



# Butterflies

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Just fifty or so yards away the holiday traffic came to a standstill as it waited to get into a crowded Lyndhurst and yet in almost total silence I was following a dusty pathway toward a green copse that in a few weeks' time will be turning brown and boasting reds and rich golds as autumn begins to take hold of our woodlands. That copse was filled the day I walked with gentle birdsong and a few paces behind me was one of the New Forest's most famous landmarks, Bolton's Bench.

Ferns taller than a man filled the space between heath and woodland and it offered shade to tiny violet flowers. As the pathway drifted past the wooded area the scenery opened out into a wide vista of rough heath which was cut into sections by footpaths that criss-crossed its purple carpet. In the distance was an upright row of tall firs and in between ponies grazing the sparse grass and groups of cattle herded together. No matter how many times I visit the New Forest it never fails to impress me or fill me with wonder; it is a beautiful and diverse habitat.

Tiny pale blue butterflies the colour of forget-me-nots, seemingly too delicate to manage in the brisk breeze of the day, flitted a few inches above the ground. I have no idea what breed they were because when I looked on a British butterfly website it could have been any one of a dozen different species, but the description Small Blue seems to fit, but so did the Chalkhill Blue. There were so many of them landing and quickly lifting off again it was impossible not to smile at their antics.

More ponies, their tails part cut by the Forest Agisters as proof that the commoners who own them have paid for the right to let them roam free across the Forest. That is until the drift, or round-up, which will take place come the autumn, when all the Forest ponies are collected.

It was fairly breezy the day I walked, which was very welcome as the sun beat down in the middle of the day trying to wilt my efforts, and I knew it would not be long before the appearance of a buzzard overhead, that most majestic of the birds of prey. It was the briefest of exciting glimpses as he drifted high above the heathland in search of his lunch. As he banked one way his brown upper plumage showed clearly, and as he changed direction his grey undersides were lit by the bright sun and showed off fully against the blue sky backdrop.

Then as I stopped by the side of a watery bog to try and take pictures of some dragonflies that were holding dogfights like world war fighter planes, something whipped through my line of vision. Its distinctive flight pattern of a few fast wing beats and then a short glide gave one clue, and its curved and pointed wings gave another – a sparrow hawk darted from one side of the area where I stood and disappeared as quickly as he had appeared. They are small, compact, beautifully coloured and supreme hunting machines and I think they are my favourite of all the raptors.

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## Bolton's Bench...

As you walk further away from the popular Bench the tourist throngs disappear from view but even in the driest of summers the ground beneath your feet will soften and become marshy. Come the rainy season, which this year pleasantly seems as if it will be autumn or even winter instead of an English summer, this area will become almost impassable without the wearing of wellies. As I attempted to walk into the shade of the cool-looking woodland my path was blocked by a six-foot-wide area of bog. Keep your eyes open for myrtle; no, she is not a strange woman who hangs around areas of woodland but a flowering shrub that grows wild in and around marshy areas.

But as well as the bog plants this is a great part of the Forest for dragonflies and damselflies, butterflies and all sorts of insect life.

When I did step into the trees the mixture of cool shade and soft breezes was very welcome from the heat of the day. The ground was soft and giving under my footsteps but at least it was dry. Later in the year the driest place to walk will be in the middle of the streams and cattle will be found grazing with their legs knee deep in mud.

Emerging once again from the woods I stepped out into a wilderness. I was off the beaten track with no obvious paths through the heath. There was the realisation that I was the only one out there; there were no people in sight, no buildings and, even better, no sounds coming from the distant town and its roads. There was nothing to spoil the solitude I felt; before me was a vast open space, wide enough to make me feel like a pioneering adventurer walking this land for the first time, but near enough to that dreaded civilisation that I was about an hour away from, a refreshing pint and a sandwich. So not really the brave pioneer then!

Everywhere I looked now there were more and more of those tiny blue butterflies. They danced and spiralled above the ground in their dozens; it was an amazing sight. As I walked and, looking down each time, placed a foot on the ground, it was like the bow wave in front of a fast-moving ship, but instead of water my wave was made up of tiny grasshoppers that leapt out of the way of my size twelves – a fascinating sight.

As the journey nears its end there is one more pleasant surprise: a pretty little cemetery that sits on a gently-sloping hill behind solid stone walls with a charming little chapel within its grounds. It seems an apt place to end the days of life.

Then the slopes of Bolton's Bench come back into view; the cricket pitch with its thatched pavilion stands idle and unused until next spring, and families on holiday and out for the day play ball and throw sticks for their dogs. I was back among the tourists, many of whom sat within feet of their cars, never planning to move further away into the stunning scenery before heading home and boasting to family and friends that they had seen the New Forest. They have no idea of the beautiful things they had missed. ■



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