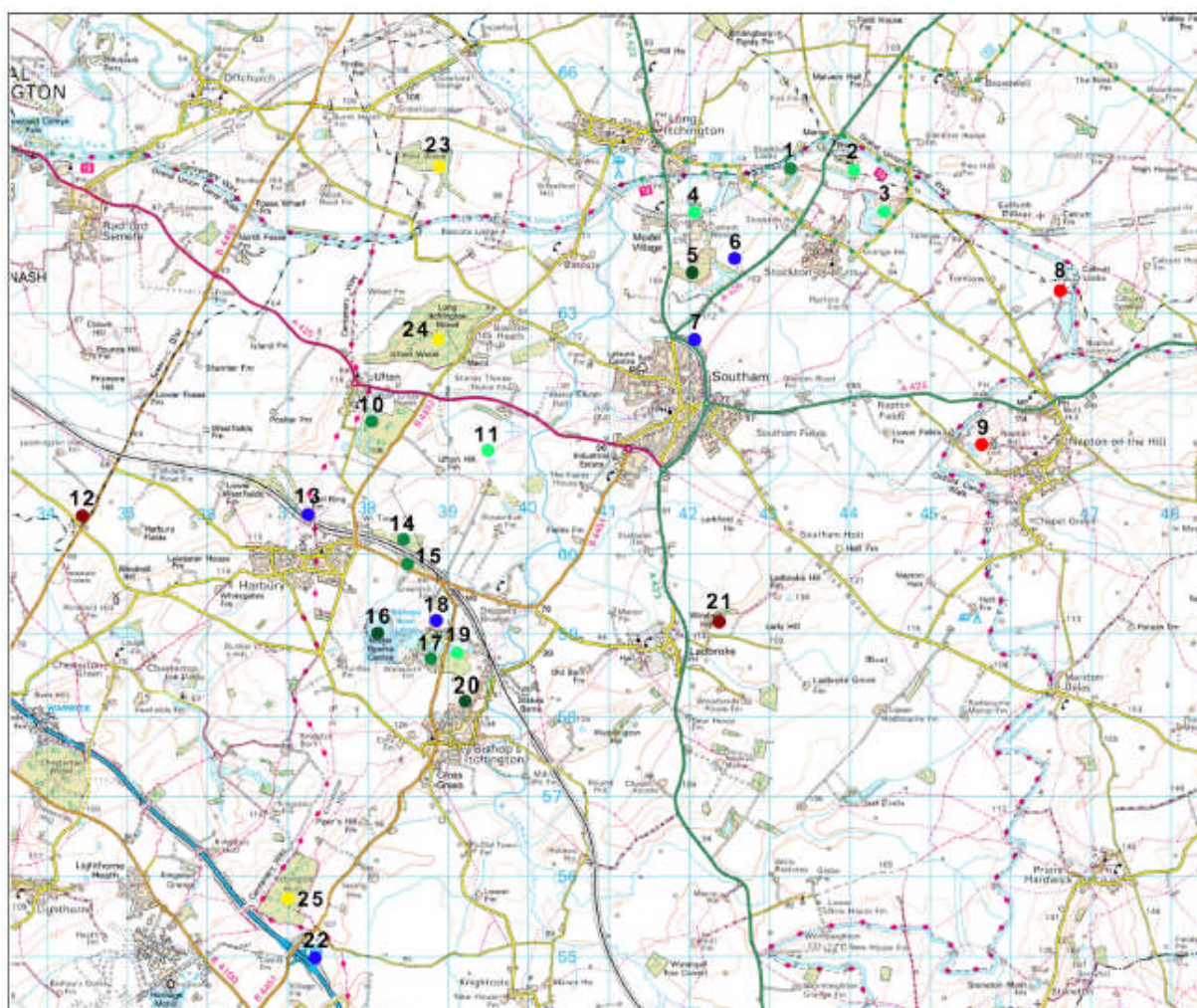


The Small Blue Recovery Project - Preliminary Update and Findings

Warwickshire is the only county in the West Midlands region where the Small Blue butterfly has not become extinct. Here, it only survives near Southam and in 2009 there were only 3 colonies; a decline of 87%. This is a butterfly teetering on the brink of total regional extinction.

Thanks to positive support from SITA Trust (landfill tax), CEMEX and a number of other organisations, an ambitious landscape scale recovery project was commenced in February 2009 to try to reverse the decline. The project's initial aim was to restore or improve 18 sites within or near to the Butterfly Conservation – Warwickshire's Southam Lias Grasslands Landscape Area.



Southam Lias Grassland Landscape Area

Many of the sites in the project are former Small Blue sites. Unfortunately, not only has the butterfly been lost but also its sole caterpillar foodplant, Kidney Vetch. The main reason for the loss is the abandonment of the grasslands. These grasslands have now been swamped in scrub which out competes the Kidney Vetch causing it to die out. The reduced and remaining fragments of species rich grasslands therefore become very susceptible to other pressures: drought, under grazing and in recent times, over grazing which removes all the flowering heads of the Kidney Vetch. Removal of the flower heads prevents eggs being laid

by the Small Blue and future seed being deposited. The plan is to restore these sites by removing the scrub and planting and/or seeding with Kidney Vetch.



Planting Kidney Vetch at Southam Bypass

This project is not only about creating suitable habitat by traditional methods but also about experimenting to see what types of management work best to establish colonies long term.



Southam Quarry Scrape and Nelsons Quarry Bund

It is important to realise that this is not a short term project. What we don't want to happen is to have the same situation in 5 years' time with scrub again encroaching on the restored site. To build sustainability into the project the stumps of the cut scrub are treated with herbicide which slows re-growth. Many of the sites have been, or are being, entered into Higher Level Stewardship schemes. These agri-environmental schemes give grants to farmers to farm and look after their land to maintain the wildlife interest. On other sites such as Ufton Fields and Bishops Hill Yellow Land, strong local community groups have been established. These groups are very enthusiastic about conserving their own local patch of wildlife. Other important partnership groups have also been established; for example, the Warwickshire County Council Highways Division, Southam Parish Council and Butterfly Conservation are working together to conserve butterflies on the Southam Bypass North. Finally, a very strong Small Blue Action Group has been established. This group works at two levels. The first is to co-ordinate work between all NGO's and

volunteer groups e.g. Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, Natural England, and Warwickshire County Council's Ecology Unit. The second is to carry out the practical conservation work.



Bishops Hill

So how is the project going?

There has been a lot of interest stimulated as a consequence of the many talks given and articles that have appeared in local papers and Parish Council newsletters. One major success is that six extra sites have come into the project; Bishops Bowl Sports and Fishing, Bishops Bowl Tisha, Fenny Compton Tunnels, Bishops Hill Yellow Land area and a disused railway at Long Itchington. The importance of this can not be over stated. Two of these sites are adjacent to two of the existing colonies; a further site with an existing colony has recently changed to a more sympathetic ownership which means that we can now look to manage all the sites that have surviving Small Blue colonies.

So far 18 sites have had the invading scrub removed and/or Kidney Vetch reintroduced. Further work is planned. The success of this restoration is being closely monitored. The latest research is indicating that a minimum of 50 Kidney Vetch plants in flower when the butterfly is flying is needed to allow a colony of Small Blue to become established. Following 18 months of hard work we now believe that we have at least 10 suitable sites. However, the success of a species recovery project should not only be judged by the fact that the habitat has been restored. We need to know the rare butterflies and moths have returned to the areas restored.

Well, we have had some success. The nationally rare Chalk Carpet moth has been found at Nelson's Quarry increasing the number of sites in the region from two to three. The Dingy Skipper has colonised Nelson's Quarry, Southam Bypass North and recently cleared areas of Southam Quarry. The Grizzled Skipper has colonised Marton disused railway and recently cleared areas at Ufton Fields, Southam Quarry, Nelson's Quarry, Bishops Itchington Yellow Land, Harbury Spoilbank South and Stockton Cutting.

Significant success, yes, but how has the critically endangered Small Blue responded to this restoration project? I am pleased to report that following clearance at Bishop Itchington Yellow Land, the colony at Bishops Hill has now expanded into the Yellow land. More importantly, eggs have been found on the

Yellow Land proving it is breeding in a much larger area now. Some success, yes, but this is not a new colony. I have saved the best to last.

This year the Small Blue colonised Bishops Bowl Tisha, a field only planted with Kidney Vetch in 2010. This field is approximately 500 metres away from the Bishops Bowl Sports colony. Even better, the first Small Blue to be seen in Warwickshire this year was on the Southam Bypass North. This indicates that not only has the Small Blue established yet another new colony but this colonisation probably occurred in 2009. This site is just over a kilometre from a breeding area at Southam Quarry. At both these new sites many eggs were located indicating that the butterfly is now well established. Finally and amazingly during an egg search at Stockton Cutting, a site approximately 2.5 kilometres from the Southam Quarry site, 2 Small Blue eggs were found.

I am delighted to report, therefore, that after just 18 months and half way through the project we have doubled the number of the critically endangered Small Blue colonies from 3 to 6. This is good news but we are not satisfied - success should breed further ambition so I can't wait to see what we will achieve in the next 18 months.

Remember, this success couldn't have been achieved without the huge number of volunteers that have assisted with this project. If you want to be a part of future species recovery success then please contact me. It makes you feel good and it's also good fun.

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