



Butterfly Conservation



eggs on Bird's-foot-trefoil

Dingy Skipper

Erynnis tages

Conservation status

Priority Species in UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

Fully protected under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

In sunshine, the Dingy Skipper often basks on bare ground with wings spread wide. In dull weather, and at night, it perches on the tops of dead flowerheads in a moth-like fashion with wings curved in a position not seen in any other British butterfly. This small brown and grey butterfly is extremely well camouflaged. It may be confused with the Grizzled Skipper, the Mother Shipton moth, and Burnet Companion moth, which sometimes occur on the same sites at the same time. The Dingy Skipper is locally distributed throughout Britain and Ireland, but has declined seriously in recent years, especially in Eastern England and the Midlands.

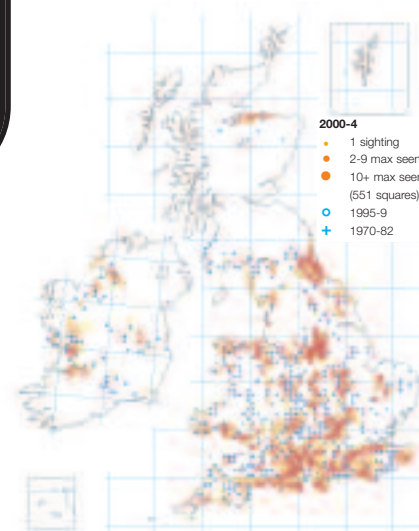
Life cycle

There is one generation a year, but in hot summers there may be a partial second brood at some southerly sites. Adults usually fly from early May to the end of June but they can begin to emerge as early as mid-April in warm springs. The few second brood adults emerge in August. Eggs are laid singly on young leaves of the foodplants and females choose the longest shoots of large plants growing in sheltered situations. The larvae hide in tents formed by spinning the leaves of the foodplant together and feed through the summer months. When fully grown, each larva spins more leaves together to form a hibernaculum in which to spend the winter. Pupation occurs the following spring in the hibernaculum, without further feeding.

Colony structure

The Dingy Skipper occurs in discrete colonies, many of which are very small and consist of fewer than 50 adults at the peak of the flight period. It is a sedentary species that is unlikely to colonise new areas of habitat unless they are close to existing populations. However, observations of natural colonisations reveal that a few individuals may move several kilometres.

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Egg												
Caterpillar												
Pupa												
Adult												



Foodplants

Common Bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus* is the usual foodplant in all habitats. Horseshoe Vetch *Hippocrepis comosa* is also used on calcareous soils, and Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil *L. pedunculatus* is used on heavier soils.

Habitat

Colonies occur in a wide range of open, sunny habitats including chalk downland, heathland, woodland rides and clearings, coastal habitats such as dunes and undercliffs. In urban areas, brownfield sites, including old quarries, railway lines and waste ground are the main habitat. Suitable conditions occur where foodplants grow in a sparse sward, often with patches of bare ground in a sunny, sheltered situation. Taller vegetation is also required for shelter and roosting.

Habitat management for the Dingy Skipper

The aim is to maintain a sparse sward interspersed with plenty of bare ground. Some areas of tall vegetation should be retained. Sites need not be large providing high quality habitat is present and other habitats occur nearby.

Grazing

The most suitable grazing regimes are those that produce a range of sward heights including breeding patches of less than 5cm. Cattle grazing is superior to sheep grazing as it results in a less uniform sward. Late spring or early summer grazing should be avoided, as egg-laying female Dingy Skippers generally avoid damaged foodplants.

Mowing

Mowing is always a poor alternative to grazing. However where grazing is impractical, a single annual cut in the autumn can maintain Dingy Skipper sites. Grassland should be mown on rotation, leaving some areas uncut each year. All cuttings should be removed from site.

above Breeding habitat on a brownfield site

below Larval foodplant Bird's-foot-trefoil



Scarification and Topsoil Stripping

Scarification is a useful means of extending and restoring habitat patches within areas of tall vegetation. Scarification is more likely to be successful on nutrient-poor soils. Some tall vegetation should remain untouched, while breeding areas should be avoided entirely. On former industrial sites, where early successional habitats are especially valuable for biodiversity, topsoil stripping can be used to restore suitable habitat. This technique can be used on nutrient-rich substrates that support swards too vigorous for the butterfly and which are effectively unmanageable by conventional means. Topsoil stripping inhibits the growth of vigorous plants, allows colonisation by the foodplants and creates patches of bare ground.

below Breeding habitat in limestone grassland

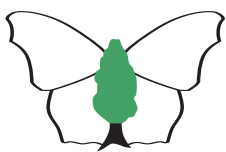


Scrub Control

Periodic scrub removal may be necessary at some sites although some light, well-spaced scrub can provide valuable shelter, especially on more exposed sites. Scrub can be cut on a rotation of 10-15 years to maintain existing levels of cover. Where scrub reduction is necessary, stumps should be treated with herbicide to prevent regrowth.

Habitat Creation

Suitable habitat can be created by either turf stripping or importing inert, low nutrient status substrates. Suitable materials include crushed limestone, railway ballast, crushed concrete, crushed brick, pulverised fuel ash and steel slag. Natural colonisation is preferable to reseeding, but results should be monitored to ensure desirable foodplants are present. Where reseeding is needed it should be a maximum of 50% of the area and only seeds of local provenance should be used. Foodplants will take several years to reach the required size.



Butterfly Conservation

Saving butterflies, moths and their habitats

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