

Bealeswood Common, August 2021

Purple Hairstreak Butterflies

Bealeswood Wildlife Recording Group (BWRG)
Previous monthly records and notes are posted at
www.dockenfieldpc.org.uk/wildlife

Our monthly notices often use the photographs of a local wildlife photographer Alex Potts, and this month she focuses her observational and technical skills to illustrate the Purple Hairstreak butterfly. This has not been previously recorded on the Common despite over 10 years of transect recording of our butterflies. It adds to her first recording of the equally spectacular Green Hairstreak butterfly earlier in the year. The following text and photos have been prepared by Alex:

“This year I have discovered that many of the Oak and Ash trees that surround Bealeswood Common are home to at least two colonies of the much overlooked Purple Hairstreak. Whilst most of the other July and August butterflies can be seen skimming over the grasses and finding nectar from flowers, the Purple Hairstreak spends most of its day up in the canopy, feeding on honeydew, but also coming down to bask on the lower branches or occasionally to take nectar from some flowering plants. I have been observing and photographing the behaviour of a particular colony that I found making use of the small Oak and Ash trees behind the bench area over several weeks in August.



Feeding on honeydew on Ash buds Basking on Oak leaf in evening light

Purple hairstreaks have a wing span of between 30 - 40 mm with a silvery looking underneath as they flit around. The upper wings of the male, when seen whilst basking, have an all over blue/purple sheen and the female has purple patches on her forewing. As widely reported, during the day they remain fairly high in the canopies and are most active when the sun is out. I have recorded as many as 10 in one morning and of these 4 or 5 conveniently fly down to the lower branches of the Ash tree which overhang the bench.

As the sun moves round during the day, so do the butterflies and in the afternoon the greater activity is found on the south side of the tree and by 3.30pm males and females can be seen basking on the leaves and there have also been signs of rarely seen face to face courtship and egg laying.

The female lays a tiny, spiny, white, single egg, resembling a sea urchin, on the underneath of an Oak flower bud where it overwinters through to around March when it emerges and feeds on the flower bud until it is fully grown - around May or June. It then makes its way down to the ground and it has been reported that some pupae are taken into their nests by ants and tended there until the adult butterfly is ready to emerge in July. Interestingly, I found that there are ants' nests directly under the areas where egg laying has taken place.



Male (left) and Female (right) Purple Hairstreak butterflies



Courtship in an Ash tree



Egg laying under an Oak bud



Newly laid egg by Oak bud

Although not rare, this is one of two species of Hairstreak newly recorded for Bealeswood Common. This brings the total number of butterfly species seen to 27 – almost half of the known butterflies in the UK. This diversity highlights how important and successful the Common is becoming in supporting the habitats for these beautiful insects.”

Dan & Alison Bosence, Alan & Pauline Cox, Philippa & Colin Hall, Steve Lockett, Alex Potts, Christina Rasmussen and Anne Tutt, 20th August, 2021.