

The Brown Hairstreak Butterfly

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I have been interested in butterflies ever since I was a boy, and it was my interest in butterflies which led to my interest in wild flowers, and eventually to horticulture and gardening generally. To know where to look for butterflies, you need to know the food plants on which the caterpillars live, and you then quickly become interested in the habitat in which you will find the food plants. One thing leads to another.

During late summer in 2011, I visited Grafton Wood in Worcestershire on one of the Butterfly Conservation open days, and was fascinated to learn about the local and elusive Brown Hairstreak butterfly, one of the rarest butterflies in Worcestershire, now only found in a relatively small area around Grafton Flyford, Feckenham, and Inkberrow.

A few months later, on the BBC 'Countryfile' programme the Brown Hairstreak was featured, and my interest was aroused again. The female butterfly lays its eggs on young Blackthorn bushes, and the males often congregate high in a nearby prominent tree, often an Ash. In March 2001 we had planted a small area of woodland in our small meadow, and had included Blackthorn on the woodland edge. Nearby is a prominent and very large Ash tree..... !

The eggs of the Brown Hairstreak are like tiny white sea urchins, and are laid in August and September in the angle between the main stems and the side branches of Blackthorn, and can be found during the winter months by diligent hunting. Realising that conditions in our meadow met the criteria, we began to look for eggs and almost immediately found three. We contacted Butterfly Conservation who responded by sending out three of their local enthusiasts who found eleven eggs in total. We were advised that it is essential that the Blackthorn is managed so as to avoid cutting when the eggs and caterpillars are resident, otherwise they will be lost. Modern hedge management by flailing has led to a significant reduction in the numbers of this particular butterfly.

We were delighted to have found evidence of this rare butterfly in our meadow, but had never seen one. However, in the middle of August of 2013 a female Brown Hairstreak landed on the outdoor nursery bench where I was working and I was able to watch her for a minute or so. This year, on 1st August I was lucky enough to be walking around the meadow with my camera and was able to photograph a newly emerged female basking in the sunshine.

Plenty of information about the Brown Hairstreak is available on the internet, and particularly on www.butterfly-conservation.org.

Appropriate habitat is the key to the success of any wildlife, and William Shakespeare recognised this in these few words :-

'You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live'.
Shylock, 'The Merchant of Venice', Act 4, Scene 1

Little did we know what we were creating when we planted our little bit of woodland!