied Chaser  
Common Scorpionfly

*Aeshna cyanea*  
*Bombus lapidarius*  
*Cassida murraea*  
*Libellula depressa*  
*Panorpa communis*

### **Birds**

Long-tailed Tit  
Common Buzzard  
Goldfinch  
Common Kestrel  
Common Chiffchaff  
Green Woodpecker  
Marsh Tit  
Blackcap  
Song Thrush

*Aegithalos caudatus*  
*Buteo buteo*  
*Carduelis carduelis*  
*Falco tinnunculus*  
*Phylloscopus collybita*  
*Picus viridis*  
*Poecile palustris*  
*Sylvia atricapilla*  
*Turdus philomelos*

### **Other notable animals**

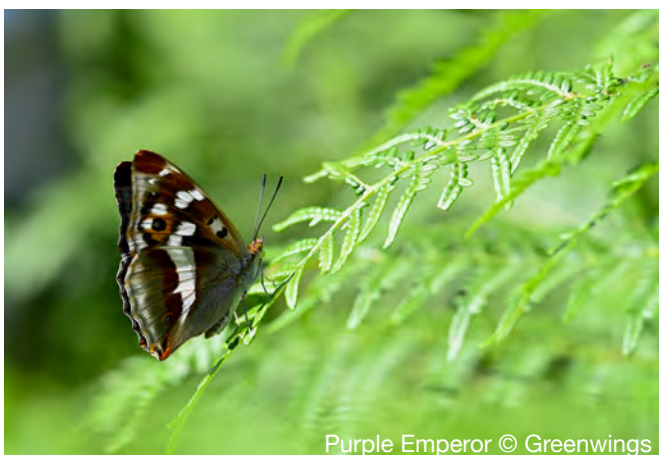
Toad  
Frog

*Bufo bufo*  
*Rana temporaria*

### **Notable plants**

Common Spotted Orchid  
Musk Mallow  
Wild Service Tree  
Woodland Germander

*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*  
*Malva moschata*  
*Sorbus torminalis*  
*Teucrium scorodonia*



Purple Emperor © Greenwings



Ringlet © David M