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Orange-tip Butterfly by Michael Blencowe of the Sussex Wildlife Trust

At this time of year I’m often asked “What’s that butterfly with the orange tips on the end of its wings called?” “Well,” I reply “its scientific name is Anthocharis meaning ‘flower grace’; probably because this beautiful butterfly lends a certain grace to the flowers it frequents. In the 18th century it was ‘The Lady of the Woods’ –a seductive title well deserved by the best-looking butterfly of the spring. The Germans celebrate its beauty in the name Aurotafalter; the sunrise butterfly. The French honour it with the poetic title L’Auroré - the rising sun.” “So what do the British call it?” “Well, we call it the Orange-tip – because it has orange tips on the end of its wings.”

Whoever gave this exquisite insect such an unimaginative name should be ashamed. It’s more than just a pair of orange tips. Forget your Bluebells and Skylarks, the emergence of the Orange-tip is nature’s confirmation that spring has officially sprung. Only the male Orange-tip has those road cone orange wing-tips that visually scream “Look at me! Look at me!” as he cruises the countryside’s hedges and edges. You’d think this flamboyant display would land him on the menu for any passing bird - but he has an unsavoury secret. He tastes absolutely disgusting. His orange tips make birds recoil when they recall last eating something that colour. To predators he is a flying pot of lime pickle; if you’ve eaten it once, you’ll never eat it again.

The grey-tipped females are more secretive. Once mated they search the hedgerows for their food plants; Cuckooflower and Garlic Mustard. They tap-dance on the plants and identify them with taste buds in their feet. Once their six soles are satisfied they lay a single, tiny, orange, rugby ball shaped egg. The egg’s shell emits a pheromone which deters other females from laying here because the cute little caterpillar, which hatches out a week or so later, is a cannibal. This caterpillar gets to work eating the flower’s seed pods, and it eats so many that it starts to look like one (my Mum once warned me a similar phenomenon would happen with me and Monster Munch crisps). Disguised as its diet, it merrily munches throughout May and the plant toxins it ingests will help to flavour the bitter butterfly it will become. In July, the caterpillar constructs a curious chrysalis, a bizarre bit of angular architecture attached to a stem by a single string. Inside this post-modern pupa the caterpillar melts into a cellular soup. And then the natural world’s greatest regeneration takes place. This biological broth builds a butterfly and the April sunshine encourages the Orange-tip to emerge; that simple flash of orange signalling that an even greater regeneration has finally taken place. Winter has turned to spring.