

## BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY FOR APRIL 2007

The sulphur-yellow brimstone was my first butterfly of the year, closely followed by peacock, red admiral, and the odd small tortoiseshell. They always look so fragile as their apparently weak, aimless flight carries them from place to place. But don't be fooled; they are tough as old boots.

For starters these early spring butterflies will have hibernated through the autumn and winter. As long as they can find a site which is dry and frost-free they survive well. The brimstone chooses a site amongst dense ivy, against a wall or a tree. Look at a picture of the underside of its wings and you will see that they are veined to imitate the prominent veins on the ivy leaf. There are even a couple of small reddish marks that look as if a caterpillar has nibbled a bit out of the leaf. Once safely hidden in the mass of vegetation, not only are they protected from the cold, but they are also next to impossible for a predator to find.

The other three butterflies choose to hibernate in crevices, caves, or hollow tree trunks. Quite often they turn up in our houses or sheds, where they are safe so long as they remain cool. This is why, when we turn our central heating on for winter, they wake up and think it's spring. For the butterfly it means certain death. Stay indoors and they starve, go outside and they freeze.

And that fluttering flight is not at all what it seems to be. As we come to understand more about the mechanisms and principles involved, it is powerful and purposeful. The muscles of the thorax, where the wings and legs are attached, power both the up and down strokes of the wings, and their sight is good enough to decide exactly where they are going. Once again the brimstone provides a good example of all this in action. Watch the males, and you will soon see just how strong and direct the flight is, as they patrol a regular beat, back and forth, in their search for a mate.

The red admiral was until recently unable to survive the cold of our English winters, So every year it arrived in variable numbers from southern continental Europe. Some years it was much commoner than others. Its caterpillar feeds on stinging nettle, and over a hot summer its numbers would build up to a peak in the autumn. There is some evidence that small numbers of the final generation would attempt a return migration in the autumn, but those that tried to hibernate invariably perished.

Now with climate change upon us, this handsome butterfly is increasingly able to over-winter, at least in the south, and those that appeared in my garden before the end of March will certainly have hibernated nearby.

Which brings me to my save the environment tip of the month. If you do not already grow any vegetables because you 'have no space', why not plant a tomato or even a few potatoes, on a balcony or a patio, even on a flat roof or porch. They will grow happily in a large hanging basket, a growbag, a large flowerpot or tub, even a strong carrier bag filled with compost (peat free!), can be pressed into service rather than sent to landfill.

And while you are about it, try a few of your favourite herbs in a container on your kitchen windowsill.

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