

The Purple Hairstreak – An Oak-Dependant Butterfly

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What could be oakier than an oak? When it comes to Latin binomials, a little Eurasian butterfly must take the prize – *Quercusia quercus*, the Purple Hairstreak. Indeed, to distinguish it from the Iberian and North African race, *Quercusia quercus* ssp. *iberica*, the typical form is known as *Quercusia quercus* ssp. *quercus*. Now I don't reckon you can get any oakier than that!

Like the German name of Eichenfalter, this Latin name is well-deserved, for the egg is laid on oak, the caterpillar feeds on oak, and the butterfly spends most of its life in oak treetops. Only the pupa or chrysalis stage occurs elsewhere, either on or under the soil (but still beneath oaks!). However, because of the habits and life cycle of this insect, many of you who live within its European (to 60 degrees north latitude), North African, and Western Asian range may be hosts to it without ever having noticed. There is only one brood a year, the major part of the life cycle of which is spent as tiny eggs laid in July or August, hatching only eight months later when the oak flower buds break in the following March or April. In addition, the resulting caterpillars immediately bore into the buds to feed and grow there invisibly for their first stage, in later stages relying on cryptic colouration to disguise them by day, feeding only at night, before they pupate in June to emerge finally as adult butterflies in July. These adults can survive through into September, but mostly inhabit the tops of oak trees, feeding on aphid honeydew and rarely flying except in sunny weather. They descend occasionally to feed on flowers – I was lucky enough to see one for the first time last July feeding on a tall Buddleia near a mixed-age stand of indigenous oaks in my valley in southwest France; but thus, equally, I had managed *not* to see them for nearly twenty years (which is what prompts this article). Butterfly aficionados often resort to tapping the branches of oaks, when occasionally scores fly up together in a shimmering cloud of purple and silver, or to using binoculars to watch them overhead. They are numerically the most common of the five species of Hairstreak found in the UK (more species are found in mainland Europe), and have been described as appearing from below like “a handful of silver coins that has been tossed into the sunlight” around the treetops.

The adult butterfly is not large, belonging as it does to the worldwide family of the Blues, the Lycaenidae, measuring not more than 3.5 cm (1 3/8 inches) across the wings. It is well described by the English common name: the “Hairstreak” refers to the markings underneath the wings of most of this group, taking in this species the form of a thin white line, inset from but roughly parallel to the outer wing margins, on a background of dove grey. A couple of orange spots, one with a black centre, on the rear tip of each hind wing complete the picture of the underside. But it is the colour of the upper side, an iridescent purple-blue more reminiscent of large lazily-flapping tropical butterflies than of a European species, which gives the males their special character -- a colour described in one book as “deep purplish fuscous irrorate submetallic indigo blue.” So now you know.

An important practical point about such iridescent colours is that their appearance depends entirely upon the angle of the light, hence photographs often do not do them justice. The female has the same purple colouration, but in a reduced area within the forewing only, the rest of the upper wings being almost black, as are the wing borders of the male.

I suppose some might find the prospect of caterpillars burrowing into the buds of their precious oaks somewhat alarming, but please don't reach for the pesticides. The Hairstreaks never reach a sufficient density to cause harm to the trees, and any unsightliness is confined to the treetops. So instead, next summer, look up, for you too might see those 'silver coins' dancing in the sunlight.

References:

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