

Butterflies

Of the 750 species of butterfly that are recorded across Europe, only 28 are considered to be native to Ireland. These insects are well known for their 2-phase life cycle. As caterpillars they feed on the leaves of various plants, and in some cases are restricted (to a greater or lesser degree) to a single species. As adult flying butterflies, they use their long tongues or probosci, to feed on nectar from the flowers of suitable plant species. As both caterpillars and adults, butterflies are preyed on by a vast array of predators including birds, insects, frogs, dragonflies, mammals and



even spiders! They use a range of defence mechanisms in an attempt to avoid predation. These include the startling eyespots of the peacock butterfly and the camouflage of other species.

Peacock caterpillars are dark and hairy and feed exclusively on the leaves of nettles. The adult takes nectar from plants such as bramble and hogweed and is on the wing from March to May and again between July and September. They over-winter as adults and hibernate in sheltered spots such as wood piles in sheds and garages and in hollow trees. Male peacocks are highly territorial and very aggressive, flying up to investigate any shadow that passes overhead.

The orange tip butterfly is known by the vivid orange patches on the tips of its wings, although these are only present on the males, and also only on the upper surface. These are some of the earliest butterflies of the year, appearing during April. The caterpillars feed on lady's smock and the species is very dependant on wet pasture and has suffered serious decline because of agricultural drainage schemes.



The painted lady flies at woodland edges and gardens where the main food plants are nettles, thistles and runner beans! Eggs are laid singly and continuously between April and October and so flying adults can almost always be seen at any time during these summer months.