

THE PAINTED LADY

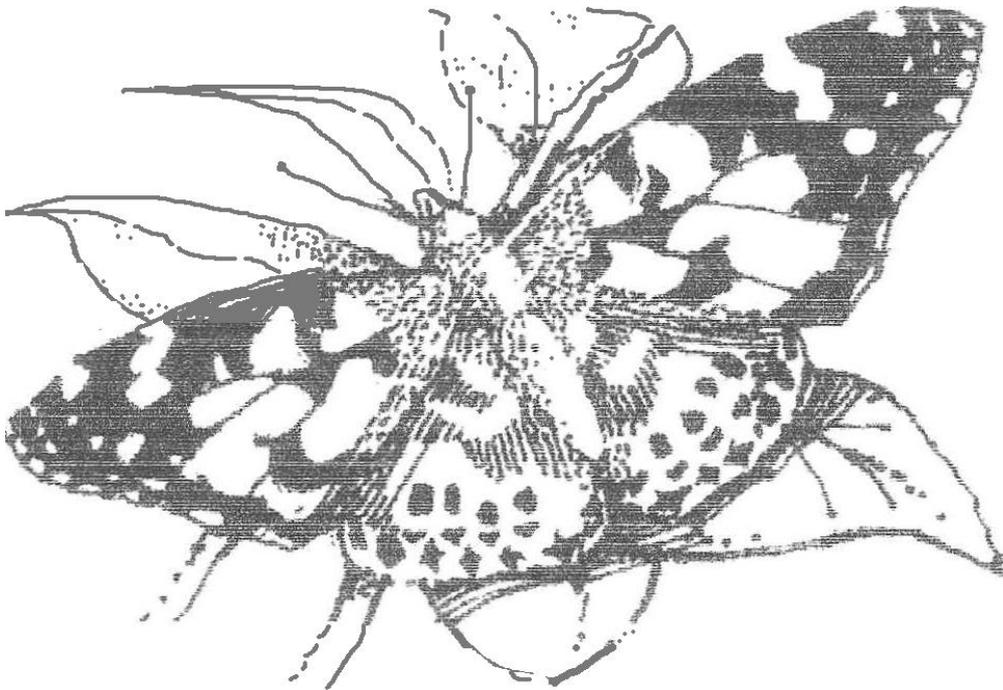
Last year's extraordinary summer saw an invasion of that elegant butterfly, the Painted Lady.

Its true home is in the Atlas mountains of North Africa and in the extreme south of Europe, from where it migrates: sometimes in large numbers.

In a good year, you may expect to see the first of these migrants in May, although I recall seeing a specimen some years ago, on the Ridgeway, in mid-February, which seems to call into question the assertion that the butterfly is incapable of surviving our comparatively cold and wet winters.

What is certain is that the early migrants lay their eggs in June and during a summer, such as we had in 2003, the butterflies emerge in comparatively large numbers, in July and August.

In favourable years, these are sometimes joined by a huge migration in the early Autumn, resulting in this beautiful butterfly becoming a common sight on our buddleias and sedums late in the year. In other years, only single specimens may be seen and these, only in the south and east.



One of the greatest migrations ever recorded was in 1903, when hundreds of thousands were seen crossing the south and east coasts and the flight continued for five or six days. Huge numbers settled wherever flowers were abundant and it is said that, "the fields were obscured by the fluttering masses".

The early-comers lay their eggs on various types of thistle. These hatch after a week and the caterpillar feeds for about twenty five days before pupating. The butterfly emerges towards the end of July and August and has been known to pair again and produce eggs and larvae in the late Autumn. These, however, succumb to the first cold and wet weather of our northern winters, which are normally fatal to the butterfly in all its stages.

My black and white drawing Can hardly do justice to this butterfly, which can hold its own for beauty with most exotic tropical species, but its pinkish- orange, near-black and white markings are distinctive and well worth looking out for as a new butterfly season gets under way.

With the advent of global warming, who knows, we might see the like of 1903 again!

Peter Waite

