

# Dingy Skipper

*Erynnis tages*



## Description

The Dingy Skipper is an inconspicuous, small brown and grey Butterfly. It is extremely well camouflaged and may be confused with the Grizzled Skipper, the Mother Shipton Moth and Burnet Companion Moth, which sometimes occur on the same sites at the same time. In sunshine, the Dingy Skipper often basks on bare ground with wings spread wide. In dull weather and at night it perches on the top of dead flowerheads in a moth-like fashion, with wings curved in a position not seen in any other British butterfly.

Colonies occur in a range of open sunny habitats, including woodland rides and clearings, heathland, disused quarries, chalk downland, and coastal habitats such as dunes and undercliffs. Waste ground is an important habitat over much of the English Midlands. It includes disused mineral workings, spoil heaps, mines, railway lines, storage depots and even rubbish tips. Larval foodplants are Bird's-foot Trefoil, and on heavier ground, Greater Bird's-foot Trefoil. Horseshoe Vetch is also used on calcareous soils. Suitable conditions occur where foodplants grow in a sparse sward, often with patches of bare ground in a sunny, sheltered situation. Taller vegetation is required for shelter and roosting.

There is one generation a year, with adults usually flying from early May until the end of June. In an unusually warm spring they can begin to emerge as early as the second week in April. In hot summers there may be a partial second brood in August at some sites.

## National Status

The Dingy Skipper is locally distributed throughout Britain and Ireland, but has declined seriously in recent years. This is the most widespread Skipper in Britain and Ireland, although it is more localised and patchily distributed than the Large and Small Skippers. In Scotland there are a few colonies in the north-east, mainly occurring on coastal dunes, widely separated from colonies in the south-west. It is the only Skipper found in Ireland. In Wales it is most often found in coastal habitats and rarely occurs above 100m. The central and southern counties of England, extending northwards to Derbyshire, form the stronghold of the species, with especially large colonies occurring on extensive areas of chalk downland and undercliff. It is absent from most offshore islands, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

Because many colonies are small, they may be overlooked, especially as they are so inconspicuous. There is no doubt, however, that it has declined considerably in recent years. The survey for *The Millennium Atlas of Butterflies in Britain and Ireland* revealed that it has probably disappeared from almost 40% of the 10km squares in which it was recorded in 1970–82. The number of colonies has probably also decreased in many 10km squares where the butterfly is still present. Data from Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (BMS) sites shows a long-term decline in numbers, greater than for most other species. Populations are lower after a poor summer and rise after a warm one, though prolonged drought can reduce population size the following season. Dingy Skipper is the subject of a national Species Action Plan by Butterfly Conservation.

## Local Status

The current status in Barnsley is unclear. Scattered colonies are known from Penistone eastwards. However, some sites where Dingy Skippers were present in the 1970s will have been lost due to lack of management. Indications are that the species is very local and largely, perhaps almost exclusively, dependent upon land which is in the industrial and post-industrial category.

## Legal Status

There is currently no legal protection for this species except in Northern Ireland.

## Links with other Action Plans

- HAP2 Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland
- HAPI0 Lowland Heathland
- HAPI7 Open Mosaic Habitats on Previously Developed Land

### **Current Factors Causing Loss or Decline**

- Changes in forestry practice, especially the cessation of coppicing, have led to shadier woods without suitable open areas.
- Lack of continuity of open spaces in woodlands and inappropriate ride management.
- Agricultural intensification, eg. ploughing and the replacement of native grassland vegetation with perennial rye-grass or arable crops.
- Over- or under-grazing of grassland/scrub habitats.
- Infilling of old quarries, development of post-industrial derelict and degraded land.
- Lack of management on disused, artificial (industrial) habitats and the consequent loss of early successional vegetation.
- Fragmentation and isolation of existing colonies and the intensive use of the surrounding agricultural land.
- Tree planting on existing or potential habitats.

### **Current Local Action**

- There is no current local action specifically for Dingy Skipper. However, the species should benefit from appropriate management, eg. on rehabilitated post-industrial land and in woodlands. The Coalfield Heathland Project and Higher Level Stewardship Schemes should also be beneficial.

### **Proposed Local Action**

- Undertake a survey of known and potential breeding sites in Barnsley.
- Identify the key locations and populations for this species in the borough and work with Butterfly Conservation to develop a conservation strategy.
- Establish a suitable regime of management at priority sites.
- Monitor sites where suitable management has been introduced.

### **BMBC Land Ownership and Management Actions**

- Routine management of Trans-Pennine Trail (TPT) to be sympathetic to Dingy Skipper needs.
- Barnsley MBC to work with Barnsley Biodiversity Trust and BTCV on occasional basis to enhance Dingy Skipper habitat.