

Wood Whites in West Sussex, 2026

Surprising discoveries... and an emerging story

A summary of findings from the 2026 Wood White survey in West Sussex

Following the discovery (or rediscovery) of three new Wood White colonies in West Sussex in 2025, a major survey of this nationally rare butterfly was undertaken in the county by members of Sussex Butterfly Conservation in 2026.

Survey organisation

Volunteers

Pleasingly, twenty-six volunteers signed up through *Assemble* (Butterfly Conservation's volunteer management system) to be Threatened Species - Wood White Surveyors. In addition, several of these surveyors were supported by one, or sometimes several, colleagues on the day.

Survey sites

During the 2026 season, the five previously known Wood White sites (Songhurst Woods, Hog Wood, Ashpark Wood, Birchfold Copse and Site X) and 103 prospective sites were visited by volunteer surveyors. In addition, eleven prospective sites were assessed (on paper) but were considered unsuitable for Wood White by local experts and were not visited.

Public awareness

David Bridges coordinated the promotion of the project through talks, walks, local magazine articles and the distribution of postcard handouts. These activities have been productive in terms of both new records and in establishing several useful contacts, especially in the Loxwood, Ifold and Plaistow Wood White heartlands.

Survey results - Established colonies

Ashpark Wood SU994319

In a personal communication from the local BC transect walker, sightings of six Wood White were reported in early May. It will be instructive to discover second brood numbers when the full transect data for 2026 is available. However, during a visit to this wood on 3 August by another surveyor no Wood Whites were sighted although one of the butterfly's larval foodplant, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, was reported to still be green and flowering despite the drought.

Birchfold Copse SU985307

Alan Birch found six Wood White widely spread on 9 May and this is consistent with 2025 numbers. On a second visit, on 20 July, twelve Wood White were seen, mostly in the NE and SE corners, including four together in one sunny spot. Two females were seen egg-laying - one reluctantly on Meadow Vetchling, the other successfully on Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil. Considering the drought conditions, larval foodplants and nectar sources were still easy to find. It was noticeable that most Meadow Vetchling was more wilted than the Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil.

The impression was of a more abundant second brood compared to last year and compared to other local sites this year – though it is hard to draw definitive conclusions from a single visit by a single observer.

The NE and SE corners still look very suitable for Wood White. The NW corner, historically a good area according to past transect data, looks increasingly unsuitable because of greater shading as the conifers there have become tall. An area in the SW looks to have potential with sunny rides through Birch plantations, but these were mown almost bald up to the wood edges and Alan has not seen Wood White there.

Hog Wood TQ015324

This site was not visited for first brood. For second brood: none were seen by Alan on 4 July, although this visit was perhaps a bit early. The 2025 maximum count was six on 16 July. Very good numbers of Silver-washed Fritillary were noted, as in 2025.

Alan revisited on 31 July but again no Wood Whites were recorded on a very hot day. The effect of the drought was clear, although some good patches of nectar plants remained in shadier areas. Very few larval food plants were evident.

Most of the plantations in the Sussex part of Hog Wood are dark and unmanaged. The aerial map view of the wood shows that the area suitable for Wood White, i.e. around where they were reported from last year, is quite small - perhaps insufficient to support a permanent colony. Of course, it is possible that the extreme weather conditions during the second brood suppressed numbers and that Wood White will be found in Hog Wood again next Spring.

Songhurst Wood TQ048324

There were several reports of Wood White from various recorders in May, with a maximum count of six. The Branch Field Trip on 10 May was well attended but was literally a wash out on a very wet day. Even with a large group of people looking, it proved difficult to discover more than a few isolated larval food plants.

David and Alan met the Tilhill Forestry manager for this area on 10 July for a walk round and discussion of management possibilities. During an extensive walk along the main ride and several side rides, no Wood Whites were seen. Several areas looked to be generally suitable for Wood White and there were still many nectar sources in flower. Again, however, not much in the way of larval food plants could be seen.

During our discussions the forestry manager seemed pleased to receive praise for how Songhurst was being managed. He also seemed open to seed being sown along the ride verges to increase the abundance of larval food plants.

Further visits were made on 20 July and 1 August, but no Wood Whites were seen during either visit.

Another surveyor reported just one second brood Wood White this year - halfway up the main track - despite repeated visits. However, understandably, her visits were generally made early in the morning owing to the extreme heat on many days this summer.

Songhurst has been recorded as a Wood White site since 2010, though counts have been quite low and variable. As this is a well-managed and easily accessible site, David and

Alan believe it needs to be better understood to determine the best ways to help Wood White thrive there. To this end, Alan and Julia Lowson Smith have agreed a route for a UKBMS transect, which will start next season. Alan is happy to take this on, though if an additional recorder could be recruited to share duties, so much the better. Julia will advertise for such nearer the start of next season.

Site X

Wood White first emerged here on 24 April with a maximum count of twenty-two in May. One surveyor was granted special permission to survey away from the PROW but found there were few, if any, larval foodplants and she recorded no sightings of Wood White away from the known colony. Some quite large areas of conifer were cleared last year due to the presence of Eight-toothed Spruce Bark Beetle, and it will be interesting to see whether any larval foodplants emerge now light has been let in and whether, as a consequence, the Wood White can expand into these newly cleared areas.

Alan and others visited several times during the second generation, but Wood White were seen only in ones and twos.

Survey results - New colonies

Three new Wood White colonies were discovered in 2026, and two further, previously suspected colonies were confirmed as established.

Wephurst Wood TQ026295

The presence of Wood Whites at Wephurst Wood, south of Ifold, was reported by a surveyor on 18 May. Alan visited on 21 May and found nine Wood White at regular intervals along the main public footpaths in the south of the wood. On visits by surveyors in 2025 there were no reported sightings of Wood White. The rides at Wephurst are quite narrow but reasonably sunny as the canopy is not over-dominated by tall oaks and other trees.

When David and Alan visited again later in the season, they noted that there was a lot of abandoned hazel coppice along the sides of the ride, suggesting that the introduction of even modest amounts of re-coppicing would really improve the ride structure. Various Wood White foodplants were readily found.

A local resident who had attended David and Alan's talk at Loxwood in May, reported that the second brood appeared towards the end of June.

Alan visited again in July, during hot weather, but saw just two Wood White. Reasonable amounts of Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil were found on the shady side of the then unmown main ride.

Our local contact kindly contacted the owner of Wephurst Wood, whom she knows. Encouragingly, he replied that he would be interested in getting help to manage Wephurst for Wood White, whose presence he was made aware of some years previously. Alan has contacted the owner with a view to arranging a meeting and discussions, although no date for this has yet been confirmed. Alan could find no historical records of Wood White from Wephurst in the usual databases.

Roundwick Copse SU996293

A member of BC Surrey Branch made a Wood White sighting in this wood (south of Plaistow) on 30 May, having been alerted to the presence of several individuals there a few days earlier by the owner of a neighbouring wood (iRecord). An additional sighting of a single individual was made on 20 June.

Alan visited on 11 July. The wood and rides were noticeably more open than when he visited in Spring 2025, apparently because of dead Ash being cleared. Eleven Wood White were recorded, concentrated in a small new clearing next to a large, well-established and flower-filled glade in the centre of the wood. Several Wood Whites were seen nectaring on Betony in the large glade just by looking from the public footpath. No doubt more would have been found deeper into the glade but there is no footpath access.

Further reports of widely spread Wood White at Roundwick have appeared on iRecord, including eight seen in the SW corner of the wood on 24 July.

So, in all, it appears that a significant new colony of Wood White has come to light. Interestingly, the second brood was strong here in 2026, in contrast to most other Sussex sites.

Alan contacted the Sussex Botanical Recording Society regarding the large, flower-filled glade mentioned above and was put in touch with a local contact, who provided an impressive species list from previous surveys and commented that it was an extremely rich site.

Several sources have confirmed that ownership of Roundwick is complicated by it having been divided into lots when last sold. Alan has had a productive phone conversation with the owner of the parcel of woodland that includes the large clearing. The owner seems enthusiastic about nature conservation in the wood and suggested that he, Alan and David, meet up there for a walk and talk in October.

There seems to be no previous record of Wood White at Roundwick, which is surprising given its proximity to Birchfold Copse. The Sussex Biodiversity Records Centre has provided a list of all species recorded in the woods. There are not many recent butterfly records, though Pearl-bordered Fritillary flew there in 1977, apparently.

David has reviewed the substantial moth list provided for this site but most of the records are rather dated. However, these records included rarities such as Argent & Sable and Black-veined moth. These and many other interesting moths are now presumed to have disappeared from the area, although with no obvious evidence of recent systematic surveying, there may still be exciting species to be found here! The one recent record - from 2025 - of a Lead-coloured Pug which is presumed to be extinct in West Sussex is interesting and points to the need for some comprehensive moth surveying. The larval foodplant of this pug is Cow wheat which is still quite common in the woods at Roundwick.

Site Y

This wood is near the established Songhurst Wood colony and is also managed by Tilhill Forestry. There is no PROW but Alan and David have been given permission to visit by the local forestry manager. Alan visited on 11 May and found the main ride to be wide and sunny with abundant nectar sources. There are substantial ditches running the length of the ride. A single Wood White was encountered near the top end of the ride.

David and Alan subsequently revisited on 10 July with the Forestry manager. Three Wood White were quickly sighted after entering at the southern end of the excellent main ride. The ride margins and ditches were full of Common Bird's-foot-Trefoil, Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil, Meadow Vetchling and Tufted Vetch as well as many nectar sources including Betony. Spruce plantations on either side of the ride were harvested about ten years ago and this area is now regenerating with Birch and Gorse.

The Forestry Manager was receptive to the idea of cutting the ride on rotation and not being too severe in the ditches. Additionally, he suggested that a newly cut area at the top of the ride could be maintained as an open glade to increase the area of woodland with light shade.

Conditions on the main ride are very good for Wood White and many other butterfly species (not to mention Nightingales) and should repay more intensive surveying in 2027.

Verdley Wood SU903259

Five individuals were seen together on the main ride in July 2025, but it was unclear if these indicated that a small colony was established in the wood. Subsequently, Neil Hulme has confirmed that he had seen a single female Wood White on a side ride in May 2025.

Although regularly visited in early May this year, by folk coming to see the Pearl-bordered Fritillary, only a single first brood Wood White was noted, on 25 May, on the usual main ride.

Alan revisited on 25 July - two Wood White were seen, again on the main ride. So, it does appear that there is a small colony established at Verdley.

Recent data from the transect there also shows a few more second brood sightings, including four on 14 July.

It was slightly surprising how good the conditions were, given the hot, dry weather - there was plentiful Common Bird's-foot-Trefoil and Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil, as well as a few bits of Tufted Vetch and Meadow Vetchling. There was also an abundance of nectar sources - Creeping and Spear Thistles, Lesser Knapweed, Common Fleabane, Betony, Tansy, Ragwort etc. It seemed much less parched than many places at that time, with plenty of other butterflies on the wing too. There's a nice ditch that runs alongside the main ride and there is a side ride which looks very suitable for Wood White too.

This whole area is managed specifically for the Pearl-bordered Fritillary, and this seems to be producing excellent conditions for Wood White too. According to iRecord data, these two species fly together at only one other site in the UK.

Verdley is some way away from the other established colonies, but it is a known historic Wood White site.

The site is part of the Cowdray Estate. Neil Hulme has been in touch with the local South Downs National Park Ranger with ideas on how to improve ride management specifically for Wood White.

Ifold Garden(s)

The owner of a property adjoining the Wey and Arun canal at Ifold photographed one Wood White from her garden in May. She later reported the presence of second brood

individuals, including two together. She also confirmed that she finds Wood White in her garden each year. It is likely that it was this person who uploaded Wood White records anonymously to iRecord in 2022 and 2023 from the same location. The owner has asked for no publicity as this is a private site.

Although not far from Hog Wood, it is likely that Wood White breeds in her garden and/or on the banks of the canal nearby. Alan knows that stretch of canal and has found abundant nectar sources and larval foodplants on the towpath there.

David witnessed a Wood White laying eggs in a different Ifold garden in 2025. The whole village is a secluded private estate with many lovely gardens. As David says, the whole village could probably be said to be the site of a potential Wood White colony.

New one-off sightings

Ebernoe Common SU983272

Alan visited on 28 May, primarily to look at the Butcherlands sections of this Sussex Wildlife Trust reserve from where the most recent Wood White records have come. The habitat here did look suitable, particularly in the western part. However, it was in the main reserve where he encountered a single Wood White flying along a broad ride in old woodland.

By remarkable coincidence, when Alan revisited Butcherlands and the main reserve on 3 August he again saw a single wandering Wood White at almost the exact same spot as in May. An extensive search in the areas around that spot did not reveal an obvious Wood White breeding area.

Extensive surveys by a team of volunteers in the greater Ebernoe area (but not Butcherlands or the area where Alan encountered Wood White) on 26 July, found little of promise, although the surveyors commented that the Sussex Wildlife Trust's newly acquired Willand Wood could develop suitably if managed well.

It seems likely that there is an established colony somewhere in the greater Ebernoe complex, though it is not clear where the currently favoured egg-laying sites might be. The part of the Butcherlands reserve around High Buildings Farm had abundant vetches and trefoils in early summer and plenty of nectar sources, particularly fleabane and ragwort, still in flower in August, despite the extremely hot and dry conditions. The increasing woodland edge habitat here also suggests this is perhaps the most likely Wood White breeding site in the Ebernoe complex.

Walthurst Copse TQ030292

When Alan visited Wephurst in May he also investigated a little further east and south, where a single Wood White was found on the corner of Walthurst Copse. Wephurst Furze is a little further south and seems to be very similar to Wephurst Wood in terms of structure, so may well be colonised soon too.

Plaistow Garden TQ005310

A resident of the village reported a singleton Wood White from his garden on 2 June, having been alerted to the Project by one of David's postcards in a local pub. He also said that it wasn't the first time he had had Wood White. As Plaistow is close to Ifold it seems probable that Wood White could be found in many gardens in this village too.

West Crawley Verge

The discovery of a Wood White egg-laying in suburban west Crawley on 10 June is by some distance the furthest east the species has been seen in the county for many years. The finder has asked that the exact location is not revealed. He also expressed his concerns relating to the cutting of roadside verge areas by Crawley Borough Council. Another surveyor visiting the area found several designated 'wildlife verges' nearby with Wood White larval foodplant but which had been closely mown by CBC contractors.

In response, David contacted Christian Threader, CBC Parks Maintenance and Conservation Manager, who has subsequently instructed the grass cutting teams not to cut the area where the Wood White was discovered, other than what are referred to as 'desire lines' (presumably these are narrow strips around the perimeter of the site or informal paths created by foot traffic between different points). Unfortunately, he did not respond when David asked whether similar instructions might be given to the teams cutting other verges and open space in the southwest of Crawley where Wood White might also (possibly) be found, especially those which the CBC have designated as wildlife verges!

Presumably, the origin of the Crawley Wood White was, probably some generations earlier, either one of the colonies near the Surrey/Sussex border, or one of those in the Loxwood / Site X area of Sussex, each being approximately equidistant from the Crawley site. There is some evidence to point to the former, with the corridor being perhaps the area to the north of the A264 near Rusper and Faygate. There are wooded areas here on clay soil where Wood White has been found historically. The alternative route seems less likely as it would involve crossing the St Leonard's Forest area which is primarily on sandy soil.

Whichever route was taken, it seems likely that some at least temporary colonies must have been founded on the way. Accordingly, likely looking sites in the two possible corridor areas were included in this year's survey. In brief, the St Leonard's area was found to be generally unsuitable, apart from some woodlands near Nuthurst. In contrast, some suitable habitat was found in the area between Rusper and the western edge of Crawley. Parts of southwest Crawley, Ifield (including the Millpond and Ifield Park Conservation area) and some fields adjacent to the railway line between Faygate and Crawley were also surveyed. Again, no Wood Whites were seen there but several areas supported good amounts of larval food plants and had potential Wood White habitat.

Conclusion

This year's surveys identified or confirmed five new Sussex Wood White colonies.

Two of these, Wephurst Wood and Roundwick Copse appear to be significant, and not previously described in the historical record. Site Y is smaller and close to the established Loxwood Songhurst colony. Further records from gardens in Ifold, near the Wey and Arun canal, suggest that the whole village might be considered as host to a diffuse colony. These four colonies are all quite close to the long-established ones in the butterfly's northwest Sussex heartland.

Further sightings of both first and second brood individuals at Verdley Wood (north of Midhurst and a few miles southwest of those above) indicate that a small colony is now

established there. This is one of very few sites nationally that are home to both Wood White and Pearl-bordered Fritillary.

One-off sightings from a Plaistow garden, from Ebernoe Common NNR and from Walthurst Copse near Ifold are all from the heartlands area.

In contrast, the sighting of an egg-laying female on a suburban grass verge in west Crawley is the furthest east the butterfly has been seen for many years. Several areas nearby were found to be generally suitable, with good amounts of larval food plants, so it is not impossible that this female has founded a colony in the area, which awaits discovery.

Visits to the longer-established sites showed apparently stable, if not very large, populations at Ashpark Wood and Birchfold Copse. Modest numbers in the first brood at Songhurst Wood were followed by just a single second brood Wood White sighting. Although concerning, this may be a result of the unprecedentedly hot and dry conditions this summer. Site X, which came to light last year, produced strong first brood numbers, with a maximum of twenty-two. The second brood was much weaker, with Wood White being seen only in ones and twos.

Several sites near the known colonies in West Sussex seem to have suitable habitat and good potential to support Wood Whites in the future. These will feature in future survey efforts.

The discovery of several new sites this year must increase confidence in the future of Wood Whites in Sussex, although it is evident that there are no strong colonies in the county, certainly compared to the position in Surrey and the Midlands. To illustrate this, Alan and David have proposed a grading system for colony strength, set out below.

Grade 1	Good numbers of adults seen reliably in both broods over an extended period of years	None present in Sussex
Grade 2	Adults seen reliably in both broods over an extended period of years but numbers sometimes low	Ashpark Wood, Birchfold Copse, Site X, Ifold gardens.
Grade 3	Low to moderate numbers of adults usually seen but a brood (usually second?) may appear to be absent in some years	Songhurst Wood
Grade 4	Singletons or low numbers seen occasionally, though maybe only once every few years	Ebernoe Common, Hog Wood (?)
Grade 5	Singleton or low number 'one-off' sighting with no historical precedent	Expected to arise most years

It is too early to categorise the Wephurst Wood, Roundwick Copse, Site Y and Verdley Wood colonies. Given that Roundwick Copse produced good second brood numbers, especially compared to other sites, this may have the best potential.

Site	Wood White Abundance (Maximum Counts)		
	2024	2025	2026
Ashpark Wood	5	8	6
Birchfold Copse	Not visited	6	12
Hog Wood	Not visited	6	0
Songhurst Wood	1	5	6
Site X	Not visited	10	22
Wephurst Wood	Not visited	0	9
Roundwick Copse	Not visited	0	11
Verdley Wood	Not visited	5	4
Woolbeding transect	Not visited	1	0
Billingshurst garden	0	1	0
E Billingshurst meadow	Not visited	1	0
Ifold garden A	Not visited	1	No sightings reported by owner
Wisborough Green garden	Not visited	1	0
Site Y	Not visited	Not visited	3
Ifold garden B	Not visited	Not visited	2
Plaistow garden	Not visited	Not visited	1
Ebernoe Common	Not visited	0	1
W Crawley Verge	Not visited	Not visited	1
Walthurst Copse	Not visited	Not visited	1
Total colonies recorded	2	6	9
Total sites with records	2	11	13
Maximum count sum	6	42	79

This report was written by Alan Birch and David Bridges
13 October 2026

Acknowledgements

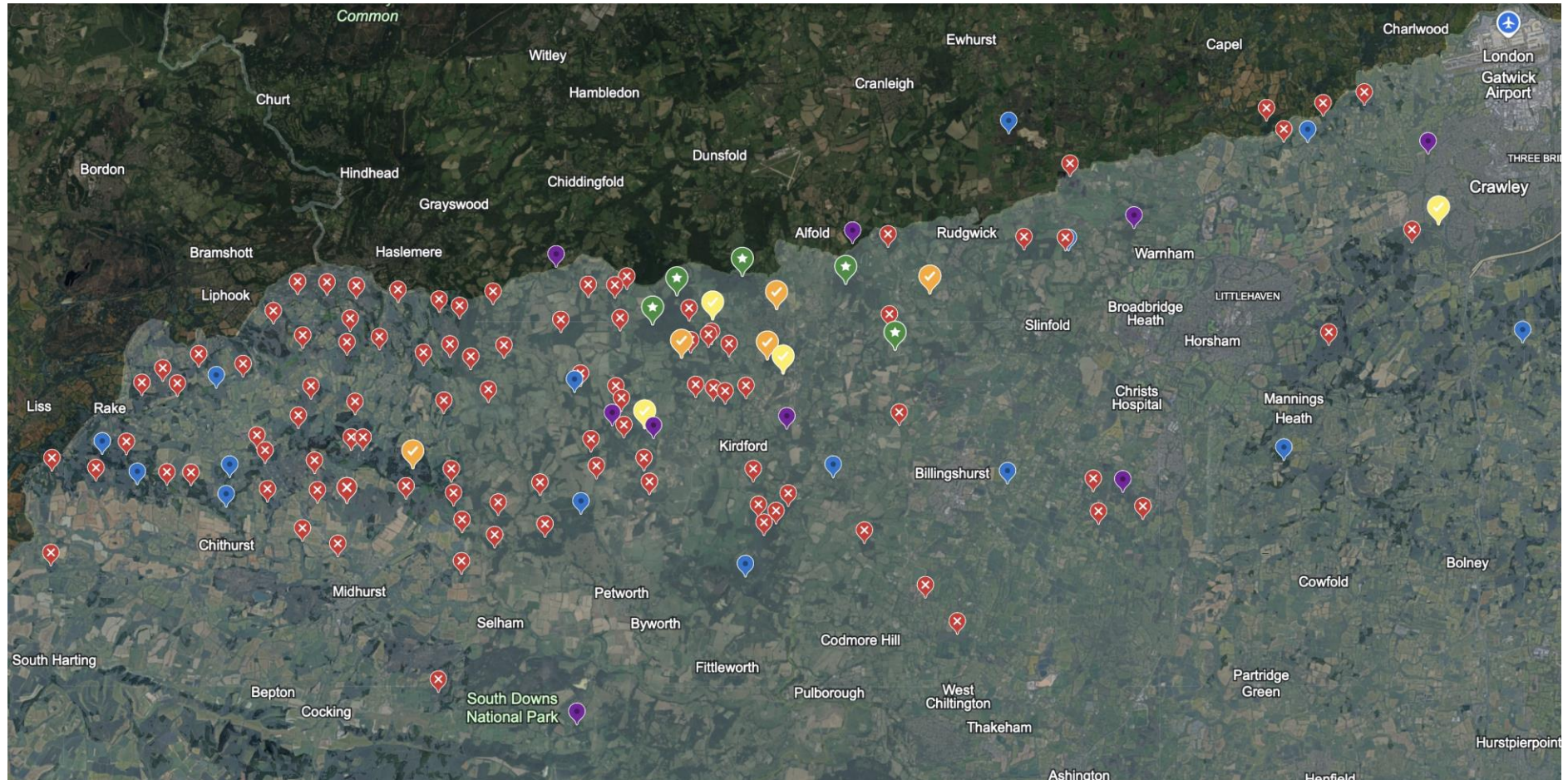
It was pleasing to receive many detailed reports back from the surveyors who had diligently visited their assigned woodland sites. Disappointingly, though not unexpectedly, many sites were found to be unmanaged and much too overgrown and shady for Wood Whites, their larval foodplants and indeed butterflies in general. Despite these difficulties, several volunteers came back requesting more places to visit.

Many of the woods proved to be remote, difficult to get round and to park nearby. So, many thanks to the following who provide the accounts on which this report is based.

Alan Birch
Millie Brand
David Bridges
Ben Carter
Helen and Chris Corrigan
Jonathan Crawford, supported by Dave Alston, Debbie Alston, Richard Bickers, Paddy Boyle, Kate Chesterton, Paul Day, Garry Faulkner, Graham Hubbard, Martin Kalaher and Maya Rodriguez
Bill Downey
Jean Elcombe
Arthur Greenwood
Francis Kelly
Kate Lewis
Julia Lowson Smith
Rupert Marshall
Vince Massimo
Claire Mayhew
Patrick Moore
Marcus Oldfield
Stephen Purvis
Jason Read
Nigel Symington
Emma Tozer

Map of Survey Sites

Key: Green star - established colony; Orange tick - new colony; Yellow tick - 2026 one-off sightings; Purple dot - probably worth re-



visiting; Blue dot - possibly worth re-visiting; Red cross - unsuitable.