

## ST ABBS HEAD NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

### A guided butterfly walk

Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2023



**Some of the BNC group above Mire Loch (Photograph by Ciaran Hatsell)**

Seventeen members of The Berwickshire Naturalists' Club gathered at the National Trust for Scotland's St Abbs Head National Nature reserve to search for the rare Northern Brown Argus (*Aricia Artaxerxes*) (see Appendix below for background information about this butterfly). We were welcomed by the NTS Head Ranger, Ciaran Hatsell, who shared the leading of the group with Council member Canon Alan Hughes. The weather was fine with the occasional shower, having been windy and wet over the previous days.

Before leaving the car park Ciaran had spotted a Hummingbird Hawkmoth, which was a good omen. Our walking route took us towards the village of St Abbs before turning left along a track toward the headlands. An excellent view of St Abbs emerged to our right as we walked uphill along the cliff. Very soon, butterflies began to emerge: Meadow Browns; Ringlets; Small Skippers; Small Coppers; Grayling; Speckled Woods; a spectacular Narrow-bordered five spot Burnet; and many Silver Y.

At Starney Bay we watched guillemots, kittiwakes, razorbills, shags, herring gulls and fulmars feeding on the water close to shore, a good sign of food source close to the colonies. A kestrel hovered above, protective of the seabirds, their eggs and chicks, its prey being rodents and stoats.

Shortly before reaching Kirk Hill, we descended down to the Mire Loch, developed as a fishing loch for the Usher family in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and were soon rewarded with our first sighting of a Northern Brown Argus. Objective achieved, the group settled down for picnic lunch at the head of the Loch. Barely was food unwrapped before Ciaran alerted us to another Northern Brown Argus feeding on the thyme amongst the rocks, as well as a male Banded Demoiselle and an Azure Damsel fly.

After lunch, we walked the eastern side of the loch and were greeted by a large Southern Hawker Dragonfly in flight. Browns, Ringlets, Skippers and Coppers revealed themselves along with a Yellow Shell, a six spot Burnet and Common Blue. The plant life we passed deserved a report in itself: sea thrift; wild thyme; and common rock rose. Ciaran said that there can be as many as twenty native plant species found in one square metre of ground on the reserve.

After progressing up Kirk Hill the group returned to Mire Loch and, eventually, to the car park. The guided walk was recorded at eight kilometres over challenging ground.

It was a hugely successful day thanks to the knowledge of NTS Head Ranger, Ciaran, and fine weather with only an occasional shower.

### Appendix



**Northern Brown Argus (*Aricia Artaxerxes*) (Photograph by Ian Cowe)**

The Northern Brown Argus only occurs in northern England and Scotland, distinguished from the Brown Argus of Southern England and Wales by a conspicuous discus white spot on the fore wings. This small butterfly of 30mm wingspan has a silvery appearance as it flies low to the ground over sheltered flowery grasslands. Northern Brown Argus primarily has an eastern distribution in Scotland with small, scattered colonies from the Borders north to Easter Ross, the exception being the predominantly coastal colonies in the south-west. It is confined to patches of species-rich grassland on limestone where its sole larval foodplant Common Rockrose grows. It likes south facing hollows.

Northern Brown Argus is a small chocolate brown butterfly, with no traces of blue. In Scotland, most individuals are of the endemic race *artaxerxes* and have a characteristic clear white spot in the middle of the forewing thus, given a good view of its upperside, it is readily identifiable. However, due to its small size, swift, low and often darting movement, it can be difficult to detect and identify when flying. Its underwing pattern of white, orange and black dots and spots can closely resemble those of female Common Blues, whilst the very similar Brown Argus does not occur in Scotland. The sexes are similar in appearance.

The species is single brooded with adults being recorded from early June through until the end of August, with numbers peaking from late June to early August. However, the flight period can vary considerably between years and between regions. The eggs are laid singly on the upper side of Common Rock-rose leaves, where they are highly visible and easily counted. Females select plants that have fleshy leaves, rich in nitrogen, and typically growing in sheltered situations. They lay most frequently in 6-10 cm swards. The young larvae feed on the underside of the leaves, leaving the upper surface intact. They hibernate while quite small at the base of the foodplant or on the ground. The larvae start basking in early spring before recommencing feeding and pupate in late May.