



Tortoiseshell butterfly.
Click on image to view video by Nicky Duckworth.



Nature Studies

By **Michael McCarthy**

An incomer's discovery of the natural world in the West Country

In writing about nature you can express love, fascination, joy, curiosity and a whole range of positive emotions, but it's quite hard to express grief. We tend to feel grief about our human world, do we not, most of all about the loss of beloved people; so to say you feel such a deep emotion at the loss of a non-human organism might seem simple exaggeration. But it's the only word for what I feel about the disappearance of *Aglais urticae*.

That such a beautiful creature should be lost to us I find almost unbearably sad.

In plain English that's the small tortoiseshell butterfly. It was the first butterfly I learned to love, as a boy of seven—an exquisite combination of lustrous orange with black and yellow bars on the forewings, and along the lower wing edges a charming row of pale blue dots, like a turquoise string of pearls. In the distant days of my boyhood it was very common, it was everywhere in summer, but over the last fifty years it has suffered a decline of nearly eighty per cent. Before we moved to Dorset we lived just around the corner from Kew Gardens, and although I spent a lot of time in Kew and saw many butterflies, including red admirals, peacocks and commas, its close relatives, I never saw a tortoiseshell once. However, when we came to Dorset in August 2021 I found to my delight that the village was full of them. They were in the gardens, including ours, and they were in the allotments and even

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the main street, small sprites flashing their sublime colours on every sunny day.

Times have changed. Last year, after the drought of 2022, there were fewer of them; but this year, after the wet winter and then the sodden spring, they have gone. Completely. I have not seen one. Anywhere. And it's not just me. Last month Butterfly Conservation revealed that 2024 had been the worst summer on record for British butterflies, and that the tortoiseshell in particular had had a 'horrendous' year.

It's also been a dreadful year for many other flying insects, and this is a dire warning for us all about the state of nature in general, and I recognise that; but the main feeling I have is heartache, of real grief at the tortoiseshell's disappearance. That such a beautiful creature should be lost to us I find almost unbearably sad.

Not quite lost, though. On September 9, while I was away, a couple of tortoiseshells did appear in the village, and Nicky Duckworth, our local birder, videoed one of them on the buddleia outside our house and sent me the file, with the message "Don't despair!" If you click on the link you can see it, and you can see at once the wonderful colours culminating in the turquoise string of pearls on the lower wing edges; you can marvel at it, as I do. But I still haven't seen a live one, and though 2024 will no doubt be remembered as the year Keir Starmer was elected in Britain, and the year when Donald Trump either was or wasn't re-elected in America, for me it will always be the year the tortoiseshells disappeared. Alas!

Recently relocated to Dorset, Michael McCarthy is the former Environment Editor of The Independent. His books include Say Goodbye To The Cuckoo and The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy.