WTPL/Richard Becker

Big Spring Watch: Orange tip butterfly

The characteristic orange tip of the forewings of the male makes this butterfly easy to identify; the female is a little harder to spot.

Aside from the male's orange tip, both the male and female look the same - white butterflies with a single black spot on the forewing.

The upper wings are white and the hind wings, which show when it is resting, are mottled green, helping to camouflage the butterfly.

The orange tip is a common butterfly; it is medium sized with a wing span range of 45-50mm.

Where to record

Orange tips can be seen throughout the British Isles, except the far north of Scotland.

The best places to see them are around country lanes, river banks, woodland margins and damp flowery meadows, though they may also visit gardens.


WTPL/Katherine Jaiteh

Male orange tip

What to record

Record the first time you see an active orange tip butterfly. The mottled green hind wing may make it quite tricky to spot!

When to record

Orange tips are one of the first butterflies to emerge from a chrysalis in spring. Butterflies seen earlier, such as the brimstone, have overwintered as adults.

The date orange tips emerge can vary greatly depending on what spring temperatures are like and where you live. They may start to emerge as early as the beginning of April, or as late as the end of May.

WTPL/Margaret Barton

Not to be confused with...

The male orange tip is unmistakeable, thanks to the flashes of orange as it flutters by.

The female could be mistaken for other white butterflies, such as the **green-veined white** or the **small white**.

Check that your butterfly has the characteristic mottled green and white pattern on the hind under wing.

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Why orange tip?

Volunteers have been recording this popular and easily identified species since at least the Victorian period, and as part of Nature's Calendar since 2000. In 2015, it will be interesting to see how fast spring moves regarding orange tip emergence and how this compares with previous years.

Our climate is changing; this will produce some 'winners', who are well adapted to change, and some 'losers', who cannot adapt quickly enough. In general, insects are responding to climate change faster than birds, trees or shrubs, since they only need a few warm days in order to get active.

Long-term monitoring of species like the orange tip will help scientists gain a greater understanding of this issue, and provide policymakers with hard evidence.

Fabulous facts

Orange tip caterpillars mainly feed on the developing seed pods of cuckooflower and garlic mustard, against which they are well camouflaged from predators.

Eggs are laid singly and well-spaced on the food plants. On hatching, caterpillars eat their shell. They are laid singly because the caterpillars are cannibalistic, so will also eat any other orange tip eggs they find.

The male is very active as it looks for a mate; the orange tips serve to warn predators that the butterfly does not taste very nice.

The female is less conspicuous and stays close to larval food plants, so it does not have the warning colours.

The orange tip overwinters as a chrysalis, emerging as an adult in the spring.

The female lays a single brood of eggs each year, but if spring starts early enough, there may be a small second brood.

How fast does spring move?

Nature's Calendar has teamed up with BBC Springwatch to seek your help in answering the question **'how fast does spring move?'**

Recording tips

Once you have seen a sign of spring, please record it! Remember that you need to register on the Nature's Calendar website first.

Registration **naturescalendar.org.uk/bswregister**
Recording **naturescalendar.org.uk/survey/login**

Please choose somewhere you visit regularly (at least weekly) to make your record, to help ensure that you spot when something happens for the **first** time.

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