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The Daily Telegraph |



THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

Spotting butterflies is the latest, coolest way of getting back to nature, says Louise Gray

I wasn't bullied for being into butterflies," says Patrick Barkham. "But let's just say I didn't brag about it."

When the self-confessed "butterfly geek" was at school in the brash Eighties, it just wasn't cool to don your anorak and dive into the nearest hedge in search of insects. In fact, wandering around the park with a pair of binoculars was very likely to get you stared at, if not arrested.

But that was then. Now we are in a more eco-aware age, when people no longer need to "come out" about an interest in nature.

Barkham recently published a book about his obsessive quest to track down all 59 species of butterfly in Britain. *The Butterfly Isles* was the second bestselling non-fiction book this year for its publisher, Granta Books, and the author's three events at the recent

Telegraph Hay Festival all sold out.

OK, he still gets funny looks walking around Hampstead Heath with a pair of mini-binoculars, but he is also approached by people who want to know more about the hobby.

"My friends are calling me up to report a sighting of a dingy skipper," he says, with some pride and not a little surprise.

A new social trend has quietly emerged from its chrysalis. Whisper it in the pub, but butterflies are cool.

Like "birding", which was transformed in the Seventies when the RSPB picked up more members than all the political parties combined, "butterflying" has gone mainstream.

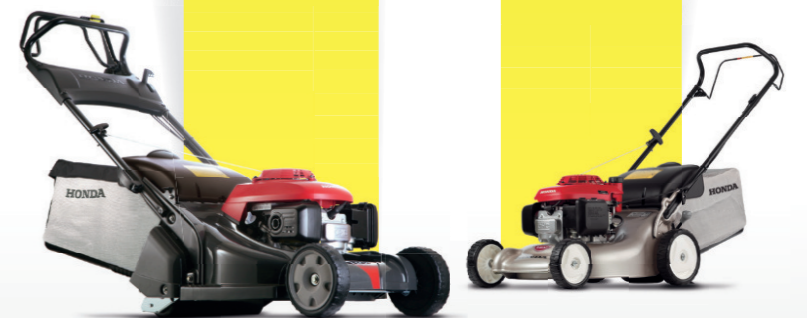
The charity Butterfly Conservation has recorded a

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Stand and be counted: the Big Butterfly Count, from July 16-31, encourages everyone to get out and look for butterfly species such as the red admiral, above

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rise in members from 1,000 or less 30 years ago to more than 16,000 today. Interestingly, the proportion of women is also rising, to 38 per cent this year.

The charity represents serious lepidopterists, but there are also lots of non-experts interested in butterflies. The Big Butterfly Count (www.bigbutterflycount.org) asks people to spend 15 minutes spotting butterflies in parks, woods or their own gardens over the next two weeks (July 16-31). To help identify different species, *The Daily Telegraph* is giving away a free interactive poster today.

It's the second count of its kind, after 10,000 people took part in the inaugural event last year, recording almost 250,000 sightings of butterflies in Britain. The cabbage white came out on top, followed by more colourful species such as the small tortoiseshell, peacock and red admiral.

B&Q and M&S have seen a rise in the number of people buying "butterfly-friendly" plants such as buddleia and lavender, and book shops are selling more guides.

EasyJet, Samsung and Laura Ashley are all using butterflies in their branding. John Lewis says sales of butterfly products have increased by

'Be warned, the pursuit of butterflies can be highly addictive'

160 per cent compared to last year. Products range from a Jasper Conran blue butterfly Wedgwood set to butterfly fairy costumes for children. The most popular item is a photo album decorated with butterflies.

Butterflies are quite literally everywhere, from Matthew Williamson dresses to Muse album covers. Now the sun is out you will notice butterflies on biceps, cleavage and even bottoms. Cheryl Cole, Paris Hilton, Britney Spears and Fern Britton all sport butterfly tattoos.

The very British obsession with butterflies is nothing new. The first book about butterflies was published here in the 17th century and the Victorians were obsessed with collecting drawersfuls of pickled insects to show their dinner guests.

But why have butterflies become as fashionable today as they were in the 1890s? Much of the attraction, especially for women, is new technology. Butterflies can now be captured with a digital camera rather than a net and a rather vicious pin – or even with a shotgun, as some of the Victorian collectors preferred.

As modern life moves away from the countryside, urban dwellers are increasingly keen to reconnect with nature. Programmes such as BBC's *Springwatch* have reminded the public about the wonders of nature on our own island, as opposed to abroad.

Perhaps, like Winston Churchill, who wound down from wartime politics by sitting in his butterfly house at Chartwell in Kent, people



Winged messenger: author Patrick Barkham at the Natural History Museum's outdoor butterfly house. He says that for children 'butterflying' will never go out of fashion; right, a large skipper butterfly

10 tips for butterfly spotters

1 Choose the right spot - find a place where you would consider sunbathing, ie sheltered and warm, and you will probably find butterflies sunbathing there too.

2 Go slow - butterflies sense movement and vibration so creep up carefully from behind and you'll get closer.

3 Learn the difference between moths and butterflies: moths have thin feathery feelers and butterflies have antennae with clubs on the end.

4 Don't forget trees - butterflies will fly high. Hairstreaks tend to be in tree tops. Look out for the purple hairstreak at the top of oak trees.

5 Use binoculars - they are good for spotting butterflies in trees and ultra-close focusing can help to identify species. They also make people think you are a birder and not a weirdo.

6 Don't bother with the whites - large, small and green-veined white all look the same. Don't

torture yourself, just call them all cabbage whites.

7 Learn key food plants - butterflies have different tastes. For example, you are unlikely to see an adonis blue unless its food plant, horseshoe vetch, is also present.

8 Don't forget the undersides of the wings - 10 British butterflies settle only with wings closed, which means you have to be familiar with the undersides to spot them.

9 Trust in children - butterflies like children, for some reason. Don't ask why, just get them to lick their fingers and very gently let a butterfly take a perch. Magic.

10 Join a group - the best way to learn is from other experts. Butterfly Conservation should have a group near you: visit the website at www.butterfly-conservation.org.

find it a good way to relax.

Nadia Kingsley, a poet who only started butterflying in her forties, represents the growing number of female enthusiasts. "I was just overwhelmed by how gorgeous and inspiring they are," she says.

Sadly, climate change and the destruction of key habitats mean there are fewer butterflies around. Butterfly Conservation estimates three quarters of the 59 species found here are in decline and nearly half of them seriously threatened.

Like birds, butterflies are a key indicator of the health of the wider environment, and one of the best ways to monitor this is to ask the public to help. The Big Butterfly Count is an opportunity to monitor numbers of butterflies across the whole country, rather than just the nature reserves where surveys are traditionally carried out.

After all, what better place to begin the metamorphosis into a "butterfly anorak" than your own back garden?

Matthew Oates, the National Trust's butterfly expert, says butterflies are perfect for beginners because it is relatively easy to spot common species such as tortoiseshell and peacocks.

Meadow browns, fritillaries and skippers are all on the wing now and this summer is set to be a bumper year, thanks to the warm spring which allowed for multiple broods.

"Forget the mortgage or the bank statement for a few hours and get involved with butterflies instead," says Oates. "Be warned though, for the pursuit of butterflies can be highly addictive - it is a deep magic far beyond the dawn of modern human experience. This is far more than the simple relief of stress and release of serotonin, the happiness chemical.

"We all need a conduit into nature, we need our hand holding - and butterflying can fulfil that need."

Having once been dumped by his girlfriend for spending most of the summer chasing insects,

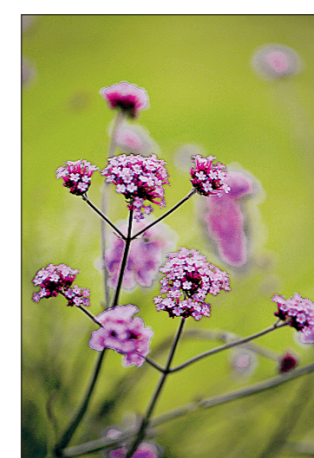
Barkham can appreciate the addictive qualities of butterfly hunting. Happily though, they are now back together and Barkham will soon be a father.

He says one of the main reasons his old school friends get back in touch with him to talk butterflies is because they are rediscovering the wonders of nature through their own children.

"Adults might go through phases but children will always love butterflies," he says. "So they will never go out of fashion."

The Butterfly Isles by Patrick Barkham (Granta, £9.99) is available from Telegraph Books at £9.99 plus 99p p&p. Call 0844 871 1515 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk.

Gardenshop



On offer: Verbena 'Lollipop' and Japanese wineberry

There's a new kid on the block, says plant buyer John Hiorns

Verbena bonariensis is one of the best cottage garden plants. One reason this stylish perennial is so deservedly popular is because it offers an airy, floating quality that creates an upper level of planting with great visual impact.

Well, now there is a new kid on the block - Verbena bonariensis 'Lollipop', a lower growing selection of V. bonariensis. It is ideal for planting at the front of the border and above low-growing plants such as Alchemilla mollis (lady's mantle), where the incredible clusters of lavender flowers will give the same eye-catching tiered effect that you get with V. bonariensis in the middle of the border.

It also has the same long-flowering period (June to September). This new plant is propagated by cuttings commercially under licence from the plant breeder, so as every seedling is identical to the parent plant it gives a very uniform effect.

'Lollipop' grows best in moist or well-drained soil and prefers a sunny spot. It grows to 2ft tall and wide, whereas standard Verbena bonariensis grows to 6ft tall. It is just as hardy and as easy to grow as the original and undoubtedly will become as popular.

How to buy

Gardening readers can buy one Verbena bonariensis 'Lollipop' for £6.99 per 9cm pot, or you can buy three plants for only £15.97, a saving of £5. The plants are all delivered within 28 days and all prices are plus p&p of £4.99. Buy online at gardenshop.telegraph.co.uk/lollipop or call 0844 873 0789 (24 hours, seven days).

Japanese wineberry offer

This delicious but unusual berry is no more difficult to grow than a raspberry, to which it is closely related. (See page 8 for Ken Thompson's thoughts on unusual fruit worth growing).

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