

Gailes Marsh SWT field trip 5th June 2016 by Tom Byars

Back in June 2015 I had a look for the Small Blue butterfly at Gailes Marsh SWT but after spending four hours searching for it in the nature reserve I eventually gave up. I was fascinated with the Small Blue reintroduction programme organised by Gill Smart and was really looking forward to hearing her talk about this to the society on the 3rd March. Would Gill be willing to show our members the Small Blue butterfly down at Gailes? Well, I just had to ask and was delighted when Gill duly obliged.

We could not have picked a better day for it, gin clear sky with warm sunshine and not a breath of wind. Fourteen members turned up for this field trip (how come that doesn't happen when I'm leading bird trips?) Gill took our members into the reserve proper looking for the particular food plant for the caterpillars. "Yes" I remarked, "there is plenty of Kidney Vetch about here" pointing to vast swathes of yellow blooms carpeting the ground. "That's not Kidney Vetch" came the chorus, "you've been looking at Bird's-foot trefoil!" No wonder I couldn't find them last year, I had been looking at the wrong food plant all that time – how embarrassing! There was very few butterflies actually flying about but a few Small Heaths and Common Blues kept our interest levels up. Gill then took us to the edge of the reserve to show us the planted Kidney Vetch but unfortunately there were no Small Blues around. Suddenly, eagle eyed Gill saw one on the reserve boundary – unfortunately I was lagging way at the back and had to quickly dash forward to secure a view. I was sounding a bit frantic "Whereabouts is it?" I asked. "It went round the corner" replied Gill. Some of our members at the front of the group caught a brief glimpse of it flying away but by the time I got there, it was well and truly gone.

Not to be deterred, I stayed well out in front of the group this time, hovering close to Gill as we crossed over into the nearby golf course which had created some excellent grassy banks as part of their commitment to helping out with the Small Blue reintroduction and increasing invertebrate biodiversity on the actual golf course. Naturalists are very welcome to come on the golf course, as long as they abide by the club rules and to not interfere with play. I thought this was a great policy and one which other clubs should duly employ around the country! At the grassy embankment, Gill shouted "I've found one" and with a quick flick of the wrist managed to sweep it up into the butterfly net with the practised skill of Zorro! It was gently placed into a plastic container and passed around our group so that everyone could have a good gawp at our little captive. I was rather disappointed with it, very small, about thumbnail size and very dull brown in colour, like a worn, faded Ringlet with no initial sign of blue anywhere. This seemed to be the spot though, long grass with a warm, south facing embankment that appeared very conducive to requirements as I quickly found another one straight away. The flight of the Small Blue is quite distinctive, very fast, very direct, in a straight line from A to B and then it abruptly perched on a long sward of dry bent grass, holding court. Through my close focus binoculars, I could now see the blue as a pale dusting around the raised underwings, more vivid too around the furry upper body. Tiny dark spots were also visible on the underwings and upper hind wings, dark tapering abdomen and vivid black eyes. Trying to put people onto it through directions was rather difficult though, especially with my classic line of "it's on a piece of bent grass!" Still, everyone saw it perched in a more natural setting now and for those of us with cameras, it proved to be a very obliging individual, allowing for very close views. A very appreciative audience gathered round and enjoyed a very unique wildlife experience here and for me – this was the highlight of the trip. So that gave us a total of three Small Blue butterflies recorded for the day.

At noon we decided to have lunch nearby, but we could not see any more Small Blues, although a Painted Lady floated close by, giving really good views in the building heat haze. A walk to the nearby pond produced some Four-Spotted Chasers and plenty of unidentified Blue Damselflies and then we came across a seeding Creeping Willow (which was a new tree species for me!) A strikingly patterned moth also caught our attention, rapidly sweep netted in and quickly identified as a Mother Shipton. The moth is actually named after a 16th century witch and prophetess from Knaresborough, North Yorkshire, who apparently foretold the future by describing the advent of various transport vehicles, such as cars, planes, iron hulled ships, submarines and even the telephone! Looking through the plastic container we could make out the side profile of the witch with her pointed nose and hooked chin which could be clearly seen on the forewings! We then headed back to our cars for 3pm and thanked Gill for such a marvellous outing and getting to see at last the enigmatic Small Blue.