

QUICK GUIDE TO...

# Photographing butterflies

With around 60 species native to the UK, there is plenty of choice when it comes to photographing butterflies. Andrew McCarthy shares his top tips for catching these winged wonders on camera



Pearl-bordered fritillary on bilberry.  
Canon EOS 5D MkIII with Sigma  
150mm macro lens, ISO 1600,  
1/1000sec at f/5.6, tripod

Butterflies are among our most attractive and ecologically important insects, and even the most common species can make a stunning photographic subject. There are few greater pleasures than searching meadows, heathland and woodland between April and September for these lovely creatures, some of which are in steep decline. However, butterflies can sometimes make a frustrating quarry for the beginner, so you will need to employ some simple techniques to improve both your chance of finding good subjects and the quality of your work.



Above The pearl-bordered fritillary's colouring can make it hard to spot among dead bracken. Canon EOS 5D MkIII with Sigma 150mm macro lens, ISO 1600, 1/500sec at f/11, tripod

## Searching for butterflies

Our most common butterflies in the UK are widespread, so you shouldn't have to travel far to photograph them. Flower-rich 'waste ground' in urban areas can be productive for species such as the common blue and meadow brown, while gardens can support a wide variety of species, especially if plants have been chosen with pollinators in mind.

To reliably find scarcer butterflies you may need to visit specially managed sites, such



Above The meadow brown, one of the UK's most widespread butterflies. Olympus OM-D EM-1 MkII with 40-150mm lens and 1.4x extender at 110mm, ISO 800, 1/500sec at f/5.6, handheld

as local Wildlife Trust reserves. Research your target species and its habitats online to find locations, and check when your quarry will be on the wing. Stay local at first to make the most of optimal weather conditions; the Butterfly Conservation has groups that run field trips to excellent local sites.

Understanding the ecology and behaviour of each species is vital. Basic questions include what type of habitat your target species favours, what its larval and adult food plants are, how long it is on the wing for, where individuals perch and roost overnight, and how easy they are to approach. Books such as *The Butterflies of Britain and Ireland* and *The Millennium Atlas of Butterflies in Britain and Ireland* are invaluable in this regard.

Photography is easier earlier in the season, when temperatures are lower, as butterflies perch more often and settle for longer in cooler conditions. Spring species include the stunning orange tip, which can be found in marshy pastures from mid-April onwards, alongside its larval food plant ladies-smock;

green hairstreak, a moorland butterfly that is on the wing from early May; and the lovely brimstone, which can be seen from the first warm days of spring along woodland rides and hedges containing buckthorn and alder buckthorn.

Get out early to find roosting butterflies, scanning vegetation from different angles to spot the tell-tale triangles of resting individuals. Better still, watch butterflies settle the night before so you can more easily locate them the following morning.

## In the field

You don't need much specialist equipment to start with. A DSLR or mirrorless camera is ideal, paired with a long focal length macro lens (around 150mm) or a close-focus telephoto zoom (such as 100-400mm) so you can stay back from your subject and minimise any disturbance.

Bright, overcast days with minimal wind are best. The diffused lighting will help reveal detail, while the bright conditions can give a reasonable shutter speed and depth of field; a good starting point for your exposures is 1/250sec at f/8.

Full sun will cast harsh shadows and in high temperatures butterflies are also difficult to approach. Stalking demands good technique; move slowly, keep low and try to position yourself so you don't form a silhouette.

If you use flash, keep it subtle. Use a low power setting and set the flash manually; don't use TTL, as a pre-flash will spook wary insects.

Dull weather can mean using a slower shutter speed, which can make it difficult to stop wind-induced movement, or using a wider aperture, which can leave you with a shallow depth of field. In either case, you may find it preferable to increase the ISO instead.

Aim to have everything in focus from wing tip to wing tip, and antennae to abdomen; a butterfly in crisp focus against a soft background will have high impact. Use manual focus and a tripod so you can make precise adjustments, and use depth of field preview or live view to assist with focusing.

If there is a breeze, use clamps on a small second tripod or ground spike to stabilise plant stems; don't attach clamps to your camera tripod, as vibrations will transmit to the subject.

Mating butterflies can damage themselves if they try to separate quickly, so move slowly, use a long lens and watch for signs of stress, such as mating organs being revealed. Move



away if you see this, as the welfare of the subject is more important than the shot.

Try to time your visits to coincide with the early part of their flight season, when butterflies are freshly emerged: no one wants to see a photograph of a tatty specimen!

Above A mating pair of the very rare heath fritillary. Olympus OM-D EM-1 MkII with 40-150mm lens and 1.4x extender at 170mm, ISO 1250, 1/250sec at f/13, tripod

Below A common blue perching on a common-spotted orchid. Olympus OM-D EM-1 MkII with 40-150mm lens and 1.4x extender at 130mm, ISO 800, 1/500sec at f/5.6, handheld

