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Purple Emperor by Michael Blencowe for Sussex Wildlife Trust

In any book on British butterflies, you’ll find our 58 species segregated into social ranks: the common browns, the blue-collar blues, the working-class whites. But turn the page, past the lepidopteral lower-classes, and you’ll find a butterfly so unique, so magnificently majestic, so breathtakingly beautiful that for centuries British naturalists have bowed before it. Draped in resplendent robes of iridescent amethyst, obsidian, and ermine the Purple Emperor has to be one of the most impressive animals on our island. In July the purple reign begins.

Aside from an alluring appearance, Emperors also possess that combination of rarity and elusiveness which has elevated them into an almost mythological figure: a butterfly bigfoot. How a large, shiny, purple butterfly manages to exist undetected in our countryside is down to an arboreal existence. Purple Emperors spend almost all their time on lofty thrones high above our woodlands. If we’re lucky we may glimpse the glide of a wide-winged silhouette as we stare sore-necked and squinting at the Sycamore skyline. Up there, in their canopy kingdom, Emperors compete in a power struggle for territory and males gather for summer tree-top tournaments. Their wings flash as they clash in acrobatic aerial jousting, and they spar and spiral high into the Sussex skies. The Emperor’s ferocity and fearlessness in the defence of his realm are famous. Butterflies, bumblebees and other insects get a battering if they trespass and, incredibly, bemused birds (including Sparrowhawks, woodpeckers, gulls and herons) also receive a warning wing-slap.

Emperors don’t lower themselves to feast on flowers like other butterfly riffraff. The Emperor sups sugars by quaffing only the finest honeydew distilled by aphids in the treetops. Yet, in complete contrast to its aristocratic high life, the Emperor has some dirty habits which drag him down to the filthy forest floor. To get his majesty’s mojo working he requires a mid-morning meal of minerals, which he obtains by probing his proboscis into the most disgusting muck he can find. Dog poo, used nappies, dead animals, sweaty feet – nothing is too repugnant. It’s like finding the King rummaging through the bins at the back of Tesco.

The female Empress does not have the shining sheen or horrid habits of the Emperor but she too descends to lower levels searching shady Sallows for a place to lay her eggs. Camouflaged caterpillars munch from August to June before giving rise to another distinguished (but disgusting) dynasty.

Recently, the Emperor has extended his empire eastwards. Once a butterfly of north-west Sussex it can now be found all across the north of the county and has been reported around Uckfield – there have even been rumoured sightings in the very heart of Brighton – so keep your eyes to the skies.

Ends

*Sussex Wildlife Trust is a conservation charity for everyone who cares about nature in Sussex. Founded in 1961, we have worked with local people for over half a century to make Sussex richer in wildlife. We rely on the support of our members. Please consider joining us. Your membership will help us challenge decisions that threaten wildlife, care for more than 30 nature reserves, and inspire the next generation about the wonders of the natural world. It’s easy to join online at sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/join*