The red admiral is a large, strong-winged butterfly common to gardens all summer long. They are familiar yet distinctive, and can be found anywhere in Britain and Ireland, in a variety of habitats. Most are migratory, traveling northwards each spring from North Africa and continental Europe, but some adults will hibernate over winter in garden sheds. Immigrant females lay eggs, which emerge as new butterflies from July onwards.

The peacock is one of the most recognisable butterflies, with bright and colourful eyespots on its wings, which evolved to scare off predators. Though its upperwings are flamboyant, its underwings are dark and appear crinkled, like dead leaves. Peacocks are strong flyers found throughout the British countryside. They enjoy the shelter of woodland clearings and edges.

As its name suggests, this butterfly has large, white wings, whose black tips differentiate it from its smaller cousin, the small white. The female has two black spots on its forewings, and both male and female have creamy-white underwings. Large whites can be found in gardens and allotments. They are sometimes called cabbage whites, as the caterpillars love to feed on cabbage.

The painted lady has similar colouring to the small tortoiseshell, though its orange is paler and its brown is focused mainly on the wing tips, where it meets with white spots. The painted lady migrates long distances, each year flying north from North Africa, the Middle East and central Asia. They return to mainland Europe, reaching Britain and Ireland and creating a spectacular show. Some years, they are abundant and enjoy visits to flowery gardens.

The comma butterfly is brightly coloured, with multiple shades of orange, deep brown spots, and intensely scalloped edges. It gets its name from the small, bright-white, comma-shaped marking on its otherwise-brown underwings. The comma’s colouring and shape helps conceal hibernating adults in dead leaves over the winter. They range widely in the summer, looking for nectar and rotting fruit, but stick to open woodland and wood edges for breeding and hibernating.

The speckled wood is mostly brown and gets its name from the pale dots and speckles on its wings and its tendency to fly in partially shaded woodland. Speckled woods can be seen in woodlands, gardens and hedgerows, and may chase each other through the air. These are territorial butterflies, whose males usually perch in pools of sunlight, from where they will rapidly rise to ward off intruders. You’ll rarely see speckled woods feeding on flowers, as they prefer the honeydew (a sugary substance left behind by aphids) in the treetops.

If you see a butterfly with solid blue wings in a park or garden, it is most likely to be a holly blue. Their undersides are very pale blue, with delicate black spots, and the females can be recognised by their black wing edges. Though its upperwings are flame-like, its underwings are dark and appear crinkled, like dead leaves. Holly blues are strong flyers found throughout the British countryside. They enjoy the shelter of woodland clearings and edges.

The small tortoiseshell can be seen almost any time during the year. Uniquely, they’re often seen in urban areas, which is one reason why it’s one of the most familiar butterfly species. Small tortoiseshells have orange, with a unique black, white and brown pattern, and slightly wavy edges, edged in light blue. They’re one of the first butterflies seen in early spring, and they visit garden flowers in large numbers in the autumn.

The small white has similar colouring to the small tortoiseshell, though its orange is paler and its brown is focused mainly on the wing tips, where it meets with white spots. The small white is found in woodland, gardens and hedgerows, and may chase each other through the air. These are territorial butterflies, whose males usually perch in pools of sunlight, from where they will rapidly rise to ward off intruders. You’ll rarely see small whites feeding on flowers, as they prefer the honeydew (a sugary substance left behind by aphids) in the treetops.

The Holly Blue
Celastrina argiolus

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