

04 May 2010

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Citation: Slaughter, L. (2010). *Revisiting a Colony of the Chequered Skipper Butterfly (in the Fort William Region Of The Western Highlands Of Scotland during the Summer Of 2008)* [Online]. Available from <http://www.dispar.org/reference.php?id=77> [Accessed May 4, 2010].

Revisiting a Colony of the Chequered Skipper Butterfly (in the Fort William Region Of The Western Highlands Of Scotland during the Summer Of 2008)

Lee Slaughter

I first made the long drive to Fort William in the Western Highlands of Scotland during the Summer of 1988 in the hope of finding this beautiful, rare and most localised of our Skipper species. I had absolutely no idea of where to look as during the 1980s there were no "site guides" books to show you exactly where to find all of our nation's species (especially the rare ones) down to the nearest 6 figure map reference; so armed with my cherished 2 part photo ID paperback by Jarrold, "British Butterflies" by George E. Hyde published in 1973, I spent 5 days in blistering hot weather sleeping in my car by night avoiding millions of midges and trekking along edges of forests, woods and streams and wading through thigh high tracts of uninhabited land mainly in Glens within 10 miles or so of Fort William. On the 3rd day I chanced to drive along the 5 mile single track road in the virtually uninhabited Glen Loy which follows the winding River Loy about 6 miles North of Fort William, just West of the Caledonian Canal. It was ideal for parking off road to sleep in the car for economy reasons. I saw an unfamiliar species rapidly darting between the grass and Bog Myrtle and it alighted on a frond of Bracken. To my delight I realised it was a Chequered Skipper in a fairly worn state but it sat there basking in the bright sunshine for me to enjoy for 30 seconds or so. I saw 4 more that day which were all worn and concluded that 14th June must be fairly late in their flight season. I found the species at no other location over the next 2 days and headed South in search of the Swallowtail in the Norfolk Broads.

I returned each year for the following 7 years for short breaks during late May or 1st week of June and found this delightful little species in several locations in much fresher condition than in 1988 as 2-3 weeks earlier was during the main emergence for this species. I always visited Glen Loy as my main area as I had discovered it there and found every year there was a good number of adults flying in a fairly restricted area about 4 miles along the little road in amongst sparse, low growing Bog Myrtle about 20 yards from the edge of River Loy. It was usually slightly boggy ground which unless preceded by drought always necessitated wearing of Wellington boots. What a delight it was to watch fresh Chequered Skippers flitting amongst the vegetation and the males furiously chasing off other males who ventured into their territory returning 20 seconds later to exactly the same leaf on the same branch on the same Bog Myrtle bush. Females of this species were not often seen with only 3 or 4 to every 20-30 males! I was later to read in several books that the female of this species, once mated, wander off for up to 1 mile or more in search of egg laying opportunities. The most prolific year here in my experience was a single day's visit on 1st June, 1992 in hot sunshine in which I must have seen over 50 Chequered Skippers at this colony which seemed to centre around an area of 80 yards long by 30 yards wide. This presumably had a perfect microclimate which ideally suited this lovely species. 1995 came a close second with at least 35 different adults seen over a 3 day period.

I only visited Scotland twice more over the following few years to different locations, 1997 and 2000, but not during the quite short flight period of this species.

Life was busy after this with getting married and having two children and although always yearning to return to the Fort William area of Scotland in early June, always made excuses why I could not justify the time or expense to undertake the 1300 mile return trip from my home in Cornwall. However, my wife and I vowed to have a 1 week holiday somewhere in the United Kingdom during the Summer of 2008, so I came up with the suggestion of us taking our two young sons aged 4 and 2 to Fort William for a week, although sleeping/camping in the car was obviously out of the question! A lovely looking cottage was sourced on the internet and booked for the 1st week of June, which had fine views of Ben Nevis mountain and was only 3 miles from Glen Loy where the Chequered Skipper butterfly used to be found!



Photo © Lee Slaughter

We drove up over two days, 30th/31st May 2008, arriving at our rented cottage in blazing sunshine at about 4.30pm on the Saturday afternoon and unpacked our bags. We had a fairly early night but could not keep any light on after 10.00pm as many midges would appear out of thin air and bite within a couple of minutes of turning on any inside light! However, it was daylight by 3.00am due to being much further North latitude than at home in Cornwall and after hearing the early dawn birds singing and returning to sleep I eventually awoke at 7.45am and got up and dressed before anyone else had woken and headed out in the car and drove the few miles to Glen Loy. The sky was

clear blue and it was already quite hot in the bright sun. Arriving at the start of the road to Glen Loy I wondered if there had been any major change in the land management or had much of it been razed to the ground for coniferisation since my last visit 13 years ago? My concerns were unfounded as the first mile looked just as I had remembered it and I parked about 1.5 miles down the road and walked amongst the trees next to the road, to a small clearing near a forestry wire fence which looked suitable for seeing a wandering butterfly. Within 10 minutes a familiar insect was seen "skipping" past me and came to rest on the Purple Moor-Grass "molinia caerulea" with its wings open. The Chequered Skipper was still at Glen Loy! The golden yellow spots on its wings in contrast to the dark brown/almost black base colour of the wings is like no other species found in Britain and it makes a fantastic sight. Alas, as soon as I dared to dig my camera out from my bag it shot off and disappeared. I decided to press on and drive further into the Glen to where the main colony used to be centred more than a decade ago.

Upon approaching the site of the colony as I remember it, I noticed the huge swathe of conifers on the other side of the River Loy had been felled a few years ago and already planted with another crop of trees looking like at least 50,000 more Xmas trees that will once again cover the lower slopes of those nearby hills. This had meant that for some years there had obviously not been as much shelter for this side of the river which the conifers had afforded the site of the colony. Had this had any effect? I parked at my old small pull in/passing place and started walking into familiar territory feeling quite anxious as to what I would see.



Photo © Lee Slaughter

The habitat looked pretty much as it had done 13 years ago although it was quite dry due to this area of Scotland having had drought like conditions for the last 4 weeks with virtually no rain! After 25 minutes I had seen NO Chequered Skippers at all and was slowly walking Eastwards towards the start of the Glen following the River Loy as I knew this species liked the close proximity of moisture or a stream or small river. Eventually after nearly 0.5 miles I spotted a Chequered Skipper and took several photographs of it and then saw two more within a few seconds of each other!



Photo © Lee Slaughter

There was a small ditch which was no more than a couple of feet deep but quite long and was very sheltered and this was attracting the butterflies. Altogether I saw at least 8 Chequered Skippers along the length of this ditch, all of which I think were males, each of which defending its own little piece of territory within the ditch. The ditch was no more than 10 yards from the riverbank and despite the drought, had retained more moisture than most of the rest of the surrounding habitat. I walked around a corner and through a couple of Birch trees and suddenly saw an unfamiliar butterfly flying awkwardly and being chased by a Chequered Skipper. It came to a halt and revealed itself as a mating pair of Chequered Skippers being harassed by a male of the same species! How lucky was I?



Mating pair of Chequered Skippers at Glen Loy, Near Fort William, Lochabar Region of Western Scotland, 1st June 2008

Photo © Lee Slaughter



Photo © Lee Slaughter

All this and it was not even 10am on my first full day here! The oversexed male flew off and left this mating pair to their personal business and me to take some lovely photographs of them "in cop". In all the years I had seen this species I had never seen a pair mating. Maybe I had not been looking at the right time of day I suppose as it was barely even mid-morning now. I was about + mile from where I used to see the butterflies back in the 1990s and can only assume that over the years they had moved little by little further Eastwards as the microclimate changed. There is much habitat in this and other Glens which looks similar but until you walk into it and take a closer look only then does it show the small differences in vegetation and other factors such as the ground level or nearby shelter from trees, Bog Myrtle bushes or light, casual grazing which can affect the microclimate and make all the difference to this species' requirements.

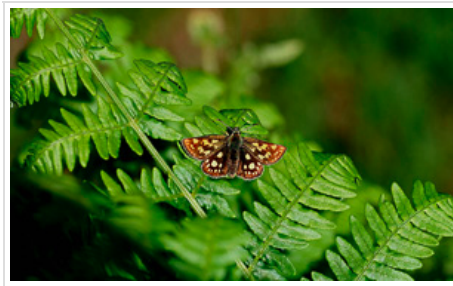


Photo © Lee Slaughter

Altogether I saw at least 28 Chequered Skippers up until 11.30am of which most of which were male and probably 3 or 4 were female. The sun was very hot and there were an annoyingly large number of flies that would simply not leave the vicinity of my head! Again, I had noticed that where a colony exists, most that are seen are male, as the females wander some distance looking for suitable egg-laying sites. I returned to my family by 11.45am very hot and tired and ready to take them up on the Gondola/Cable Car into the mountains at Anoch Mor, near Ben Nevis, to a restaurant at 2250 feet altitude for lunch. It clouded over there during the afternoon with light drizzle. How I was glad that I had ventured out early that morning to see the butterflies when the sun was out as this species just disappears when the sun goes in and it is like looking for a needle in a haystack.

I did visit Glen Loy once more 3 days later, again fairly early in the morning and whilst I did not see a mating pair, I did see a similar number of Chequered Skippers and got some good photographs again on my digital camera. On both days however the most numerous species by far was the Small Pearl-Bordered Fritillary butterfly, which must have been flying in their hundreds! Whatever the perilous state of this Fritillary species back in England, there certainly is no cause for concern at present for this species in this area of Scotland! One interesting moth for which I noted a few specimens on both days in Glen Loy was the Argent and Sable Moth which tend to fly between the Birch trees but seem to be difficult to get near enough to photograph. Once seen, this moth cannot be mistaken in flight with any other such is the contrast in its black markings and lovely white wings. Another moth found here was the very interesting subspecies "scotica" of the Pebble Hook-Tip moth which obliged nicely for my camera. This is far paler than the normal form "falcataria" found further south in

England.



Photo © Lee Slaughter

We were lucky enough later in the week to see and photograph a female Chequered Skipper in the garden of our rented cottage nectaring on flowers on a grassy bank on the edge of the lawn! This species would not breed here as the habitat was unsuitable but this shows that the female of this species does wander quite some distance from its colony in search of egg-laying sites and of course will need to take on board nectar to keep up her strength.

It is heartening to note that despite all the threats to most of our native butterfly species, the Chequered Skipper seems destined to survive at least in Glen Loy for the foreseeable future even if it will shift its breeding area when certain conditions dictate.

I can thoroughly recommend this beautiful and wild area of Scotland to anyone who loves the great outdoors and the wildlife that inhabits it. Do take on board however that whilst my family and I had wonderful weather for most of the week, we were quite fortunate, as this region does have a higher than average rainfall compared to most parts of Britain. If you leave a trip like this to the last minute for seeking out this wonderful species and the weather forecast is poor then it is better not to risk it as this species should only be looked for in sunny weather. Many frustrating hours have been wasted by me many years ago looking for roosting adults in overcast conditions to no avail. Once I searched fruitlessly for 3 hours and then the sun came out for 10 minutes and I saw 4 adults in that time and all disappeared again as soon as the sun went behind the cloud! You need a lot of dedication and a great deal of patience, which will hopefully be rewarded eventually. If anyone is interested in visiting this area in search of this species then I will be happy to assist in giving local details to help find the butterfly.

My sincere thanks for the patience and support of my wife, Lisa Slaughter, and my sons Robert and Michael, without whom this trip would not have been possible.