LARGE BLUE

Maculinea arion

Wingspan:
3.8 to 5.2cm
Habitat:
Dry, warm grassland
Markings:
Dark blue upperwing with grey edge and unmistakable black spots, the underwing is light brown with several black spots circled in white
Where and when to see in Gloucestershire:
Daneway Banks, June to July

Did you know?

The large blue is the largest of the blue butterflies, although it is still quite small - it's wingspan is about the same as the diameter of a strawberry.

Key facts

- Butterflies have four stages of life: egg, caterpillar, pupa and butterfly. The process of changing from a caterpillar to a butterfly is known as 'metamorphosis'.

- The large blue has a very unusual life cycle and needs a specific habitat to thrive in. This is also why it is a very rare butterfly - some call the large blue 'Gloucestershire's rarest resident'.

The life cycle of the large blue

- In June and July adult butterflies mate and lay their eggs on wild thyme plants.
- Caterpillars hatch and feed on the young flower buds for 3 weeks, before dropping to the ground.
- On the ground, the caterpillars give off a scent that attracts red ants. They look just like ant larvae so the ants take them back into their colonies.

- The caterpillars feed on ant larvae in the colony for the next 10 months until they form a chrysalis.
- The next summer, when the weather warms up, the new butterflies emerge from the chrysalis and the process starts again!

Did you know? The large blue has the highest survival rate when the caterpillars are taken in by a certain species of red ant - Myrmica sabuleti

Large blue extinction and reintroduction

The large blue needs a specific habitat to survive, including red ant colonies and wild thyme. Loss of habitat led to the large blue becoming extinct in the UK in 1979. Daneway Banks was the first successful reintroduction to the UK, and the butterfly continues to flourish there (although it is still very rare!). The grassland is carefully managed by grazing and scrub clearance to ensure a future for the large blue.