

BLUE BUTTERFLY IS COMING BACK

By

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Down a track, through beech woods so thick you must turn on your car headlights, lies a secret meadow, full of flowers. Mauve scabious and darker purple knapweed wave their heads in the aftermath of a summer thunderstorm.

“If anyone asks, we’re looking at ants and flowers”, instructs David Simcox, abruptly swinging his walking boot into the flowery turf. This furtive act of apparent vandalism is one small step in what may be the most complex and successful conservation project in the country : the reintroduction of the once-extinct large blue butterfly.

This insect, which baffled conservationists for more than a century because of its strange and wonderful life cycle, became extinct in Britain in 1979.

In the following decade, two scientists brought it back to life : Jeremy Thomas, professor of ecology at Oxford University, worked out exactly what is needed to survive : and Simcox, a conservation consultant for the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, drove his VW Campervan to an island in Sweden, collected some eggs from the large blues that fly there, and released caterpillars in Devon and Somerset, south-west England.

The large blue, which is globally endangered, now flies at sites in Somerset in greater numbers than anywhere else in the world. After pioneering that first ever successful reintroduction of a butterfly driven to extinction in Britain, Thomas and Simcox, with assistance from everyone from the National Trust and Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust to Holland and Barrett, are this summer attempting an ambitious second phase.

They want to help the large blue move north, to the Cotswolds, where it hasn’t flown for 50 years. So far, so straightforward, but establishing a new colony of these unique butterflies is an almost unimaginably delicate and labour-intensive operation.

Simcox’s base camp is a stone cottage with rough, whitewashed walls close to one of two secret sites where the butterflies are being reintroduced. Every day, he rises at 6am to check on the caterpillars. This time he did not have a drive to Sweden, but obtained eggs from a thriving colony on Green Down nature reserve, Somerset, where a record 135,000 eggs were laid this year.

Virtually invisible to the naked eye, and smaller than a pinhead, these eggs are attached to thyme. Over several weeks in June and July, Simcox and Thomas, helped by a sharp-eyed conservationist, Sarah Meredith (“not many people can see them. She can”, says Simcox), collected flower heads with 400 eggs on them.

Simcox then stuck the egg-laden thyme in green foam blocks used by flower arrangers and watered it every day. At first, the caterpillars are virtually invisible and too small to be moved. Simcox only knew they were there by the frass – black pellets of caterpillar poo – that falls from the thyme.

(Courtesy : The Guardian, London)