

= Lulworth skipper =

The Lulworth skipper (*Thymelicus acteon*) is a butterfly of the HesperIIDae family . Its name is derived from Lulworth Cove in the county of Dorset , England , where the first specimens in Great Britain were collected in 1832 by English naturalist James Charles Dale .

The species occurs locally across Central Europe , Asia Minor and North Africa , where its population is considered stable . Its numbers have declined in Northern Europe , leading to its European status of " vulnerable " . Its range in Britain is restricted to the south coast of Dorset , however it is locally abundant and its numbers currently are perhaps at their greatest since its discovery there .

With a wingspan of 24 to 28 millimetres , females being larger than males , the Lulworth skipper is a small butterfly , the smallest member of the *Thymelicus* genus in Europe and among the smallest butterflies in Britain . Aside from the size difference , the sexes are distinguished by females having a distinct circle of golden marks on each forewing . Due to their likeness to the rays around the eye of a peacock 's feather , these are often known as " sun @-@ ray " markings , and they can faintly appear on males .

= = Taxonomy = =

The Lulworth skipper was first described by German entomologist S. A. von Rottemburg in 1775 . The butterfly was first discovered in Britain on 15 August 1832 , when specimens were taken from Lulworth Cove in Dorset by English naturalist James Charles Dale It was introduced the following year as the Lulworth skipper (*Thymelicus acteon*) , a name that has remained unchanged ; it is the only one of Britain 's vernacular butterfly names for which there has never been a proposed substitute .

= = Description = =

The male Lulworth skipper has a wingspan of 24 to 27 millimetres (0 @.@ 94 to 1 @.@ 06 in) , and the female 25 to 28 mm . This makes it one of Britain 's smallest butterflies and , in Europe , the smallest member of the *Thymelicus* genus . Of Britain 's five " golden " skippers ? the others being the silver @-@ spotted skipper (*Hesperia comma*) , large skipper (*Ochlodes sylvanus*) , small skipper (*Thymelicus sylvestris*) and Essex skipper (*Thymelicus lineola*) ? the Lulworth is both the smallest and darkest . Beyond its small size , it is distinguished particularly by its dark , dun @-@ coloured wings that appear with tinges of olive @-@ brown ; this darkening especially apparent in males .

Variations are known to occur ; in north @-@ west Africa , the uppersides of the fore and hind wing are darker , with hints of greenish or greyish brown . Similarly @-@ coloured races occur in Spain , Elba , Crete , and other Eastern Mediterranean islands . *T. acteon christi* , endemic to the Canary Islands , displays colour variations , with the uppersides of the fore @-@ wing showing defined yellow ? orange markings .

The butterfly is sexually dimorphic ; females have a distinct circle of golden marks on each forewing , often called " sun @-@ ray " markings due to their likeness to the rays around the eye of a peacock 's feather . Males sometimes have these markings , though they are noticeably fainter (see Illustration 1) .

= = Distribution and habitat = =

The Lulworth skipper is found locally across southern and central Europe , Asia Minor and North Africa , where its population is considered stable . In northern Europe , its numbers and range have severely declined , most notably in the Netherlands where it is now extinct . This decline has led to the butterfly 's European status of " vulnerable " . Isolated populations of the species in Armenia are also threatened , although not yet included in the National Red List . It is also listed as threatened

under the United Kingdom Biodiversity Action Plan .

In Great Britain , where the butterfly reaches the northern limit of its range , its distribution is restricted to the southern coastline of the county of Dorset . Here , both the population and range have changed little in recent decades ; it is locally abundant , with the majority of colonies found on the coast between Weymouth and Swanage and on the Purbeck Ridge , a line of inland chalk hills . Two outlying colonies also exist , at Burton Bradstock and on the Isle of Portland ; the cause of the colony on Portland is unknown , but has been put down to either natural colonisation or released specimens . There is evidence to suggest that the Lulworth skipper is now more abundant in Dorset than at any other time since its discovery in 1832 .

Although colonies of Lulworth skippers existed in Devon , the species has , beyond single records , not be seen in the county since the 1930s . Similarly , records of occurrences exist for Cornwall , but they have not been verified as native colonies .

Habitats are primarily on unfertilised calcareous grassland ; this includes chalk downland , coastal grassland and undercliffs in Britain . In all of these habits Tor @-@ grass (*Illustration 2*) , the butterfly 's sole food plant and that on which it lays eggs , is widespread . Tall , ungrazed grass is a favoured habitat due to oviposition and larval development ; Lulworth skippers have benefited from the move away from tight grazing by sheep in the last century and recently outbreaks of myxomatosis among rabbit populations , which otherwise maintain a lower grass height . However , there is evidence to suggest that minimal grazing is not detrimental to the species , and may in fact be beneficial in that it encourages the growth of flowers that act as adult nectar sources .

= = Behaviour = =

= = = Life cycle = = =

The females lay their eggs in rows of 5 to 6 (although as many as 15 have been recorded) on the flower @-@ sheath of Tor @-@ grass (*Brachypodium pinnatum*) , preferring the dead sheaths of tall plants . The care taken by females over where to lay their eggs is considered the only remarkable part of the Lulworth skipper breeding process , otherwise it is considered common .

Upon hatching , the 2 @. @ 5 cm (1 in) long larva spins a compact cocoon on the site of the eggshell . In this , it will overwinter until around the third week of April , at which point it will eat its way out by making a small hole in the side of the sheath . The caterpillar will then search for tender Tor @-@ grass blades and feed upon them by chewing out notches from the margin . During this time , it will live separately , within a tube composed of the two edges of a blade bound by cords of silk . Fresh tubes will be made as the caterpillar grows larger . Lulworth skipper caterpillars live in the warmest zone of a grass clump , at a height of 20 to 40 centimetres (8 to 16 in) .

The pupal stage lasts for about two weeks , from the beginning of June onwards , until late July . It is formed inside a loose " nest " of silk and grass that is spun deep inside a tussock of tor grass . Imago begin to emerge in the early middle of July and finish emerging in the middle of September . Typically , they will live for five to ten days ? the normal lifespan for a non @-@ hibernating butterfly of the Lulworth 's seasonal stage . They fly only in strong sunshine and tend to form discrete colonies , with the largest containing up to 100 @, @ 000 individuals .

= = In literature = =

In the novel *The Return of the Native* , by Thomas Hardy , a possible reference is made to Lulworth skippers in the " strange amber @-@ coloured butterflies " which " were never seen elsewhere . "