

SPECIES OF THE WEEK



The Cabbage White Butterfly

Small White, *Pieris rapae*, Bánóg bheag.

Large White, *Pieris brassicae*, Bánóg mhór.

The Cabbage White or white butterfly is a common name used to refer to two different, if visually similar, species found in Ireland.

The small white, *Pieris rapae*, is a medium-sized butterfly species found throughout Ireland in all habitats. They are particularly common in gardens, hedgerows and meadows. This pollinator is very distinctive been pure white in colour with two small black eyespots and short black tips on the forewings. They are seen from April to October with population peaking in May and August.

The large white, *Pieris brassicae*, is a larger butterfly found all across the country. Males and females of this species both possess white wings with black tips, with the females also showing eyespots similar to the small white. They are often noticeably larger than the male. They are seen in all habitats throughout Ireland from April to October, with numbers greatest in May and August. They are most commonly seen in gardens, uncut hedgerows and other areas with an abundance of flowers and Brassica plants.

Both species have two broods per year, with the small white sometimes having three in good weather conditions. The first eggs are usually laid in April-May and in optimal conditions can hatch as little as 72 hours later. Caterpillars emerge in May and June and a pale green and cylindrical in shape. They begin to eat as soon as they hatch. The summer months of June and July see these now-fattened larvae pupate into the adult white butterfly. The cycle then repeats with these summer adults laying eggs in June and August. The caterpillars of these hatchings then overwinter as pupae, emerging as adults in the spring.

Studies in Britain showed that birds are a major predator in town and city environments while arthropods had larger influence in rural areas. This pattern is likely similar in Ireland. Bird predators include the house sparrow *Passer domesticus*, and goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*. Bird predation is heaviest on late-year larvae or on overwintering pupae. They may act as an important, nutrient rich food source for birds in winter, particularly for new fledglings.

The small white will readily lay eggs on both cultivated and wild members of the cabbage family Cruciferae and seem to prefer the heart of any cabbage plant they come across. As many gardeners know these caterpillars are immensely fond of the garden nasturtium *Tropaeolum majus* and the garden mignonette *Reseda odorata*. The cabbage white is seen as a pest for commercial agriculture as well as garden-grown vegetables.

These butterflies are strong flyers with Irish populations sometimes increased by immigration from European populations. They are usually diurnal and rarely show activity at night unless disturbed by predators or inclement weather. They show a large worldwide distribution and are capable of surviving temperatures between 15-35 degrees C so long as humidity isn't high enough to cause damage to pupae or eggs.

While visually distinctive, the cabbage white can be confused with other members of the Pieridae family in Ireland. Commonly confused species include the Green-Veined White, the female Orange Tip, the Wood White and the female Brimstone.