

White-letter Hairstreak Butterfly

Ròin-steallach Geal



The Gaelic for butterfly is “dealan-dè” which translates as “God’s lightning”. Appropriately, then, the White-letter Hairstreak has a distinctive, white “W” traced on the underside of its wings like a bolt of electricity. There have been two, historical records of this species in Scotland from the 19th century but a recent discovery in 2017 was followed by records from quite a few locations in the south of the country which correspond to an expansion of range in the north of England.

The caterpillars mostly feed on Elm and the species is of a high conservation priority following declines because of Dutch Elm Disease. There is some evidence that they prefer Wych Elm on which the caterpillars are more successful.

They are elusive and spend their time high up in the treetops where they are often seen as a small, flitting silhouettes with the characteristic, erratic, spiralling flight that is typical of the hairstreaks. As butterflies, they feed high up in the leaves on honeydew – which is secreted by aphids. The exception to this is after storms when rain has washed the honeydew off the leaves. Then they may be seen taking nectar from flowers, but rarely far from the Elm trees on which they live.

The hairstreak butterflies have the generic name Satyrium from the mythical, horned, woodland creatures – Satyrs- because of the horned points on their wings.

It is likely that their spread northward has been helped by climatic warming, but a return of some disease-resistant Elm trees is helping them establish. There is still a scattered, but hardy, population of Wych Elm in Scotland that has survived the Dutch Elm outbreak and there is a good opportunity for the White-letter Hairstreak to become firmly established here.