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## Nature note:

### Last of the summer nectar

Despite that spell of very hot weather – now a distant memory as autumn closes in on us – it was rather a mixed summer for butterflies. We had the usual range of common species, but the showier ones, like peacock, red admiral and painted lady, seemed to be far fewer in numbers than usual. There was

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*Grayling opening wings*

one nice exception, though – a much more discreet and unobtrusive local speciality, the grayling. Graylings are very easy to overlook. For a start they don't feed on flowers as much as other butterflies do, but are more likely to be found sipping at the sticky resin on fence posts and bark. They also have the habit of resting on paths to catch the sun and you usually first see them when they fly up in front of and settle again a bit further on. But they are still hard to spot since they always have their wings closed while at rest and are beautifully camouflaged to blend in with their surroundings, even angling their wings to avoid throwing any shadow. The undersides of the wings, which is all you ever really see, are barred with a subtle combination of grey and tan, in broken lines to break up the outline, and it is only when they take off that you see a flash of the orange markings and the eye-spots, as in my lucky photo.

The Latin specific name is *semele* and this ties in with the grayling's rather smoky appearance. Semele in the Greek myth was seduced by Zeus, King of the Gods, who had a fair bit of form in this respect. Zeus's wife, Hera, got wind of this – they always do in the end – and tricked Semele into demanding that Zeus prove who he really was. So, he reluctantly sparked off a little lightning as a demo. But of course, it's fatal for mere mortals to look upon a god and Semele literally went up in smoke.

The grayling is a late summer butterfly, seen well into September. We've also had some end-of-season visits from the spectacular humming-bird hawk-



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*Hummingbird hawkmoth*

moths, which look for all the world like real humming-birds, siphoning the nectar from flowers with a long, retractable tongue. Amazingly, they are migrants who cross the sea from the continent, and even more amazingly some at least of them migrate back again in the autumn. They have their own folklore, in this case a modern story that a small party of them was seen flying over the English Channel on 6 June 1944 to bring the glad news of D-Day. Well, the tale deserves to be true and let's hope they return next year as well.

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