

# Butterfly Conservation

## Sightings of non-native butterflies and moths

### Guidance for branches (August 2014)

#### Background

There have been several incidences of non-native species being recorded in the UK in recent years which has posed questions to BC Branches and volunteers. The additional guidance is intended to help branches to decide their response. Note that some of these issues are already covered in BC's Policies on Introductions and Re-introductions; and Collecting, Breeding and Photography; which should be read in conjunction with this guidance.

#### Legal situation

The introduction of non-native species into the UK is illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) and Butterfly Conservation does not support any such activity. If BC Branches or members hear of people deliberately releasing non-native species, they should strongly discourage such activity because it is against the law and also because it runs the risk of damaging the ecology of native species, for example by introducing non-native pathogens and parasites.

#### Accidental releases of non-European species

In many cases, it is clear that sightings of non-native species originate from releases of bred stock, for example non-European species which may have escaped from Butterfly Houses. Such sightings are of little relevance to the work of Butterfly Conservation.

#### Sightings of non-native European species

Where European species are recorded near the coast, or even inland, it is often not easy to separate releases from natural migration. Sightings should be reported to the county recorder (listed at <http://butrfli.es/BNMcontacts>) and notified centrally to Richard Fox, Surveys Manager (rfox@butterfly-conservation.org). Advice should also be sought from them before giving the sightings any publicity. There are pros and cons of publishing such records that must be judged on a case by case basis.

If it is possible that a migration is occurring, then it would be worth publicising sightings so that other observers can keep a look out (e.g. Long-tailed Blue). However, if a very rare migrant appears to have established a colony it may be best to keep details secret until any breeding can be assessed. There is a huge interest in photographing rare migrants which could damage a small breeding colony, and there is a risk that some people may want to collect the adults, or take eggs or larvae for rearing. If the latter is felt to be likely, it is best to keep the locality secret until the situation can be properly assessed in discussion with the county recorder and Richard Fox (or Nigel Bourn or Martin Warren in his absence).

#### Established colonies of non-native species

We know that many species are spreading rapidly northwards in Europe due to climate change and some will inevitably arrive and establish colonies. For example, nearly 30 moth species have become established in the UK this century, some due to natural colonisation others as a result of accidental importation (e.g. in the horticultural trade).

If a non-native species succeeds in establishing a breeding colony (e.g. evidence of successful breeding over two or more seasons), by whatever means, our strategy should be to monitor the results so that it can add to our understanding of the impacts of climate change. The rearing and further release of the species should be discouraged so that we can learn the natural behaviour of the species in our climatic conditions. Again, such colonies should be reported to the cCounty recorder and Richard Fox and advice sought about any publicity.

### **Assisted colonisation of non-native species**

Some naturalists are advocating that we help species adapt to climate change by “assisting” their colonisation of new countries. Aside from the legal issues, Butterfly Conservation believes that such measures should not be attempted at the current time as it would confuse scientific understanding of natural responses to climate change, undermine local conservation efforts in the natural range and might have unexpected adverse effects here, but will be reviewing this advice in coming years. There may be situations in the future where sedentary species in other parts of Europe are at high risk of extinction because their original habitats are becoming unsuitable due to climate change and there is no possibility of natural spread. Assisted colonisation may thus be the only option to ensure their survival. If such cases do arise, we will consult widely with Lepidopterists across Europe to agree a continent-wide conservation strategy.

### **Butterfly releases at ceremonies**

There is an increasing and disturbing trend of live butterflies being released at weddings, funerals and other ceremonies. In some cases such releases may be illegal. Butterfly Conservation strongly disagrees with this practice for four main reasons: 1) It disrupts natural distributions and the study of them; 2) Bred individuals may have different genetic traits compared to wild ones and releases may disrupt the genetics of natural populations; 3) There is a risk of spreading diseases into wild populations, especially from high density breeding and releasing programmes; 4) Such releases send the wrong message about human attitudes to nature and other living creatures and distracts from the real problems facing butterflies.

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August 2014

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