**Grizzled Skipper Project - Working together to meet common goals.**

As a regular reader of this newsletter you will be aware that in recent years we have been working in close partnership with the Nottinghamshire Biodiversity Action Group (Notts BAG) to improve the line side habitat for a nationally important species of butterfly, the grizzled skipper, *pyrgus malvae*.

Since initial work to clear areas of scrub was undertaken by a contractor, back in 2012, a series of volunteer work parties, ‘the grizzled skipper work parties’, have taken place annually. The work parties, have been incredibly popular and have regularly pulled in over 20 volunteers for each session. As a result, these have enabled the areas that were cleared back in 2012 to be kept free of scrub and in addition new areas have been opened up annually.

Work has focused on the three main areas where grizzled skipper butterflies are known to frequent; the cutting south of Rushcliffe Halt, the cutting south of East Leake Station and the cutting south of Barnstone Tunnel.

Notts BAG is working on this project in close liaison with one of their member organisations, Butterfly Conservation East Midlands (BCEM). In 2019, GCRN and BCEM (under the guidance of Notts BAG) were successful in an application to the Rushcliffe Biodiversity Grant Scheme, which at the time of writing was due to be spent on some additional habitat enhancement work (scrub clearance) in early March.

The partnership with BCEM has also been beneficial to GCRN as it has enabled more funding to be obtained to help manage the areas of habitat either side of the track bed. In 2018, BCEM were able to spend a donation from the Rempstone Steam Festival on yet more work to be undertaken opening out the area of grassland in the cutting south of Barnstone Tunnel.

In addition to scrub clearance work, other more specific habitat enhancement work has been undertaken along the line too. Grizzled skipper butterflies are very particular about their egg laying requirements and as a result, the project has sought ways to assist them. The butterfly tends to prefer areas of bare ground over which its foodplant (members of the rose family, including creeping cinquefoil and wild strawberry) tend to send out runners. Railway ballast creates a good area of bare ground and therefore the project purchased some ballast back in 2015 and installed this at strategic locations within the cuttings. Strawberry and cinquefoil were subsequently planted into these piles of ballast and allowed to spread. This has created perfect locations for the next generation of grizzled skipper to enjoy.

The results of all this great work has been observed in recent years by the number of butterflies being recorded along the line since 2012. In 2018, the highest number of grizzled skipper butterflies (in one single visit) were recorded in the cutting south of Barnstone Tunnel. In addition, surveys on the installed ballast piles, have recorded good numbers of grizzled skipper eggs and larvae since 2016.

During the same period that we have been recording positive results for the grizzled skipper in Nottinghamshire, Butterfly Conservation have recently reported that in 2017, grizzled skipper numbers nationally were at their lowest ever on record. In addition, they reported that grizzled skipper numbers had declined by more than half since the 1970’s.

The project along the GCR(N) is a great example of what can be achieved when different organisations with a common goal work closely together. The railway is improving all the time not just for grizzled skipper but for a whole host of invertebrate species. At the same time, the line side habitat is changing to look more like it was when the great central railway was in its heyday, with many more areas of open grassland.

Anyone wishing to find out more about the Grizzled Skipper, or wishing to become involved in future volunteer work parties or surveys at the site, can contact Chris Jackson, the Notts BAG Biodiversity Officer, on 0115 993 2588 or by emailing chris.jackson@nottscc.gov.uk.