

Butterflies of Assynt



S U T H E R L A N D

A s s y n t

C o i g a c h

Assynt Field Club



BUTTERFLIES OF ASSYNT

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Thanks to all those many people who sent in records to the Field Club over the years and to A. Haines who collated all the records.

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Assynt Field Club

19 species of butterflies have been recorded in Assynt, out of the 30 that are known to occur in the Highlands and some 59 in the British Isles as a whole. For almost 25 years Assynt Field Club has been recording species of butterflies that occur in this small parish in the north west Highlands (475km²). Over that time 2737 sightings have been made, largely by volunteers and friends of the Assynt Field Club. These records have been digitised and can be seen on the Assynt Field Club website. The distribution of sightings for each species can be seen in the maps shown in this booklet.

We may appear to be too far north, too cold and wet, to hold a massive array of butterfly species and many that do occur in Assynt are at the northern most limits of their UK range, but there are some gems to look out for. For instance, we do have good populations of UK priority Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species such as the large heath, small heath, small pearl-bordered and grayling that are scarce further south.

Climate change has driven the range of some species northward into Assynt in recent decades, such as speckled wood, peacock and orange-tip, and others may well follow but equally is putting pressure on others such as grayling. Milder and wetter winters, for instance, are having a negative impact on some species including the small tortoiseshell. As Climate change continues, we may see some fast-moving changes in our butterfly population and therefore we need to continue to record distribution in detail and over time.

We want this leaflet to inspire you to help us record our changing butterfly populations. We will show you what species you are most likely to see, as well as when and where to look. Butterflies are relatively easy to see and the use of camera phones can help enormously so you can compare the finer details of your butterfly with the guide book when you get home.

Please tell us what you find. Good luck and remember you can report your sighting on our website:

www.assyntwildlife.org.uk



The best places are where there are a good variety of flowers, especially thistles, from which many adult butterflies will gather the nectar on which they feed, such as sheltered clearings, un-cut road verges and gardens.

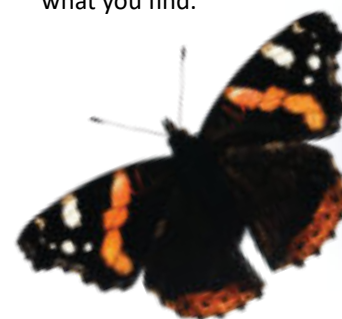
Some sections of the old road along Loch Assynt (e.g. NC1223 and 1425) provide these conditions.

The Kirkaig falls (NC0918) and the Gleann Leireag (NC1630) paths are both great for small pearl-bordered and dark green fritillaries. The coastal heath between Achmelvich and Clachtoll (NC05250) is a good place to look for common blues and grayling, while the path to the Old Man of Stoer (NC0033) can be super for small heath butterflies and for seeing migrating species.

Scotch Argus can be found along the Traligill path at Inchnadamph (NC2621), and Drumbeg peat road (NC1232).

The Culag woods (NC0921) is great for seeing speckled woods.

But there are many places in Assynt that are great for butterflies for you to explore. Good luck and tell us what you find.

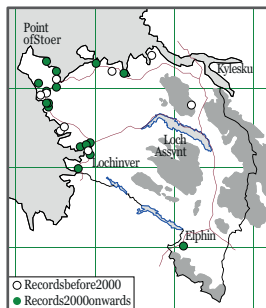


This is a strong flying butterfly often referred to as 'cabbage white'. They are attracted to brassicas in gardens and indeed most sightings came from gardens in Lochinver, Clachtoll, Stoer, Drumbeg and elsewhere.

In Assynt they are on the wing from April through to September where sightings are rather sporadic (56 sightings). They can have two generations per year in parts of Scotland. An early brood will emerge in May and early June. We have only had 6 sightings during this period.



Large White

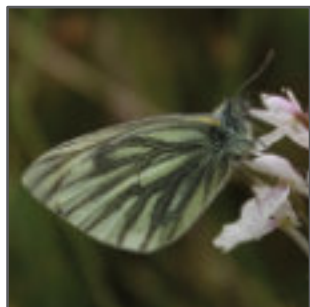


Large White distribution

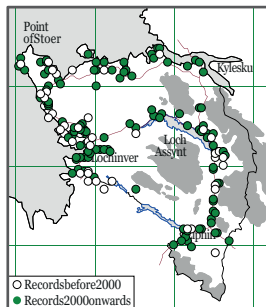
In Assynt the main flux of adult butterflies are on the wing from late June to September (accounting for 90% of our records). This species, however, can make long migratory flights and tends to fly north in the spring. There was one very early record on 5th January 2019 at Inverkirkaig and the latest record was 22nd September in Nedd.

This is perhaps the commonest butterfly in Assynt. We have 324 sightings from April to October. The peak abundance seems to be May and June accounting for 56% of all sightings. However, there is another smaller peak in August which is undoubtedly from the second brood. The earliest record was 11th April 2009 in the Culag Woods and the latest was a very late record on 24th October at Stoer.

This butterfly is very widespread, especially in marshy places, and often along roadsides where cuckooflowers occur, a favourite food of its caterpillars.



Green-veined White

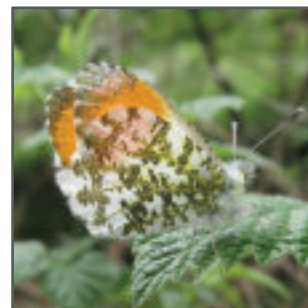


Green-veined White distribution

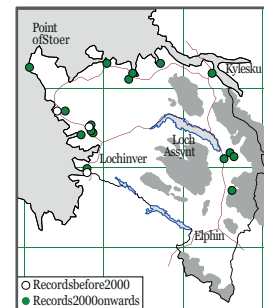
There are hot spots along the road from Inchnadamph to Elphin particularly near Ledmore junction, but also on the B869 between Lochinver and Achmelvich bridge. The spring brood of adults fly from April to June and the summer brood from July to September. They will hibernate as chrysalids.

With only 23 sightings, this is a fairly recent addition to our butterfly list, and still considered scarce. It is another species undoubtedly expanding northwards due to climate change. The vast majority (74%) of records were in the month of May. The earliest was 24th April 2007 at Inverkirkaig and the latest was a very late record on 2nd July 1996 at Recharn.

The caterpillars feed on cuckooflower. Perhaps the best place to look for them is on the roadside between Achmelvich Bridge and Torbreck.



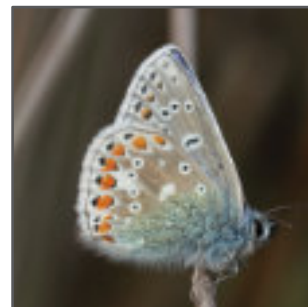
Orange-tip



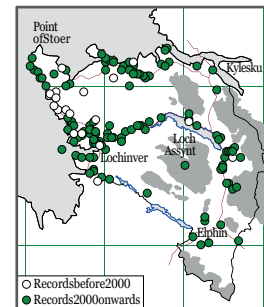
Orange-tip distribution

This attractive butterfly is the only blue butterfly recorded in Assynt. There were 262 records in Assynt from June to September.

It seems to be found, sometimes in abundance, where its larval food plant, bird's-foot-trefoil and other legumes, occur in quantity. For example, 40 individuals were seen on one day on the 25th June 2014 on the machair around Achmelvich. Incidentally 2014 was a great year for them. They have a strong coastal distribution but also occurs in hot-spots such as the limestone corridor around Inchnadamph.



Common Blue



Common Blue distribution

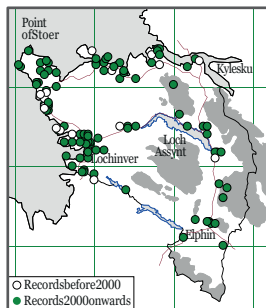
The earliest record was 10th June 2009 at Gleann Ardbhair and the last 22nd September 2008 near Lochinver. The vast majority (80%) however, were seen in the second half of June and the month of July. Common Blue butterfly larvae overwinter low in vegetation and the lack of late records suggest they are single brooded in Assynt.

There have been 303 records of this very familiar migrant species. Sightings are well distributed around the parish but concentrated especially near human habitation such as Lochinver, Clachtoll and Stoer. This is not surprising as this butterfly has a fondness for garden flowers especially nectar-rich species such as buddleja.

Migrants normally start arriving here in May and continue through to July. The adults lay their eggs on stinging nettles. There is then a lull in records in early August before we see the first emerging adults in August and continue through to October. Over a third of all Assynt's records are in September and October. Interestingly there is a cluster of records in late September at



Red Admiral



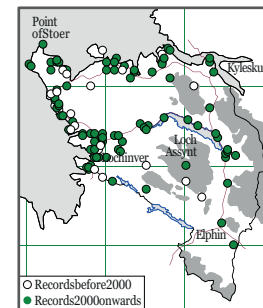
Red Admiral distribution

Stoer lighthouse. Could these be migrating adults? The Last sighting of the year was recorded on 7th November in 2003. Red Admirals over winter as adults. A scattering of records in March and April and even one 11th February 2008 suggest some butterflies overwinter here in mild winters.

There were 314 records of our resident vanessid, hibernating, often in buildings, and appearing in March onwards. 20th March is the earliest record, apart from one early butterfly coming out of hibernation on a warm day on 26th January in 2009. 40% of our sightings were before June, when there was a slight lull in numbers before the second generation appear on the wing from July through to October. In August they are at their peak. The highest density was 12 feeding on a buddleja bush 13th August 2004 in Lochinver. Gardens in Lochinver, Stoer and Drumbeg seem to be the main place to see them. The last record of the year was 27th October in 2005.



Small Tortoiseshell



Small Tortoiseshell distribution

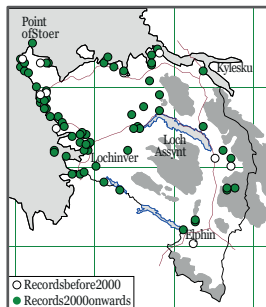
This once very common butterfly has declined dramatically here and all over the country in recent years and one theory is that a newly colonised parasitoid fly is to blame. We will watch this species carefully.

There were 119 records for this migratory species, that occurs most years, sometimes in considerable numbers. For instance, 2009 was a particularly bumper year in Assynt with 40 records. 11 million were seen in the UK that year. 2019 was another phenomenal year for them. 150 were estimated to be on the wing one afternoon at Stoer Green on the 30th July. Normally they were seen in Assynt from April to October but with a distinct peak in June which accounted for half the records. There was one very early record on 7th January 2015. Other than that, the earliest was 24th April and the latest 15th October at Inverkirkaig. Most flying adults were seen on the coastal strip between Inverkirkaig and Stoer point.

The Painted Lady does not hibernate in the UK and all European Painted Ladies stem ultimately from North Africa and Arabia. The first wave reach here in May and June and subsequent



Painted Lady



Painted Lady distribution

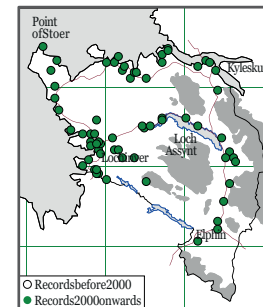
immigrations mingle with locally bred offspring. These butterflies lay eggs on stinging nettle and spear thistle.

Once very rare in Assynt (and Highland as a whole), this butterfly had a remarkable extension of range in 2006 into Assynt and the north coast of Sutherland. There was only one record before this. Subsequently there have been 130 records of this butterfly and it will be interesting to see if it maintains its presence here.

It was recorded from March through to October but absent in July. Adults of this species can live up to eleven months and can thus be seen on a sunny day over much of the year. However, emergence generally starts in August. Adults will hibernate and can re-appear in the spring months.



Peacock

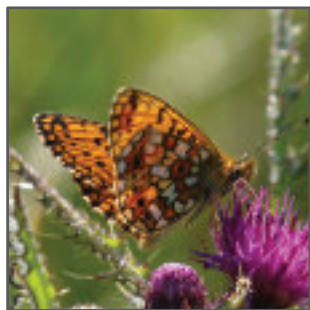


Peacock distribution

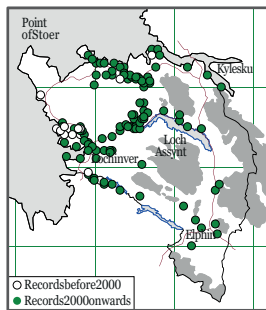
Ninety sightings were from the start of August (69%). The earliest record was 19th March 2009 at Kerrachar gardens and the latest was at Clachtoll on the 12th October 2013. By far, the most records (36) were in 2008 and most of them in September of that year. Interestingly this was followed by 8 records in March and April the following year.

This lovely chequered orange butterfly flies mainly in June and July in boggy areas, where its caterpillars feed on marsh violet. The caterpillars prefer sunny south-facing sheltered locations.

The earliest adult was seen on the 28th May 2012 at Little Assynt and the last on 14th August 2003. The peak month, however, is June which accounts for 76% of all sightings. There were 172 records of this butterfly throughout Assynt but some of the best places to see them include the walk to the Kirkaig Falls, Little Assynt, the old road to Lochinver beside the River Inver and Gleann Leireag.



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary

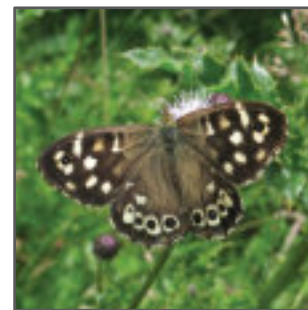


Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary distribution

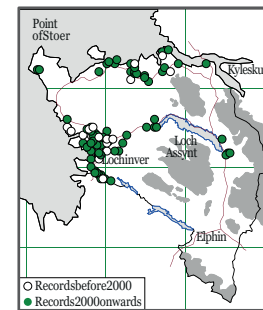
The highest density was on the path to Kirkaig Falls where over 20 were observed on 7th June 2008. This butterfly overwinters as a chrysalis.

This species was almost unknown in Assynt until the 1990s. Now, as the climate warms up its northward spread means it is widespread in gardens, scrub and woodland around the coast with 252 records in Assynt.

Speckled Woods are on the wing from April to October though individuals rarely live longer than a week. They spend the winter either as a caterpillar or a chrysalis and therefore emerge May and June. The earliest sighting was 17th April 2003 at Kerrachar gardens. The offspring of these produce a second brood with peak in August and September but can hang around until October.



Speckled Wood



Speckled Wood distribution

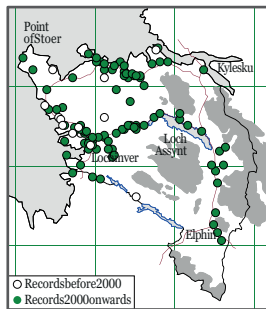
59% of our sightings are in this later period. The last record was 10th October 2006 on the Glencanisp road. The best places to see these lovely butterflies seems to be Culag Woods, along the rivers Kirkaig and Inver as well as Nedd and Glencanisp.

There were 198 sightings of this large fritillary. It has tawny wings (the dark green refers to the underside). It flies from the second half of June through to the end of August, though 53% of all sightings were in the month of July.

It occurs widely in Assynt in grassy and moorland areas often next to scrub, where the larval foodplants, violets, occur. In Assynt it is particularly attracted to the marsh violet.



Dark Green Fritillary



Dark Green Fritillary distribution

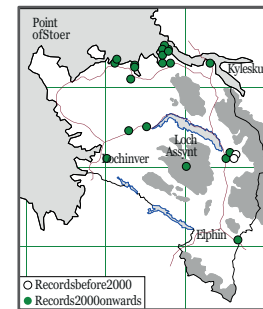
This fritillary overwinters as a caterpillar amongst the dead grass and often beneath bracken leaf litter. The earliest record adult was seen 13th June 2009 at Gleann Leireag and the latest on 8th September 2015 at the Bone Caves. 2006.

26 records were made of this dark chocolate-brown butterfly with distinctive wing-spots. Once very rare in Assynt, it seems to be increasing in numbers in tall damp grassland areas, where its larval food-plant, purple moor-grass occurs.

This species is very dependent on sunshine when they seem to rise out of the undergrowth in search of a mate. Locally abundant in Inchnadamph, and recently in places in north Assynt such as Gleann Ardbhair and Duart near Nedd. Over 30 butterflies were seen flying on 4th August 2013 at Ardvar.



Scotch Argus



Scotch Argus distribution

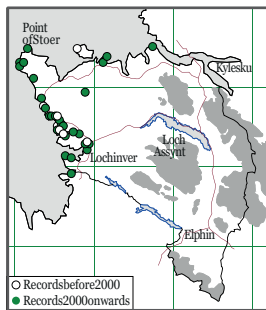
It may well have been overlooked here in the past. Flies in late June to mid-August. The latest sighting was 15th August. Scotch Argus hibernates as a caterpillar in deep grass tussocks.

There were only 53 recorded sightings of this butterfly, but it may be very under-recorded in Assynt. Virtually all records of adults flying were in July and the first half of August. The latest record was 26th August in 1997 at Clachtoll. There was also a single record on the 18th June 2007 at Achmelvich.

It is very much a coastal butterfly especially between Achmelvich and Clachtoll, but also Raffin, where it likes to sunbathe on rocks and paths, with its wings tilted at right angles to the sun.



Grayling

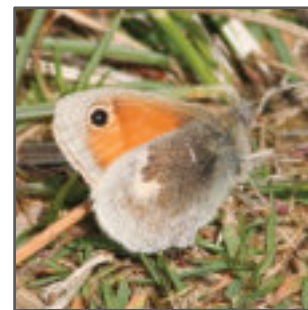


Grayling distribution

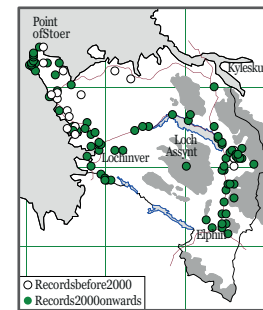
2009 was a bumper year for grayling with 30% of all sightings happening in that year. For instance, 15 adults were seen flying within a short distance of each other at Kirkaig Point and 15 at Achmelvich Point that year. Some years there are no records.

In Assynt this is a small butterfly of coastal grasslands such as Stoer peninsula and Achmelvich but also limestone areas around Inchnadamph. It is grey with orange undersides to the wings.

It is not widespread but may be frequent where it occurs. For example, 29 were reported on 13th June 2009 on the stretch from Stoer lighthouse to the Old Man of Stoer. Small Heath butterflies live in self-contained colonies of limited size for all their lives. Of the 173 sightings, it has been recorded on the wing from May through to September, but the vast majority can be seen in June (69%) and July (25%).



Small Heath



Small Heath distribution

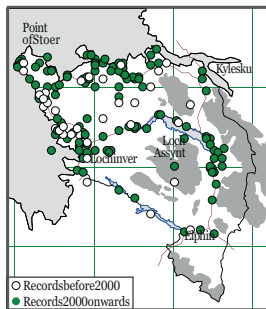
The earliest recorded was 28th May 2001 at Stoer and the latest 14th September 2015 at the Bone Caves. There is only one brood in this part of Scotland, with caterpillars overwintering.

A large but unspectacular butterfly that has declined over the country; still common in Assynt with 244 records. It can be seen flying in grassy places that have plenty of summer flowers and fine-leaved grasses.

In Assynt it occurs on the wing from late May to the end of August. Most records (64%), however, were in the month of July. The earliest was 27th May at Stoer and the latest 28th August at Loch Awe. The highest densities were in the area of Inchnadamph and the Bone Caves with several records of 20+ butterflies.



Meadow Brown



Meadow Brown distribution

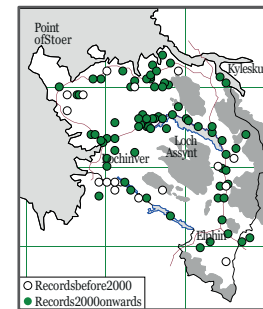
They overwinter as caterpillars. It is larger and lighter in shade than the Scotch Argus and with a single eyespot on the fore wings.

There were 101 sightings of this characteristic butterfly of boggy areas in the Assynt landscape, where the caterpillars feed on hare's-tail cotton-grass. It is a highly sedentary species that does not move very far between colonies. This is a strong flier, that can be seen from the second half of June into July and a lesser extent August.

It requires careful identification where the Small Heath might also occur. The earliest butterfly was on the 8th June 2008 at Little Assynt and the latest 24th August 2003 near Loch Veyatie. Hot spots for this butterfly include Gleann Leireag, Little Assynt and the Drumbeg peat road. The largest congregation was recorded on 28th July 2008 when over 40 were counted near Tumore.



Large Heath



Large Heath distribution

Adults on average only live for three to four days and their main cause of death is thought to be attacks from meadow pipits. They overwinter as caterpillars deep in the tussock.

Scarce Species

Clouded Yellow

Colias croceus

☐

There have been only three local sightings for this migratory species. All were in 1992, the year of the last major influx for this migratory species.



Small White

Pieris rapae

☐

There have been only two records of this migratory species both in the month of August and on the coast. They were at the Old Man of Stoer in 2013 and before that at Drumbeg beach in 1997.

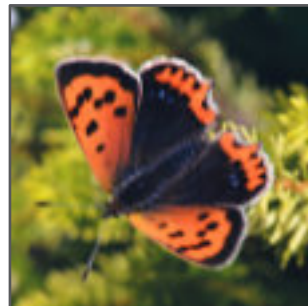


Small Copper

Lycaena phlaeas

☐

There are only a couple of recent records of this unmistakable butterfly both from coastal areas (Baddidarach and Clachtoll). The last one was on 28th June 2006.



We are still recording butterflies so we would be grateful to hear about anything you see when in Assynt, especially from the more remote areas.

If you are sending in a record, please supply:

- a date
- name of observer
- a six-figure grid reference (e.g. NC123 234)*
- how many you saw (if possible)
- what they were doing or feeding on

*If unsure about grid reference you could supply as much detail about the location as possible. You could also attach a photograph if you are in any doubt about the identity.

Send any observations or photographs to us via the reporting form on our home page:

www.assyntwildlife.org.uk

or by email to assyntwildlife@gmail.com



Further information

There is a wealth of books on British butterflies as a whole.

The Atlas of Butterflies in Highland and Moray (Barbour, D. et al., 2008) is great if you are going further afield than Assynt.

The Millennium Atlas of Butterflies in Britain and Ireland (Asher J. et al, 2001) will give you the picture nationally.

There is a leaflet available entitled **Butterflies of the Highlands** – an identification guide produced and available from Butterfly Conservation Scotland.

For more information on Butterfly Conservation please visit:

www.butterfly-conservation.org/in-your-area/highlands-and-islands-branch

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