



## Silver-spotted skipper - *Hesperia comma*

**This butterfly, in common with most other skippers, is small and largely orange, and triangular in appearance when at rest. The top of the wings have pale spots, but the silver-white spots are most obvious on the underside of the wings. Adults may be found from late July to early September.**

The preferred habitat of the silver-spotted skipper is open chalk or limestone grassland with patches of short (below 4 cm), sparse turf with bare ground containing its foodplant, sheep's fescue (*Festuca ovina*). Being on the northwestern most limit of its European range in the UK, the silver-spotted skipper needs warmth, so south facing, sunny slopes are favoured.

The adult female butterflies lay their eggs on the leafblades of small specimens of the foodplant, or sometimes on adjacent plants. The caterpillars are dull olive green, with a black head and black collar. They hatch in early spring and feed in silken webs around the foodplant. The sparse nature of the turf in which they breed appears to provide a warmer microclimate, helping the development of the caterpillars and pupae, which are formed within grass tussocks.

The silver-spotted skipper is reasonably effective at colonising new suitable habitat within a few kilometres of an existing colony, but its rather specific habitat requirements put it at high risk from slight changes in grazing management.

The silver-spotted skipper declined substantially during the 20th Century, becoming extinct from many areas such as Yorkshire, the Cotswolds, Devon and Cambridgeshire, declining by approximately 90% to around 50 colonies. This decline has been attributed to both reduced stock grazing and the reduction in the rabbit population following the spread of myxomatosis. The species is classified as Rare in Great Britain, is protected from sale under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) and is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority species.

Within Kent, the silver-spotted skipper had disappeared from many of its former sites along the North Downs. However, more recent surveys have revealed that between 1982 and the late 1990s the species has expanded its range in the North and South Downs by almost 50%. The species is listed in the Kent Red Data Book as vulnerable.

skipper



The main threats to the silver-spotted skipper are inappropriate grassland management, particularly resulting from changes in livestock or rabbit grazing intensity, and loss of unimproved calcareous grasslands, in which the caterpillar's foodplant grows.

The main colony in Kent, at Lydden Down, is the largest colony of the species in the country, and receives a degree of protection from being included in Lydden/Temple Down National Nature Reserve and SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest). This colony has provided butterflies that have enabled the introduction of the species to Burham Down (part of Wouldham to Detling SSSI) in 1998, as well as to Wye Downs National Nature Reserve.

With the ecology of this pretty little butterfly becoming better understood, it is hoped that the species will return to sites that are now being brought back to suitable management.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION:

Butterfly Conservation: [www.butterfly-conservation.org](http://www.butterfly-conservation.org)  
'The Butterfly Conservation is the UK charity taking action to save butterflies, moths and their habitats'

UK Biodiversity Action Plan: [www.ukbap.org.uk](http://www.ukbap.org.uk)

English Nature: [www.english-nature.org.uk](http://www.english-nature.org.uk)

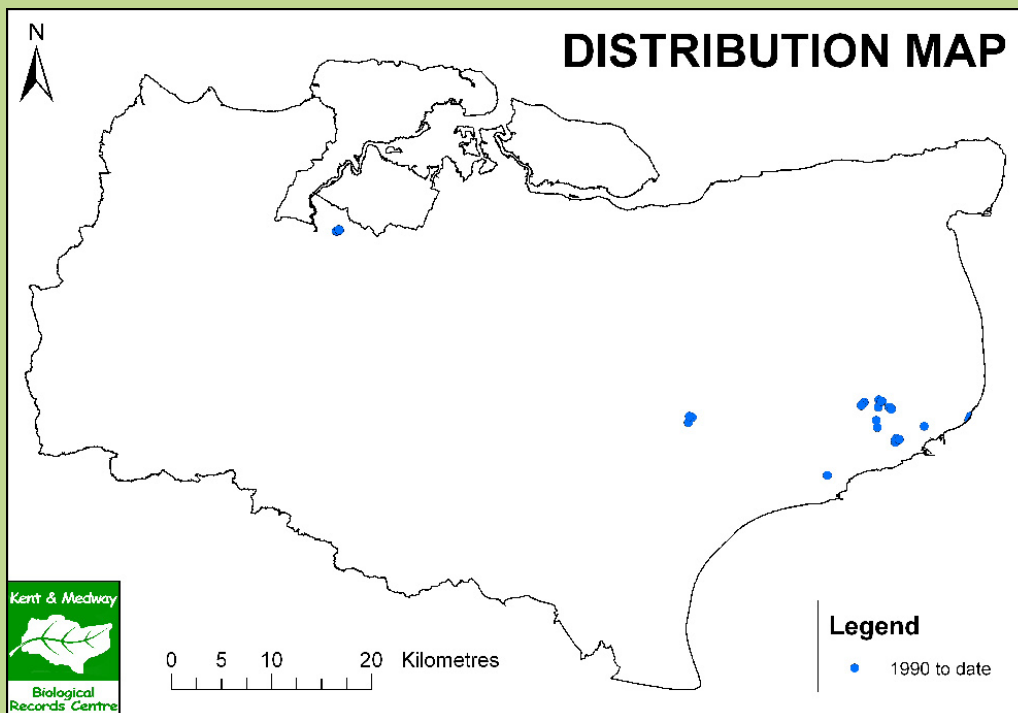
Kent Wildlife Trust: [www.kentwildlife.org.uk](http://www.kentwildlife.org.uk)

Kent Biodiversity Action Plan: [www.kentbap.org.uk](http://www.kentbap.org.uk)

The Kent Red Data Book, available from  
Kent County Council: [www.kent.gov.uk/biodiversity](http://www.kent.gov.uk/biodiversity)

Kent Landscape Information System:  
[www.kent.gov.uk/klis](http://www.kent.gov.uk/klis)

Kent and Medway Biological Record Centre:  
[www.kmbrc.org.uk](http://www.kmbrc.org.uk)



Data courtesy of John Maddocks / Butterfly Conservation

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