

Skippers (Hesperiidae) are a family of small moth-like butterflies with thick-set bodies and a characteristic busy, darting flight, often close to the ground. Eight species of skipper occur in the United Kingdom and three of these are found in the North East: the Large Skipper, the Small Skipper and the Dingy Skipper. Although with a little practice these charming butterflies are quite easily identified there are some potential identification pitfalls and the purpose of this note is to highlight the main distinguishing features.

Dingy Skipper *Erynnis tages*

This is the first of the Skippers to emerge each year usually appearing towards the end of April and flying until the end of June/early July (a small number of individuals emerge as a second generation in August in some years but this is exceptional). It occurs in grasslands where there is bare ground where its food plant, Bird's-foot Trefoil occurs and is strongly associated with brownfield sites. The Dingy Skipper is quite different in appearance to the other two skippers present in our region, being (as the name perhaps implies) a predominantly grey-brown colour in contrast to the golden-orange colour of the other two. However, the species does sometimes get confused with two day-flying moth species that can occur within the same habitats: the Mother Shipton, *Callistege mi*, and the Burnet Companion, *Euclidia glyphica*. The photos below highlight the main differences.



Wingspan approx. 28mm. Note widely spaced antennae with slightly hooked ends. Forewing greyish with darker brown markings forming loosely defined bands. Hind-wing brown. A complete row of white spots along the margin of both fore and hind wings.



Mother Shipton: Wingspan approx. 32 mm. Note Antennae are close together and lack a club. Forewing markings resemble the face of an old crone (Mother Shipton) with a hooked nose and prominent chin and a black spot forming the eye. Hind wings, when visible, have two conspicuous rows of white markings giving a much more variegated appearance than the Dingy Skipper.



Burnet Companion. Wingspan approx. 30 mm. Antennae close together and lacking a club. Forewing brown/purplish-brown with two complete darker brown bands and a brown mark on the leading edge towards the apex. No white marks. Outer part of hind-wing is orangey-brown with a dark brown band across it and a dark margin.

(Photo: Weza; Wikipedia Commons, public domain).

Large Skipper *Ochlodes sylvanus*

The Large Skipper usually emerges in our region towards the end of May/early June with peak numbers occurring in late June and remaining on the wing through July and into August. It is a grassland butterfly that occurs where there are clumps of tall grass including its favoured food plant Cock's Foot. The Large Skipper, in our region at least, is usually found in small numbers with counts rarely going into double figures on most sites. The Large Skipper is superficially similar to the Small Skipper and care needs to be taken to distinguish the two species.



(Photos Graham Beckwith). Wingspan approx. 30 mm. As with other skippers the antennae are widely spaced on the head and the clubs are slightly hooked. The Large Skipper is one of the 'golden' skippers which all share a similar basic colouration but close examination shows that on both the upper and under sides of the forewing the Large Skipper has a number of pale marks that give the wing a faintly chequered appearance. The Small Skipper lacks these blotches and has a much more uniform appearance. The left hand picture, above, depicts a male, distinguished by the black streak angled across the forewing. This is the sex brand which contains specialised scent scales. It is larger and more conspicuously marked than the sex-brand of the Small Skipper.

Small Skipper *Thymelicus sylvestris*

The Small Skipper is the last of the Skippers to emerge in our region, with its flight period lagging roughly three-weeks to a month behind that of the Large Skipper. It is a grassland butterfly favouring rough grasslands with long grass. It is much more numerous than the Large Skipper and goods sites can often yield three figure counts. Large counts of a 'golden' skipper are much more likely to be this species than Large Skipper. The favoured food plant is Yorkshire Fog.



(Photos: J Wallace (left); Graham Beckwith (right)). Wingspan approx. 28 mm. Although it is smaller than the Large Skipper the most obvious difference between this species and the Large Skipper is the relatively uniform colouring of the forewing of the Small Skipper which lacks the chequer marks of the Large Skipper. Although not illustrated here, the sex-brand on the male Small Skipper is also much more finely drawn and less conspicuous than on the Large Skipper. Both the Large and the Small Skipper habitually bask on prominent plants with the wings held open and the forewing held at an angle to the hind wing.

Other British Skipper Species

Species	Scientific name	Notes
Chequered Skipper	<i>Carterocephalus palaemon</i>	Extinct in England. Occurs in a number of sites centred around Fort William in the west of Scotland.
Essex Skipper	<i>Thymelicus lineola</i>	This species is very similar to the Small Skipper and requires close examination for reliable separation. The best character to separate them is the underside of the tips of the antennae which are black in the Essex Skipper and orangey-brown in the Small Skipper. This species has spread outwards from south-east England and it is conceivable that, in time, it could eventually reach the North East.

Species	Scientific name	Notes
Lulworth Skipper	<i>Thymelicus acteon</i>	Tiny skipper that is restricted to a small area on the Dorset coast.
Silver-spotted Skipper	<i>Hesperia comma</i>	This species requires warm conditions and is restricted to a few sites in the south of England.
Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus malvae</i>	Superficially similar to the Dingy Skipper, this species has dark grey/black wings with white chequer marks. It is restricted to central and southern England.