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The Butterfly Isles: A Summer in Search of Our Emperors and Admirals

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THE BUTTERFLY ISLES: a Summer in Search of Our Emperors and Admirals, by Patrick Barkham. 372 pages, 16 plates; 8.5 × 6 in; ISBN 978-1-84708-127-8; Hardback. UK £20.00. Granta Publications, London;. Publication date: 2010.

As far as I can tell, this book is only the second published account of a butterfly big year. As the only other member of this exclusive club, I was of course eager to read it, and I am in a privileged position to review it. Four years studying and working on butterfly conservation in England, many years ago, enhanced my desire to do so. Let me say from the outset, however, that I have attempted to avoid comparing Mr. Barkham's adventure with my own, apart from sympathizing with our common challenges, trials, and pleasures. A big year based on just 59 resident species of butterflies on a small archipelago can in no way be judged or measured against a similar endeavor staged on a large continent hosting 800 species (Pyle, 2010). I trust, therefore, that these comments will be taken as coming from what Nabokov described as "a fellow sufferer" of the "*passio et morbus aureliani*" rather than from any sort of competition.

The narrative begins with Barkham's long-ago hunt with his dad for the Brown Argus (*Aricia agestis*), followed by memories of six summers rambling with his "Jeremy Thomas" in hand—his field guide, tantamount to birding with your Roger Tory Peterson (Thomas, 1986). But "we ran out of summers, or steam," he writes, "and my personal tally of British butterflies got stuck at 54." The years since had afforded no time for butterflies. In 2009, he went forth to pick up the others, and in fact to try to see all 59 in one year: "Finally, I decided I must complete this unfinished business, in the course of one summer. Butterflies, I hoped, could be a way to unlock the ordinary, everyday beauty of the natural world that I hoped could still be experienced on our small island, if only I took time to seek it out. This is the story of my search for every British butterfly ... from beaches to forests, from central London to the Highlands of Scotland ... before it was too late." And as he described both what he would need ("fine weather, good luck, and a lot of patience") and what he hoped he might receive ("fleeting moments of wonder as we fly through our lives"), I fully understood.

As the accompanying map shows, the author did not actually visit very much of the British Isles: no Wales, no Northeast, barely into Scotland. He did, however, visit Northern Ireland for Real's Wood White (*Leptidea reali*), relatively recently discerned in Britain from the ordinary (but uncommon) Wood White (*Leptidea sinapis*), of which more later.

Barkham is a professional writer, and the book is generally very handsomely written: "My love of butterflies began not with a blaze of colour but with a small brown job. That's what my mum called the common plodders of the butterfly world that would scarcely divert your gaze as they bimbled past." "Wobbling down the street like a small boy on a bicycle was a white butterfly." A memorable frog-mating sequence ("hurtling around cooing and groaning and fervently trying to find someone to love") takes place in tandem with the first butterfly spotted, a Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*). And then there's the raven that "gurgled as it lurked on the headland, as shifty as a hooded teenager in a park." Duke of Burgundies (*Hemearis lucina*) "were repelled by an invisible force, and looped away from each other in the sky. Then each butterfly folded its wings together and plummeted like a meteor back to the warm grass."

The author describes the collecting vs. watching dichotomy in Britain, which is far more starkly drawn on that fair but crowded isle than in the U.S., where netting and sampling remain alive and important. He portrays collectors as being of another era, colorful but well behind us, and he tells of the admitted excesses of some of the mega-collectors of yore. Britain may be one of the few countries where a big year could gain any credence absent voucher specimens for difficult species (certainly necessary in North America). Barkham doesn't carry a net even for catch-and-release, unlike his more knowledgeable father who sometimes does. In fact, he is even embarrassed to wear his binoculars, which he calls "The ultimate symbol of geekiness." This, to one whose binoculars have been welded to his body for most of his life, seemed odd indeed. Happily, he gets over it.

Throughout, he draws upon plenty of engaging literary references and lepidopterological lore, with which Great Britain is abundantly supplied. He gives a memorable portrait of British butterfly culture, both of the earlier collecting era and of today's equally avid and idiosyncratic watchers, tickers, and photographers. Splendid portraits of particular lepidopterists—David Redhead, the inimitable Matthew Oates, Jeremy Thomas himself, and Butterfly Conservation's CEO Martin Warren, among others—peg them perfectly. I have been in the field with most of these, going back forty years, and young Barkham's sketches are spot-on.

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Sometimes he seems wise for his years: "The countryside shrinks in winter; there really is less of it."

Barkham gets a lot out of just 59 species. "If I had strolled straight through the meadow, I would have only picked up the two hefty Peacock butterflies pursuing each other around a patch of brambles. The lovely thing about looking for butterflies, however, is that it gives you an excuse to dither and then just be. I stood there, in the sunshine, in a meadow of pink and white flowering nettles and creamy cow-parsley flowers with their delicate, slightly bitter scent, with young hops and sticky goose grass straining to climb over it all. " But there is a serpent in the garden; the story also becomes a plaint for love gone wrong. His girlfriend, Lisa, "found the geekiness of all this quite cute. 'Butterfly Boy' was her new nickname for me. But she preferred to relax by flitting around parties in fancy dress with all her mates and I no longer had time to do any of this." As the season progresses, Lisa makes game attempts to take part in some of his field trips, but the writing is on the wall: it's going to be butterflies or her.

Mr. Barkham is no lepidopterist, and he knows it. Some of the evidence is startling: "Butterflies and moths are distinguished from other insects by having wings ***made of*** tiny scales" (emphasis mine). He gets better as he goes along, earnestly learning in the field and from mentors. Yet one gathers he read a lot more historical than contemporary lep lit. For example, he overdoes "pugnaciousness" in the old manner, apparently unaware of the contemporary interpretation of many male-male butterfly encounters as potential courtship pursuits. Even with the classical literature, he's not always accurate. In retelling the well-worn story of Alfred Russell Wallace's day-long headache after finding a resplendent birdwing, Barkham misattributes the attack to *Ornithoptera alexandrae*, the largest butterfly in the world, of Papua New Guinea; whereas the actual agent, as made clear by Wallace in *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), was the Golden Birdwing (*O. croesus*) of the Mollucas. Wallace never saw Queen Alexandra's Birdwing, and a good thing; it might have given him a stroke.

Nor is the book free of grammar problems, an increasing plague in modern books where editing and proofing short-cuts are more and more the rule. He's a pro, but his editors sometimes let him down: The Purple Emperor "eluded and taunted my dad and I for years"--it taunted *I*? "Anyone could train themselves ..." "Pupa" and "pupae" both used as the plural in the same sentence. And a number of misplaced modifiers: "Further on, stuck to the starry white blooms of greater stitchwort, we saw our first Common Blues of the summer." It's hard to watch butterflies when you're stuck to the flowers of greater stitchwort, but Patrick and his dad did it! (We all make such goofs, but that's what editors are supposed to be for.) Another frequent lapse, one that I note all too often in this journal and the *NEWS*, is the failure to capitalize Lepidoptera—which, like every other taxon name above the level of species, is properly upper-cased. Readers could use a little more guidance with the lovely but quirky British common names. Barkham explains that the sole British metalmark, long known as the Duke of Burgundy, finally lost its unfortunate epithet "fritillary;" but not that some of the so-called British "fritillaries" are actually checkerspots; nor the relationship between the Brown Argus and the Scotch Argus (none); or that the Scotch Argus and the Mountain Ringlet are both actually species of *Erebia*. A gap is the total absence of scientific names, which would have been easy and helpful to include (here I have followed Asher et al, 2001).

The book is dedicated to the author's father, John Barkham, an experienced naturalist who was the boon companion of Patrick's butterfly-watching trips in his youth; and again, after a long hiatus, for some of the jaunts in 2009. Though undedicated and undernoted, his mother was also important, providing, in fact, his best single day: six new species at Kelling Heath on the Norfolk coast. Overall, Barkham had a lucky good year: sunny, with a big Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*) invasion, of which he gives a fine account in historical context. He's a good researcher, as his work as a journalist might suggest. And that's another salient point: he had to hold a job down all year, and often had to work when he wanted to be out (whereas on my big year, I was able to devote almost the entirety of the time to my admittedly larger task). Concerned with just 59 species, the book is able to include a complete set of British butterfly images—a built-in, very helpful field guide—in the middle. Painted by Brian Hargreaves, these were borrowed from Higgins and Riley's popular Collins field guide (1970). Additional plates reproduce photographs from life by the author, depicting particularly memorable moments and butterflies. Fine pencil drawings by Helen Macdonald enhance each chapter heading.

Barkham's treatment of conservation is thorough and thoughtful, as in a conflict between Marsh Fritillaries (*Euphydryas aurinia*) and windmills: "Which comes first: green energy or a rare and beautiful butterfly? ... Must we sacrifice the latter to our insatiable desire for power?" Almost every encounter touches on conservation or management, in the country that pioneered butterfly conservation yet still loses essential habitat annually, even as heroic efforts are made to save

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and restore critical butterfly sites. He gives excellent accounts of the great successes, such as Jeremy Thomas and the reintroduction of the Large Blue (*Maculinea arion*), and Martin Warren and the Heath Fritillary (*Melitaea athalia*); and stirring reports of his meetings with these men and the butterflies they helped save, including an eye-witness account of an historic outbreak of the sometime-endangered Heath Fritillary. Having spent a summer myself seeking *M. athalia* on its historic sites in the early '70s, when it was nearly extinct and its ecology and management needs but little understood, I can especially appreciate Barkham's wonder at seeing thousands on the wing. But he also endured close calls, such as with the first butterfly saved by Jeremy Thomas's research and subsequent applied management, *Satyrium pruni*: "The sun did find a small window in the cloud and the woodland rides were suddenly, capriciously, animated with dozens of indefatigable Meadow Browns, warring Large Skippers, beautiful Marbled Whites, bejewelled Common Blues and a couple of pristine, velvety Ringlets, the first of the year. But that modest, slightly tatty insect was the only Black Hairstreak I saw."

Mr. Barkham's narrative holds up well and brings us right along on the journey. There is high adventure to be had here, with the Purple Emperor (*Apatura iris*) and the Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon brittanicus*); and low adventure, as when Barkham, butterfly-creeping around London parks, is mistaken for a skulker looking for a same-sex hook-up. And pathos: he finally loses his sweetie over a date with the emperor, when he opts for baiting it with rancid fish paste instead of a weekend country house party with her. All this takes place in a great chapter called "The Curse of the Purple Emperor." At least he succeeds in seeing this mythic beauty—57 of them, in fact—flying in tandem with Purple Hairstreaks (*Neozephyrus quercus*).

The author sees some of the best of wild Britain, from Arnside Knot to Meathop Moss; but also plenty of gridlocked, fumy motorways and unpleasant urban passages on the way to the desired habitats. He does not, as I did, have days on end in lonely landscapes with more wildlife than people (he could have, in northern Scotland; but he never made it up there, picking up the Scottish specialties farther south). He runs into "Butterfly Burnout" over the Lulworth Skipper at Lulworth Crumple on the Dorset Coast and Chalkhill Blues on Royston Heath (*Thymelicus acteon, Lysandra coridon*). But he can't give up now—he has more to go. He grows giggly in the seemingly futile search for #55, *Leptidea sinapis*, differentiated from Real's Wood White (*L. reali*) by that species' much longer penis. "My journey to find all fifty-nine species would end at fifty-eight. It was not an heroic failure. It would be an inept failure, especially as the stumbling point was the humble Wood White, and the short-willied form at that."

At that point Mr. Barkham comes to a realization that must ultimately ground every good-hearted big year: "I too had no control over the weather, or the butterflies, or the traffic, or the hearts of those I loved. For some reason, I continued to cling to the idea that I could find what I was looking for if only I was smart enough, and disciplined enough, and organized enough, and knew the right back road through south London. I badly needed to learn not only patience, but acceptance." Of course, eventually he does find the Wood White.

And then the Final Four: the Scotch Argus (*Erebia aethiops*), as it "jittered and bashed its way clumsily through the stiff moor grass;" the Adonis Blue (*Polyommatus bellargus*), "the best of the blues ... this dashing electric-blue butterfly [that] had the power to incite great obsession" (how well I remember!); the Silver-spotted Skipper (*Hesperia comma*) on a round-headed rampion on the South Downs of West Sussex, which he watches copulate; and finally, the Brown Hairstreak (*Thecla betulae*), a winter search for the eggs of which had actually begun his year afield. "Watching so intently," he writes, "I became attuned to every pinprick in the landscape, the sway of every blade of grass and the blunder of every bee." Driving home, drained by his success, he realized that "it proved easier to see the butterflies than I imagined, but far harder to undertake the journey." To the last part, I can definitely relate! But even then it wasn't over, for there were surprises to come, and recoveries, that I will not spoil here. I'll just say that I found *The Butterfly Isles* to be a delightful, evocative, and thoroughly worthwhile read; and if he wouldn't be ashamed of his binos, I would very much enjoy going afield with Mr. Barkham. His was a very different butterfly big year from my own, to be sure, and no less for it. He has entered a memorable title in the uncrowded genre of natural history big years in general, whose masterpiece is Kenn Kaufman's *Kingbird Highway* (1997), and a worthy entry it is.

"Searching for the butterflies," Barkham reflected, "had given me the gift of becoming, for a moment, here and there at least, a small, harmonious part of the natural world." But it had also made him realize, in spite of his good luck with weather and numbers, that "what everyone instinctively suspects" is true: "Most of us no longer find our summer days routinely animated by dozens, let alone swarms, of butterflies." They really are fewer than they used to be. And yet, reflecting on his first Orange Tip of the year, the first he'd seen in a decade, he felt "Everything was all right with the world,

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for another year at least, if the Orange Tips were dancing through a meadow by the Thames in April. The Apocalypse was not nigh, not quite yet."

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