

Is Wyre Going Green?

MIKE WILLIAMS



Male Dark Green Fritillary, Dowles, 6 July 2014

Craig Reed

The Wyre Forest has always been famous for its fritillary butterflies, at one time holding six species. Both Marsh Fritillary and High Brown Fritillary have sadly long gone but thanks to strenuous management efforts led by Butterfly Conservation and involving a range of partner organisations, Pearl-bordered, Small Pearl-bordered and Silver-washed Fritillary are more than holding their own. Indeed, there have been encouraging signs of increased population numbers in recent years, particularly of Pearl-bordered Fritillary, and dispersal to parts of the Forest where they have not been seen for many years. Perhaps less expected, however, have been an increasing number of reports of Dark Green Fritillary.

Evidence suggests that this species was fairly widespread in the Forest in Victorian times but numbers appear to have subsequently declined. By the early 1980s when I first became involved in butterfly recording in the Forest confirmed records of Dark Green were occasional to say the least and certainly there was nowhere in the Forest where you could confidently go and expect to see this butterfly. Recording was not helped by the presence of the very similar High Brown Fritillary and it may well have been the case that some Dark Greens were overlooked by recorders. I remember one of the few confirmed records of this time being a photograph shown to me by John Robinson, then National Nature Reserve warden, of a Dark Green Fritillary being fed by a

Spotted Flycatcher to a nest of hungry youngsters!

The last few years, however, have seen Dark Green Fritillaries being reported with increasing frequency. A real challenge to recording is separating out Dark Greens from equally fast flying Silver-washed Fritillaries and, short of being extremely adept with a butterfly net, it is often difficult to be 100% sure. There were reports of Dark Green Fritillaries on the Wyre Forest west transect each year from 2006-9 and in 2009 there were further reports from two very experienced observers of Dark Green Fritillaries being seen in the meadows along the Dowles valley on two separate dates in July. A single sighting was reported in 2011 and another possible but unconfirmed report in 2012. The real take-off point occurred in 2013 when a meadow survey undertaken on 15th July by local West Midlands Butterfly Conservation volunteer Richard Woolley and his team produced a count of over 30 in the meadows along the Dowles Brook. Over the next few days there were several more sightings including in the meadows around Lodge Hill. The pattern was again broadly similar in 2014 with sightings in the same meadows, although they were not quite so numerous as the previous year. However, there were also new reports some distance away from North Kinlet where over 20 were seen on a single day by another Butterfly Conservation volunteer recorder Jackie Wickham and subsequently by several other observers.

The sudden arrival of Dark Green Fritillaries in Wyre is hard to explain. Certainly, a number of our butterflies are responding to global warming and extending their range but the nearest known colonies of Dark Green Fritillary to Wyre are many miles away in mid-Shropshire. The species, in contrast to other Fritillaries, is more a species of open, flower-rich grassland and bracken-dominated glades and it may well be the case that increased grazing in some of the meadows and more extensive open space management has created more suitable habitat. Could it be that Dark Greens have persisted in the Forest for some years at a low population threshold but as a result of habitat change and a warming climate are now finding conditions to their liking and becoming more visible to recorders? The other explanation of course is that they have been subject to an unofficial release, something that unfortunately still occurs but something Wyre has largely escaped from in the past. Certainly, the pattern of sightings, with sudden reports of relatively large numbers of individuals on a single day, does suggest this as a distinct possibility. If this is the case, enquiries have so far not produced any definitive proof.

It will be interesting to see what 2015 brings. The fact that Dark Green Fritillaries have been seen along the Dowles Brook in successive years does perhaps suggest local breeding and it may be worth trying to search for caterpillars in the Spring. It is certainly worth being on Dark Green Fritillary alert come late June and July and give that large Fritillary whizzing past your head a second glance. Please do report any confirmed sightings to Butterfly Conservation (mike@stagborough.fsnet.co.uk)



Female Dark Green Fritillary

Jon Cartwright



Common Dog Violets

Rosemary Winnall



Female Dark Green Fritillary, Postensplain, 16 July 2014

Jon Cartwright