

Brown Butterflies

(opinion)

As a reminder to myself and to help those who ask, I have created this chart showing four familiar *hereabouts* 'brown' Butterflies. The chart also includes a fifth Butterfly which has been re-introduced to parts of Northern England. The fifth I have not seen.

There are several useful online contributions on this topic. This contribution originates from the <https://GoytValley.org.uk> website and was developed only with that specific (Goyt Valley and Thereabouts) area in mind. The act of creating this document helps reinforce the detail in my mind. There will ultimately be separate documentation relating to food plants.

The first image below includes some terminology popularly used in connection with Butterflies.

When at rest with wings folded, we mostly see the lower wings or hindwings. The upper wings or forewings tend to be hidden for the most part when wings are folded. When wings open flat, for the most part the lower wings or hindwings are hidden and we then see the upper wings or forewings.

Most learned people seem to me to use the terms upper wings and lower wings and I will observe that convention here, unless I am corrected in due course.

I have only included larger images of Butterflies with wings folded, as all species indicated do routinely rest with wings folded. Usefully, the first four open them also from time to time.

Page 11 includes a reduced-size image of each Butterfly and that page could be printed and carried as a reminder when out and about.

All images except the Large Heath Butterfly are my own. The latter is taken from the Butterfly Conservation website and is credited below.

Over time, Butterflies and Moths quickly become jaded and may be difficult to identify. This document is based on my own experience of the various species.



This Butterfly is the Gatekeeper (*Pyronia Tithonus*) and the diagnostic feature for me, not seen on any of the other four, is the twin white dots in the black circle on the upper wing (male and female).

The twin dots always distinct *in my experience*, even as the Butterfly ages. The twin dots are also invariably visible at all times, both when wings are open and closed. No other Butterfly here has the twin dots.

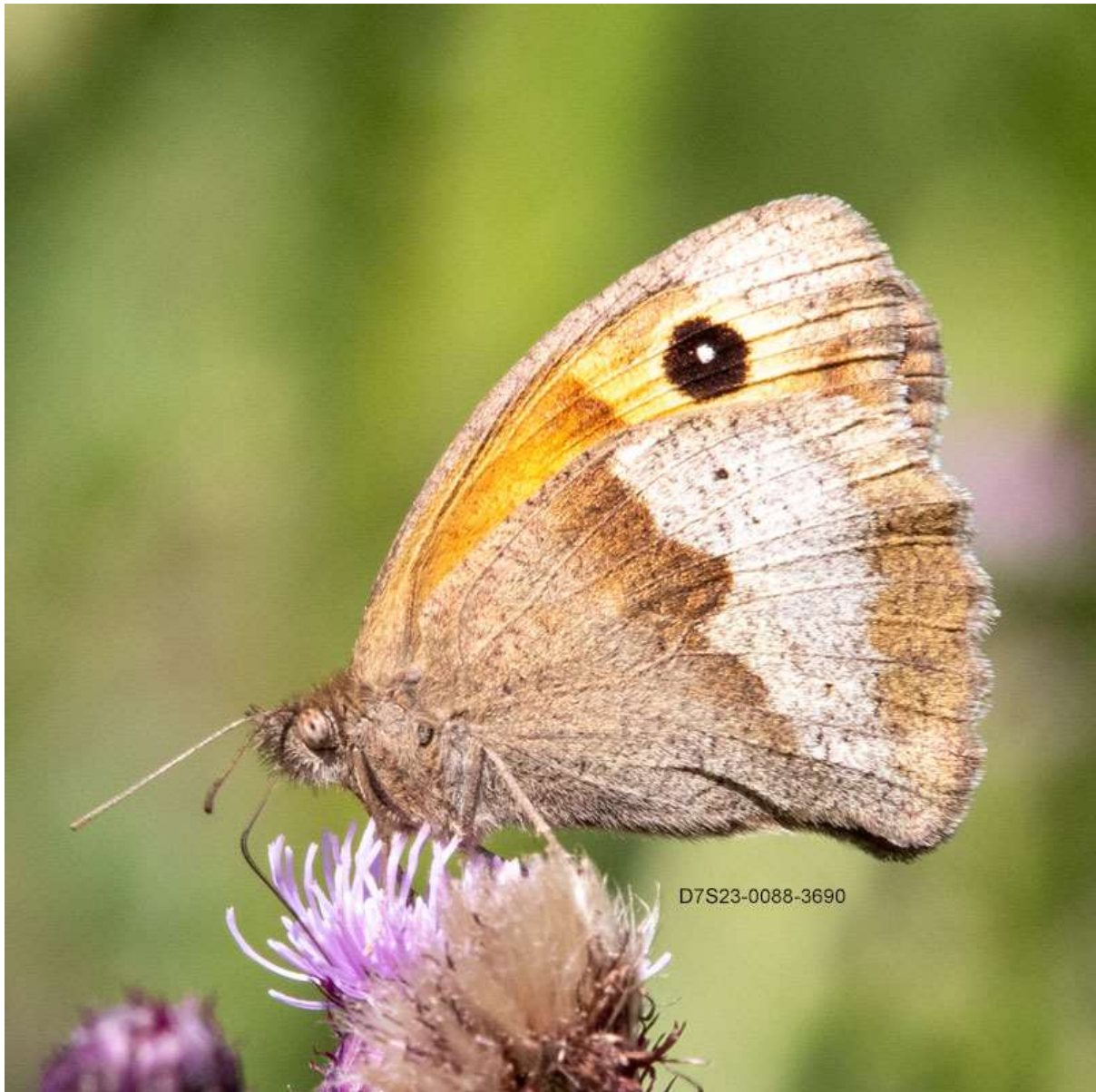


This is the Ringlet (*Aphantopus hyperantus*) and the strong lower wing pattern is the stand-out defining characteristic for me, not shared with any other Butterfly. I regard this as a diagnostic feature. Regardless of age, the boldness of the pattern seems to remain distinctive.

In addition, the background in my experience always remains a consistent colour, without significant pattern staining or blotches seen in the others. I regard this also as a shared diagnostic feature together with the strong lower wing pattern.

The nearest potential conflict appears to be with the Large Heath Butterfly but that includes distinct blotchy areas as well, which the Ringlet never does. I have no experience of the Large Heath Butterfly.

Whenever I refer to conflict, that means here at-a-glance sightings when the insects are not settling for long and the observer is relatively inexperienced.



The Meadow Brown (*Maniola jurtina*) is most likely to be confused with the Small Heath Butterfly at a glance, though the Meadow Brown is browner than the more orange Small Heath. It is also much larger but you need to be used to comparing the size of two in the field. Only experience can deliver skills at distinguishing species but we all have to start somewhere.

The Meadow Brown includes two black full-stops as I call them on the lower wings and the lower wing full stop is not very distinctive above, which is a word of warning.

In my experience, the way the upper wings are stored when closed, may deny visibility of the 'eye' on the upper wing with this species. Be prepared for that if it initially appears absent.

If you study the Small Heath (next), that includes several less than distinct circles on the lower wings. Certainly not the two full-stops.



The Small Heath butterfly (*Coenonympha pamphilus*) is smaller than the Meadow Brown and far more orange than brown. Generally, less dull overall.

If you study the Small Heath, that includes several less than distinct circles / markings on the lower wings. Certainly not the two full-stops.

Essentially, I determine this species by simply excluding the other three above.



Image source: <https://butterfly-conservation.org/butterflies/large-heath> - Image not altered in any way.

I repeat, I have never met the Large Heath Butterfly (*Coenonympha tullia*) and the only other local Butterfly it could potentially be mistaken for at first glance, by the less experienced, is the Ringlet Butterfly.

However, a second glance at the multiple backgrounds and blotches should readily resolve any questions.

To quote Butterfly Conservation: “The main foodplant is Hare’s-tail Cottongrass *Eriophorum vaginatum*, although females select areas for egg laying with mixed species rich swards of variable height rather than areas completely dominated by large, lush tussocks of the foodplant. Larvae have also been found on Common Cottongrass *E. angustifolium* and Jointed Rush *Juncus articulatus*. In the North York Moors Common Cottongrass is probably the principal foodplant, particularly in wetter areas”.

I am aware of areas in the Goyt Valley containing Cotton Grass, which has always delighted me. Which species I do not yet know. I aim now to find out. The following image I shot late morning, mid-May (along with many others in the same area). At the time I was concentrating only on Green Hairstreaks and this one was clearly feeding on Cotton Grass (I have video as well). Sources suggest the attraction is pollen, not nectar, which is absent.

At that elevation (380 metres), I cannot recall the detail of the surrounding vegetation and whether it includes mixed Heather and Cross-leaved Heath. The latter a favoured nectar source for Butterflies, when the delightful flower cups develop.

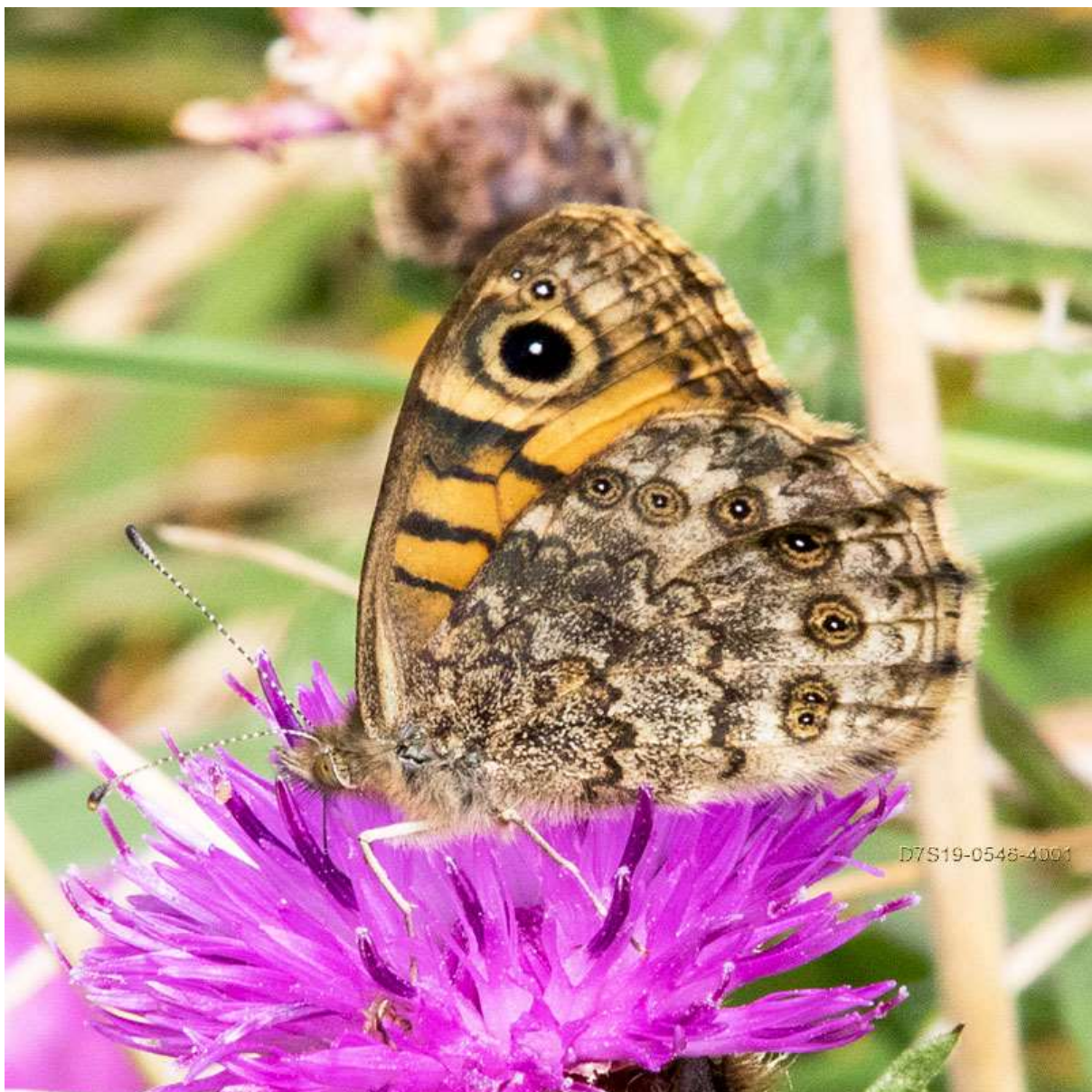


I recall the exact place. An area not far off the beaten track but far enough to avoid any risk of being disturbed by humans. Also, a very long way short of areas favoured by ground nesting birds, known to be resident in that Brown Hare countryside as well.

I want to repeat this exercise with an emphasis on better recording the vegetation and now, all Butterfly species that may be seen. This will begin when I see my first Butterfly in that area and will end when it ends*.

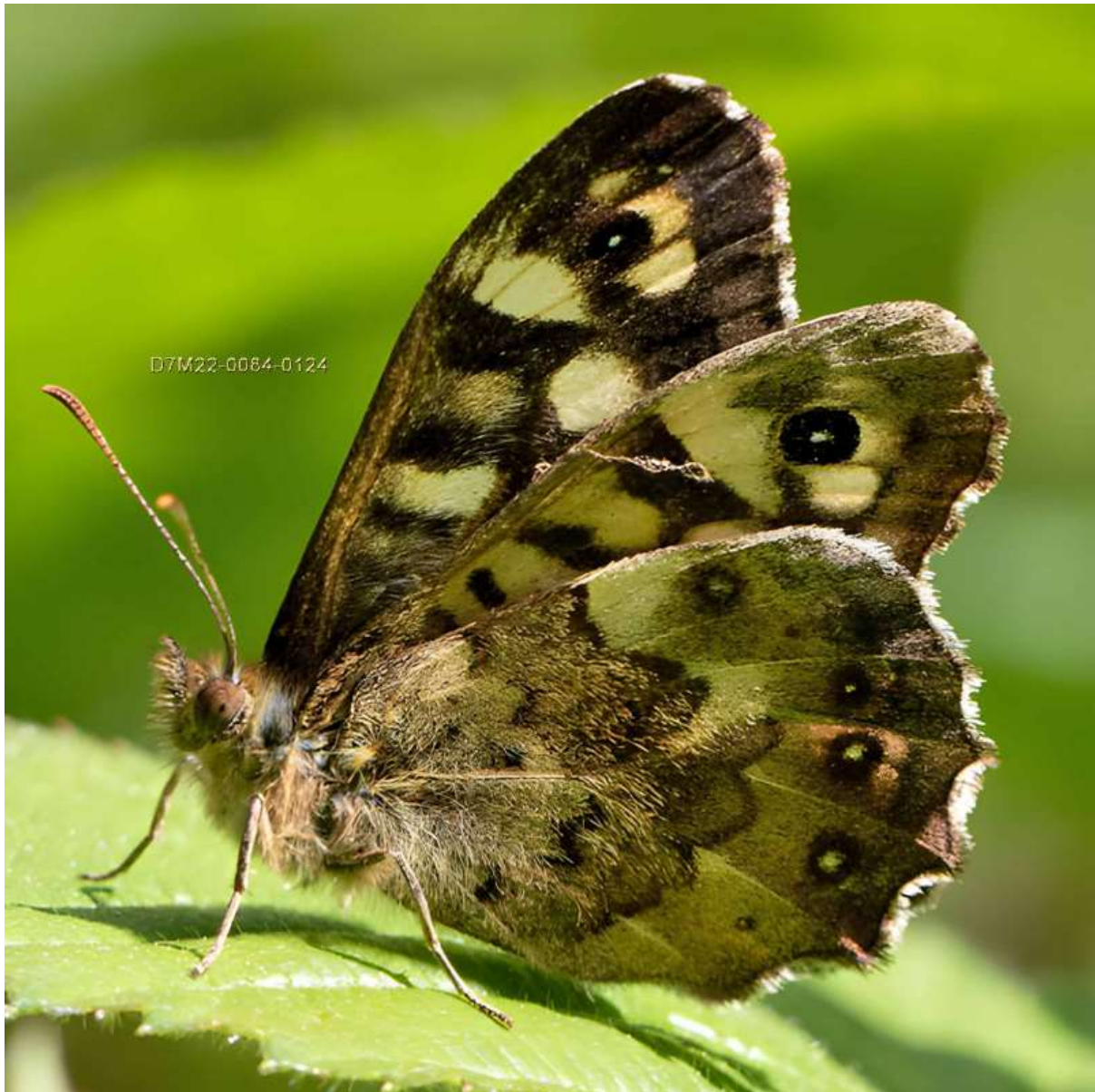
To be abundantly clear. I am not suggesting I expect to see the Large Heath Butterfly. The Derbyshire County Recorder includes 32 Butterflies on his published list (below) of prospects for recorders, on the recording spreadsheet for 2026. The Large Heath Butterfly is not on that list. Anyone can research this topic for a full Large Heath bio at Butterfly Conservation (<https://butterfly-conservation.org/>)

I ought to mention two other 'browns' just for the record. This No: 6 below is known as (hereabouts) the Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*). Butterfly Conservation refer to this species simply as 'Wall', omitting the words 'The' and 'Brown'. I confess it is a favourite with me.



I have not included it specifically as I regard it as too distinctive. Less often seen *in my experience*. Also, I have rarely seen it on plants, most often seen by me on an inorganic surface and/or other non-food flat surface. Also, more often than not *in my experience*, the wings are rarely folded. When wings are open the Wall Brown cannot be mistaken for any of the other 'browns' above.

No: 7 is the Speckled Wood (*Pararge aegeria*) and again I have not included it specifically as I regard it as far too distinctive. It is also widespread and very familiar everywhere I go. A delightfully co-operative species for nature photographers.



Out of the 32 Butterflies referred to above, I can expect to see 22 as a matter of routine every year. Those in maroon font below. I have also less often photographed the 4 others shown in blue font below.

SMALL SKIPPER - ESSEX SKIPPER - LARGE SKIPPER - DINGY SKIPPER - CLOUDED YELLOW – BRIMSTONE - LARGE WHITE - SMALL WHITE - GREEN VEINED WHITE - ORANGE TIP - GREEN HAIRSTREAK - PURPLE HAIRSTREAK - WHITE LETTER HAIRSTREAK - SMALL COPPER - BROWN ARGUS - COMMON BLUE - HOLLY BLUE - PURPLE EMPEROR - RED ADMIRAL - PAINTED LADY - SMALL TORTOISESHELL – PEACOCK – COMMA - DARK GREEN FRITILLARY - SILVER WASHED FRITILLARY - SPECKLED WOOD - WALL BROWN - MARBLED WHITE – GATEKEEPER - MEADOW BROWN – RINGLET - SMALL HEATH

See smaller images on next page:



Gatekeeper



Ringlet



Meadow Brown



Small Heath



Large Heath

This page could be printed to enable it to be carried in the field.



Wall Brown



Speckled Wood

I have added some images (where available) with wings fully opened. I will need to make it an objective to obtain better images with wings opened:



Gatekeeper



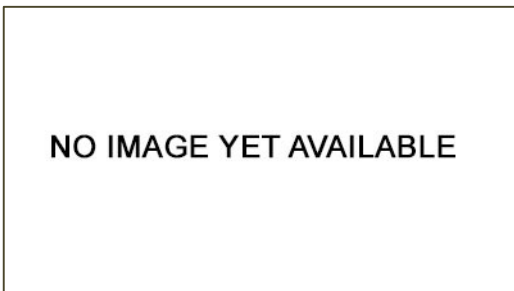
Ringlet



Meadow Brown



Small Heath



Large Heath



Wall Brown



Speckled Wood

NB: I will also be producing this year a guide to the Large, Small and Essex Skipper Butterflies but I will need some more detailed macro images. I may have met the Essex Skipper and not recognised it as a different species, given that superficially it will easily be mistaken for a Small Skipper.

* In autumn 2025 a Peacock Butterfly crawled into my Hedgehog house which has an SK10 postcode. It climbed a gable wall (fortunately opposite the camera) and it appeared to me to have passed away peacefully. It had not. I chanced to see it moving one day when apparently it seemed to be engaging in keep-fit exercises, ready for spring.

Aside from quickly evicting a spider I spotted and launching it over the garden wall, the mini-beast has hardly been disturbed and can be seen in the image below. I am hoping to obtain video of the Butterfly leaving but that will be a matter of chance.



I have always regarded the Butterfly threshold as 14⁰C, so when the temperature begins to rise, which will be sooner at my 150m elevation, than at the Goyt Valley, I may have to leave video capture recording each morning when I am out and about.

NB: The 14⁰C mentioned is the early starting temperature of the day and any Butterflies tempted out and about tend to stay out, even if the temperature drops below 14⁰C.

This document is now more or less complete though the year and experience may result in further changes, including improved images.

Revision Number: 3 – 27.02.2026