

## Purple Hairstreak butterflies at Boden Boo Woodland near Erskine

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Boden Boo is a small area of community parkland downriver from the old Erskine Ferry slipway. It is a popular area for dog-walkers and families often take their children to play on the sandy beaches near the Erskine Bridge. The site also includes a large area of deciduous woodland with many large trees which were once part of the Erskine House policies. Natural regeneration has produced an interesting mix of young and mature trees. The woodland is known as the Boden Boo Plantation and is now managed by the Forestry Commission (Scotland) which has recently constructed a network of paths throughout the site. In springtime many willow warblers and blackcaps sing in the woodland and great-spotted woodpeckers drum on dead tree branches. Oak trees are much in evidence and it is these trees which are home to the Purple Hairstreak butterflies.

The Purple Hairstreak is a small insignificant butterfly, about the size of a thumbnail, which belongs to the family Lycaenidae. This butterfly is generally distributed throughout the south and the central belt of Scotland but it is very much under-recorded because it has some strange habits. It emerges later in the year around the beginning of August and flies in the evening - at the top of the oak trees! The butterfly overwinters as an egg which is laid singly on an oak-bud on a branch that receives the full sun. The brown-coloured caterpillars hatch in early April to feed on the developing leaves within the bud. In June they descend on a silken thread to the ground where a chrysalis is formed. The butterfly emerges from the chrysalis in late July to early August. It frequents the lower branches of the oak trees for a few days feeding on aphid honeydew before slowly migrating to the tops of the trees and flying about the leaf canopy.

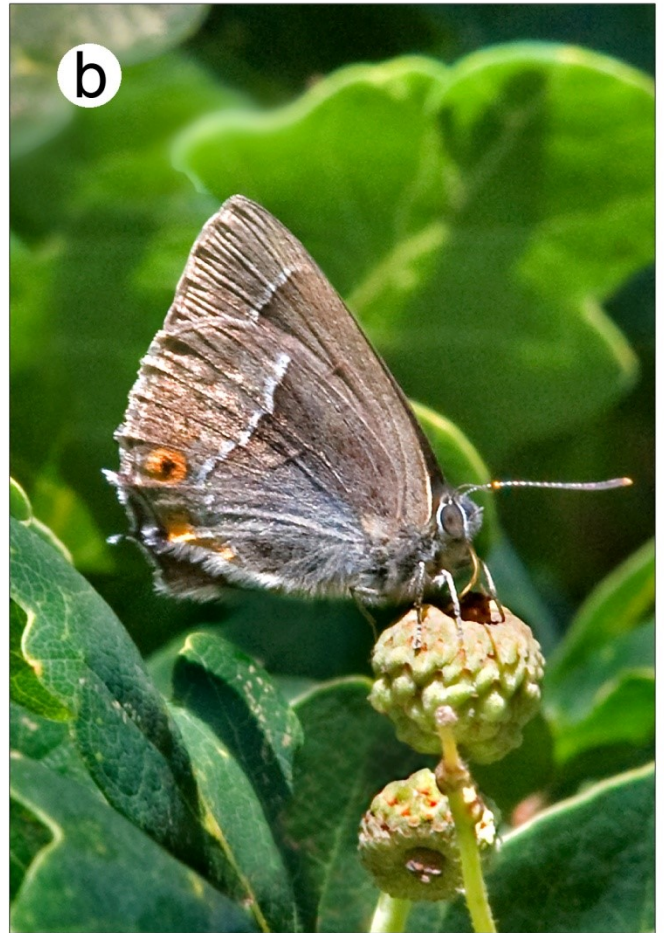
The best opportunity to view these attractive butterflies is shortly after they have emerged from the ground and this may mean many regular visits to the site. A small colony of Purple Hairstreaks was first reported in the Boden Boo area in 2011 and since then three new sites have been located. This does not indicate a species expansion but simply that more people have been searching for them more actively.

My first encounter with the Purple Hairstreaks at Boden Boo was on the evening of the 4th August 2013. I was walking along a path heading for an area where the butterflies had been seen in 2012. While examining some small oak trees, a small butterfly landed on a lower branch of an oak tree - at head height right in front of me! It was a Purple Hairstreak! It sat quite motionless began feeding at the rim of an emerging acorn. These butterflies rest and feed with their wings folded over the thorax and can be very difficult to spot unless they are flying from one feeding station to another. A few more of the butterflies were spotted, all feeding on something associated with the emerging acorns. One or two of them continued to feed for 20 to 30 minutes at the same spot. So intent were they to feed that they simply moved aside when pushed off the acorn by a passing wasp or a fly. Whatever was on the rim of the acorns, it was certainly much in demand. I counted eight butterflies feeding in front of me. Sadly, none of them chose to sun themselves and display the wonderful purple sheen to the brownish upper wings. This is quite spectacular on the male butterflies.

On returning to the site in the middle of August, no butterflies were seen on the lower branches but many were watched through



## Purple Hairstreaks at Boden Boo, Erskine



(a) Purple Hairstreak at rest (b) Purple Hairstreak feeding at an emerging acorn  
(c) Purple Hairstreaks - the one to the left is a female.



binoculars flying high in the leaf canopy. However, when I examined the acorns on which some of the butterflies had been feeding it was noticed that many were now infected with Knopper Galls. These large, conspicuous galls grow from the acorn cup and are caused by the Knopper gall-wasp which is host specific to oak trees. It is known that the oak tree reacts to the newly laid eggs of the gall-wasp by producing a defensive chemical reaction which may include some sort of sweet exudate akin to honeydew. A search through the literature may come up with an answer.

I hope to add new records next year and, hopefully, photograph some male Purple Hairstreaks sporting their brilliant colours as they bask in the warm autumnal sunshine. A short way upriver from the car-park is the old disused Erskine Harbour. This area of tidal mud is often visited by bird watching members of the Paisley Natural History Society looking for ducks and waders which arrive in the early autumn. So, why not take a walk through the Boden Boo Plantation in search of the Purple Hairstreaks?

T. Norman Tait April 2014

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