

EU Grassland Butterfly Index 1991-2024

Technical report



Butterfly
CONSERVATION EUROPE

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Photo: Chris van Swaay



This work was funded by the European Union through the EMBRACE (Expanding Monitoring of Butterflies for Restoration and Conservation across Europe 2021-2026) project (Contract no. 090201/2024/929792/SER/ENV.D2, European Commission DG Environment).

EU Grassland Butterfly Index 1991-2024

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Van Swaay C.A.M., Schmucki R., Roy D.B., Dennis E.B., Collins S., Fox R., Kolev Z.D., Sevilleja C.G., Warren M.S., Whitfield A., Wynhoff I., Arnberg H.J.H., Balalaikins M., Barea-Azcón J.M., Barkmann F., Boe A.M.B., Bonelli S., Botham M.S., Bourn N.A.D., Cancela J.P., Caritg R., Dapporto L., Ducry A., Dušej G., de Flores M., Dopagne C., Escobés R., Eskildsen A.E., Fric Z.F., Fernández-García J.M., Fontaine B., Glogovčan P., Gohli J., Gracianteparaluceta A., Grill A., Harpke A., Harrower C., Heliölä J.K., Høye T.T., Judge M., Kati V., Krenn H.W., Kühn E., Kuussaari M., Lang A., Lehner D., Lysaght L., Maes D., McGowan D., Melero Y., Mestdagh X., Middlebrook I., Monasterio Y., Monteiro E., Montes A., Munguira M.L., Musche M., Olivares F.J., Ozden O., Pladevall C., Pavličko A., Pettersson L.B., Rákossy L., Roth T., Rüdissler J., Šašić M., Scalercio S., Schönwälder M., Settele J., Sielezniew I., Sielezniew M., Sobczyk-Moran G., Stefanescu C., Švitra G., Svabadfalvi A., Tiitsaar A., Titeux N., Tzirkalli E., Tzortzakaki O., Ubach-Permanyer A., Vičiuvienė E., Vray S., Zografou K. (2025). *EU Grassland Butterfly Index 1991-2024 Technical report*. Butterfly Conservation Europe & EMBRACE/eBMS (www.butterfly-monitoring.net) & Vlinderstichting report VS2025.023.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18414227>

Keywords

Butterfly, Grassland, Monitoring, Trend, Index, Europe, European Union, Indicator, Biodiversity

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December 2025



Acknowledgements

We thank the European Union for funding the EMBRACE (Expanding Monitoring of Butterflies for Restoration and Conservation across Europe 2021-2026) project (Contract no. 090201/2024/929792/SER/ENV.D2, European Commission DG Environment).

The European Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (eBMS) is indebted to the constituent National Butterfly Monitoring Schemes, their funders and all volunteers who contribute data. At the time of producing this report, the eBMS is a partnership of the following organisations: the Natural Environment Research Council (acting through NC International, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology), Butterfly Conservation UK, Helmholtz-Zentrum für Umweltforschung GmbH – UFZ, Butterfly Conservation Germany (GfS), De Vlinderstichting, Catalonia BMS, Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE), Butterfly Conservation Europe (BCE), Research Institute Nature and Forest (INBO), Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle (MNHN) CNRS-UPMC & OPI, Lund University, National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC) Ireland, Luxembourg Institute of Science and Technology (LIST), Asociación Española para la Protección de las Mariposas y su Medio -ZERYNTIA, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, University of Ljubljana, Hungarian Lepidoptera Monitoring Network as part of the Szalkay Hungarian Lepidopterist's Society, Zoolab Department of Life Sciences and Systematics, TAGIS – Centro de Conservação das Borboletas de Portugal, Biodiversity Monitoring Switzerland, Czech Butterfly Conservation Society, University of Innsbruck - Butterfly Monitoring Viel-Falter, Croatian Natural History Museum, Apollo-grBMS and Lithuanian BMS.

The Viel-Falter Monitoring Scheme (www.viel-falter.at) is coordinated by the Department of Ecology at the University of Innsbruck and implemented together with the Natural History Collections of the Tiroler Landesmuseen Betriebsgesellschaft m.b.H., inatura—Erlebnis Naturschau GmbH, and EURAC research. It is financially supported by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management, the federal provinces of Tyrol and Vorarlberg, as well as by the private Foundation Blühendes Österreich.

The Danish Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (2023-2027) is funded by the 15. Juni Fonden and AAGE V. JENSEN NATURFOND and is grateful to all Danish volunteers for their invaluable efforts in the field.

The Finnish Butterfly Monitoring Scheme is organized by the Finnish Environment Institute (Syke) and funded by the Finnish Ministry of Environment

The French Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (« Suivi Temporel des Rhopalocères de France, STERF ») is a cooperation between the MNHN (Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle) and Opie (Office pour les insectes et leur environnement), with the support of French biodiversity Office (OFB), as part of the national plan for butterflies.

The German Butterfly Monitoring Scheme is a cooperation between the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ and German Butterfly Conservation (GfS).

The Irish Butterfly Monitoring Scheme is funded by the Heritage Council and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

The Italian Butterfly Monitoring Scheme is a cooperation among University of Turin, University of Florence and the Council for Agricultural Research and Agricultural of Cosenza.

The Nature Conservation Agency of Latvia kindly provided the BMS data for Latvia.

The Butterfly Monitoring Scheme in Luxembourg is coordinated by the Luxembourg Institute of Science and Technology and is co-funded by the Ministry of the Environment, Climate and Biodiversity.

The Dutch Butterfly Monitoring Scheme is a co-operation between Dutch Butterfly Conservation and Statistics Netherlands (CBS), part of the Network Ecological Monitoring (NEM) and financially supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature (LVVN).

Jacqueline Loos, Iulia Muntean, Franz Kalhard and László Rákossy were important contributors to the Romanian part of the AMIGA project.

The Society for the Conservation and Study of Lepidoptera in Slovenia was kind to supply the Slovenian data.

Spanish Butterfly Monitoring Scheme is coordinated by the association SOCEME, with the collaboration of Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM), Spanish Ministry of Environment (MITECO), Spanish National Parks Agency (OAPN), Sierra Nevada Global Change Observatory, and ICTS-Doñana (Doñana Biological Station, CSIC).

The Butterfly Monitoring Scheme in Spain coordinated by ZERYNTHIA receives support from various public institutions, as regional and local administrations across the Iberian Peninsula and the Canary Islands.

The Czech Butterfly Monitoring Scheme was funded by the Biology Centre CAS and is run in cooperation with the Czech Agency for Nature Conservation and the Czech Butterfly Conservation (SOM).

The Basque Country Butterfly Monitoring Scheme has been funded by the Basque Government since 2008 and is jointly coordinated by Hazi Foundation and ZERYNTHIA.

The Catalan Butterfly Monitoring Scheme is funded by the Departament d'Acció Climàtica, Alimentació i Agenda Rural de la Generalitat de Catalunya, i per la Diputació de Barcelona.

The Urban Butterfly Monitoring Scheme uBMS running in Barcelona and Madrid cities is coordinated at CREA, supported by the Fundación Biodiversidad (Ministerio de Transición Ecológica, 2018) and by the Barcelona City Hall (since 2019). The project sincerely thanks its funders and all its volunteers.

The Swedish Butterfly Monitoring Scheme is coordinated by Lund University and is funded by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency.

The Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) kindly provided the BDM data.

The UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme is organised and funded by Butterfly Conservation, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, British Trust for Ornithology, and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. The UKBMS is indebted to all volunteers who contribute data to the scheme.

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Executive Summary

1. Butterflies have been **systematically monitored in Europe for several decades** using standard protocols that are now adopted in over 30 countries. Butterflies are ideal biological indicators: they are well-documented, measurable, sensitive to environmental change, occur in a wide range of habitat types, represent many other insects, and are popular with the public because of their beauty.
2. Records from **over 16,150 standardized butterfly transects** are gathered by National BMS and integrated into a central database as part of the European Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (eBMS) run by Butterfly Conservation Europe (BCE) and the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (UKCEH). The database provides trends on individual species, which can be combined to give trends for different habitats.
3. In this report, **trends for 17 species have been used to generate an updated Grassland Butterfly Index (GBI) for 1991-2024**, using data from all 27 EU countries. The GBI is mentioned explicitly in the EU Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR) in Article 11 on the Restoration of Agricultural Ecosystems as one of the three indicators that Member States can elect to monitor. Member States choosing the GBI as one of their two mandatory indicators shall achieve an increasing trend at the national level until the satisfactory levels as set in accordance with Article 14(5) are reached.
4. **The EU Grassland Butterfly Index shows a decline of 47% since 1991.** In North-western Europe, the decline is primarily attributed to habitat loss resulting from the intensification of agricultural grasslands, nitrogen deposition and pesticide drift in nature reserves. In Northern Europe (Scandinavia, Finland and the Baltic states), Eastern and Southern Europe and the Alps, the abandonment of grasslands is also a strong driver as shrubs and secondary forest encroachment result in net habitat loss for grassland butterflies. The decline observed over the last 34 years likely reveals only part of the historical decline in grassland butterflies, as many populations were extirpated from the landscape before 1990.
5. **The GBI is the indicator on the EU Dashboard Target 5** for evaluating progress with improving agroecosystems for biodiversity. It is also part of the EU Sustainable Development Indicator set for evaluating the implementation of the Global and EU Biodiversity Strategy.
6. This report provides an essential message from scientists to policymakers - that **butterflies are still declining at an alarming rate across the EU and that urgent action is required to protect and restore habitats to reverse this trend**, not only for butterflies but also for other wild insect pollinators and their ecosystem services. The completion and appropriate management of the Natura 2000 network across Europe are crucial for helping grassland butterflies. Restoration and creation of landscapes with mosaics of habitats, both within and outside Natura 2000 areas, are essential to protect grassland butterflies in the EU.
7. We are grateful to the many **thousands of volunteer butterfly recorders** who contribute their records to this important database, to the many BMS schemes, coordinators and funders who support the work, and to the EU for funding the eBMS through the EMBRACE project.

Chapter 1 / Introduction

There is mounting evidence of widespread declines in the diversity and abundance of insects across the globe (Sánchez-Bayo & Wyckhuys 2019, Seibold et al. 2019, van Klink et al. 2020, Wagner 2020). This gives a stark warning of the precarious state of biodiversity and demonstrates that addressing the gap in knowledge of the status of insects is vital (Cardoso et al. 2020, Samways et al. 2020). Insects are estimated to comprise more than half of all described species and are a dominant component of biodiversity in most ecosystems (Bar-On et al. 2018). Insects also play a crucial role in the functioning of ecosystems. They supply many ecosystem services such as pollination, biological pest control, soil fertility regulation and diverse cultural ecosystem services, but also disservices such as damage to crops and spread of diseases to livestock and humans (Gutierrez-Arellano & Mulligan 2018, Noriega et al. 2018). There is a pressing need to assess the status of insects to set and evaluate conservation targets.

More than half of the 501 European butterflies occur in grassland habitats (dry, alpine, subalpine, mesophilic and dry siliceous grasslands and steppes; van Swaay et al. 2006). As in many other parts of the world, several butterfly species have declined dramatically in Europe (Warren et al. 2021). These declines are often linked to habitat loss and unsuitable environmental conditions due to land-use change, pesticide applications and other pollution and climate change (Van Swaay et al. 2025, Rashid et al. 2023).

In May 2020, the European Commission adopted the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. It aims to ensure that Europe's biodiversity will be on the path to recovery by 2030 for the benefit of people, the planet, the climate and our economy, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the objectives of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. It addresses the five main drivers of biodiversity loss, sets out an enhanced governance framework to fill remaining gaps, ensures the full implementation of EU legislation, and pulls together all existing efforts. The strategy established in the EU Nature Restoration Plan includes "*Bringing back nature to agricultural land*" and uses the Grassland Butterfly Index (GBI) as the policy indicator for Target 5 to reverse the decline of pollinators (see the [EU Action Tracker](#)).

The EU used the strategy as an example to help agree and adopt a transformative post-2020 global framework at the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity held in Montreal, Canada, in December 2022.

The Grassland Butterfly Index (GBI) is specifically mentioned in the EU [Nature Restoration Regulation](#) (NRR), which came into force on 18 August 2024. Article 11 on the restoration of agricultural ecosystems lists the GBI as one of the three indicators that Member States can elect to monitor from 18 August 2024 until 31 December 2030 (in practice from 2025 onwards), and every six years thereafter. Member States shall achieve an increasing trend at the national level until the satisfactory levels as set in accordance with Article 14(5) are reached. The methodology used by the Member States to calculate their national GBI shall mirror the methodology used to produce the EU GBI (see [NNR Article 20 and NNR Annex IV](#)). It is currently unclear which Member States will opt for the GBI as an indicator for Article 11; this will only become evident in the National Restoration Plans that Member States are required to prepare by September 2026.

Parallel to the GBI being listed as an indicator in Article 11 of the Nature Restoration Regulation, Article 10 aims to stop the decline of pollinators by 2030 and is accompanied by a delegated act for "establishing a science-based method for monitoring pollinator diversity and pollinator populations". Fieldwork for this will start in 2027. Article 4 on the Restoration of terrestrial, coastal and freshwater

ecosystems requires Member States to achieve an increasing trend towards the sufficient quality and quantity of the habitats of the species listed in Annexes II, IV and V of the Habitats Directive, which include a number of butterfly species that contribute to the GBI.

Some of the EU biodiversity indicators provide specific measurements and trends on species and ecosystem/landscape diversity, but many have a more indirect link to biodiversity. Very few have been explicitly established to assess biodiversity. The status indicators for species recovery include only birds and butterflies, as these are the only taxa/species groups for which reasonably harmonised European monitoring data are available (EEA, 2012). This technical report builds upon previous reports on the EU Grassland Butterfly Indicator (e.g., van Swaay et al. 2019).

Butterflies are ideal biological indicators: they are well-documented, measurable, sensitive to environmental change, respond rapidly, occur in a wide range of habitats, represent many other insect groups, and are popular with the public because of their beauty (Erhardt & Thomas 1991). Field monitoring is essential to assess changes in their abundance. Indicators based on butterfly monitoring data are valuable for understanding the state of the environment and for evaluating policies and their implementation. Trained volunteers are a cost-effective way to gather robust data on butterflies, especially when supported by informative materials and efficient online recording tools.

This report underscores a vital message for policymakers: butterfly populations continue to decline at an alarming rate across the EU. Urgent action to protect and restore habitats is essential—not only to reverse this trend for butterflies and other wild insect pollinators, but to safeguard the ecosystem services on which we all depend.



Chapter 2 / Butterfly Monitoring in Europe

Butterfly monitoring is increasingly popular in Europe, mainly supported by Butterfly Conservation Europe (BCE) and its partners. Although Butterfly Monitoring Schemes are present in an increasing number of countries and new ones are being established in many regions, long time series are currently available for only a limited number of countries. For the EU Grassland Butterfly Indicator (GBI) presented in this report, we used data from all 27 Member States of the European Union (Figure 1; see Figure 5 for EU27 and Europe-wide GBI).

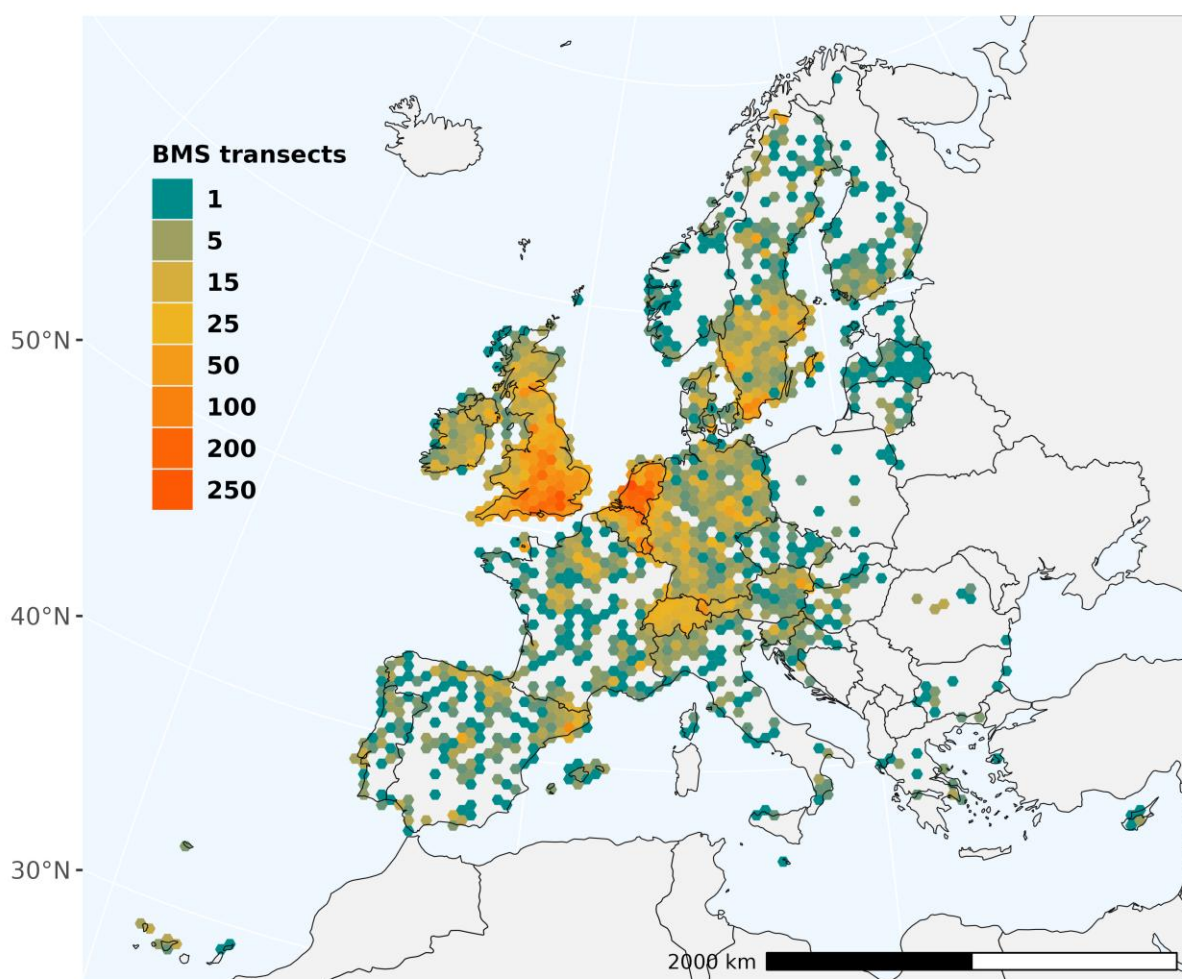


Figure 1: Density of Butterfly Monitoring sites since 1990, based on eBMS v7.0.

The indicator uses data from the latest version of the [eBMS \(v7.0\)](#) database, which includes data up to the end of the 2024 field season. In the previous technical report on the indicator up to 2023 (Van Swaay et al., 2025b), the method for calculating the indicator was also improved.

In 2024, more than 3,800 standardised butterfly transects distributed across 28 monitoring schemes in nearly all EU27 Member States were counted (Figure 2). Since 1990, more than 9,600 separate transects have contributed to the EU27 GBI indicator. Outside the EU, 6,551 additional transects have been counted in Europe, mainly in the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Norway.

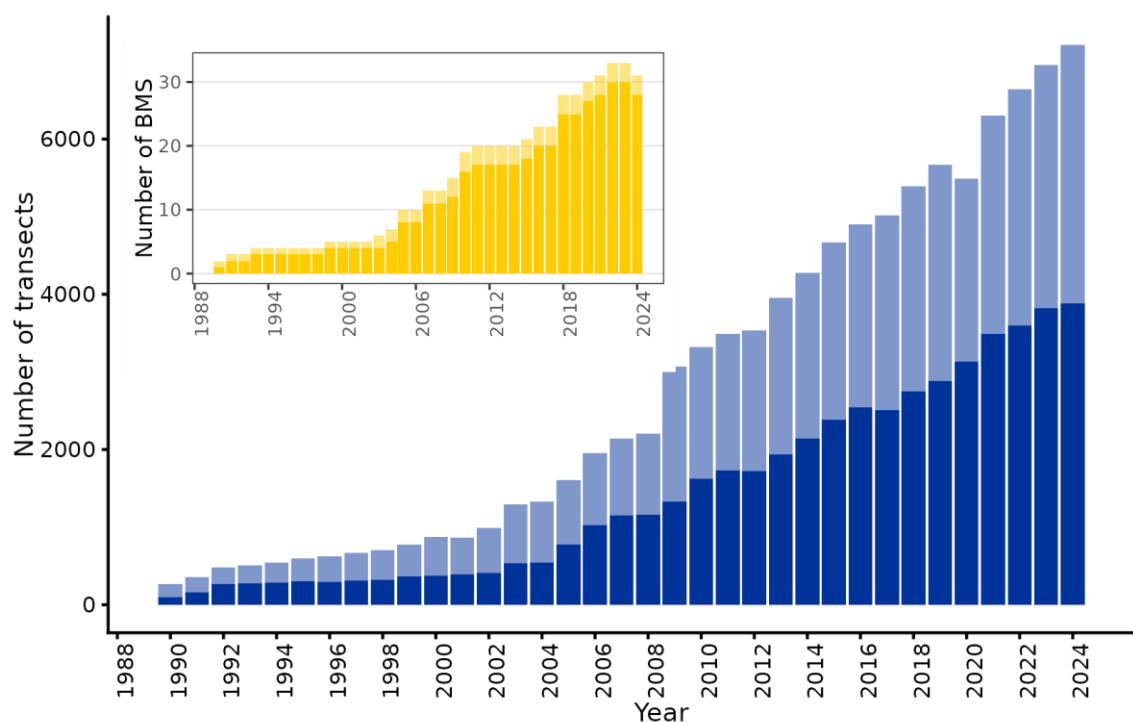


Figure 2: Number of butterfly monitoring transects (blue) and number of Butterfly Monitoring Schemes (yellow) in Europe. Dark colored=EU27, light colored = rest of Europe. For 2024, data from Malta, Croatia and Sierra Nevada have not been received on time to be included in this analysis.



Chapter 3 / From butterfly counts to indicators

Butterflies can be found throughout Europe and are among the best-known groups of insects. Although popular, little was known about their density and trends until recently. In this chapter, we will describe how counts are made and how they can be used to detect trends and to build indicators.

Fieldwork

The butterfly indicators are based on field observations conducted by thousands of trained volunteers and professional recorders, who have counted butterflies on more than 16,000 transects across Europe. These counts are made under standardised conditions, providing high-quality data that are suitable to assess species status and trends. National coordinators collect the data and perform the first quality control.

All schemes apply the method initially developed for the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (Pollard & Yates, 1993). The counts are conducted along fixed transects of 0.2 to 3 kilometres in length, divided into smaller sections for recording. The fieldworkers record all butterflies observed 2.5 metres to their right, 2.5 metres to their left, 5 metres ahead of them, and 5 metres above them (Van Swaay *et al.* 2008). Butterfly counts are conducted between March-April and September-October, depending on the region. In some places (e.g., Andalusia, Canary Islands), monitoring is conducted all year round, although it sometimes pauses in July-August due to the hot and dry summer. Visits are only conducted when weather conditions meet specific criteria. The recommended number of visits varies from weekly (e.g., in the UK, Catalonia, and the Netherlands) to 3-5 visits annually in France. In Austria (Viel-Falter) and Switzerland, the BMS employs a stratified sampling design, in which a portion (25% and 20%, respectively) of the sites is monitored annually, allowing coverage of all sites every four or five years. This protocol enables representative and high-frequency monitoring in areas where access presents specific challenges (alpine sites).



European Butterfly Monitoring Scheme database

The European Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (eBMS) database is a collation of standardized butterfly counts recorded along Pollard walks repeated in time (since 1976 in the UK). Since 1990, volunteers and professionals have recorded nearly 60.6 million butterflies identified at the species level in the eBMS database. These counts have been recorded over more than 1.34 million monitoring events (e.g., BMS transect visits) and curated by National Butterfly Monitoring Schemes (BMS). In terms of sampling effort, together these visits covered over 16,000 transects (Figure 1), distributed across 36 monitoring schemes and 31 countries (Figure 2), with 9,605 monitoring sites in EU27 Member States.

The eBMS database is updated annually by gathering data from the National BMS, with each update released as a major version (e.g., v7.0). Subsequent corrections, additions, and bug fixes are identified and released as minor version updates (e.g., v7.1). Source data files are sent by National BMS and processed programmatically to ensure adequate standardization and formatting of the data before being integrated into the eBMS database.

Transect selection

To allow for robust and unbiased inference of temporal population trends at the national or regional scale, transects should ideally be selected in a grid, random, or stratified random manner (Sutherland, 2006). Several recent schemes, e.g. in Switzerland and Austria, France and Luxembourg (Mestdagh *et al.* 2024), have been designed in this way (Henry *et al.* 2008). If a scheme aims to monitor rare or policy-relevant species, coordinators and observers will tend to locate transects in areas where these species are found, which may lead to an overrepresentation of special and protected areas. In most schemes, transect locations have been freely chosen by observers, which in some cases has led to an over-representation of protected areas in natural areas and an under-representation of the wider countryside and urban areas (Pollard & Yates, 1993). However, this is not the case in all countries (e.g., Germany, Kühn *et al.* 2008), and several schemes have addressed this problem by establishing new sites in rural (e.g., [WWider Countryside Butterfly Survey - WCBS](#)), urban (e.g., [urban Butterfly Monitoring Scheme - uBMS](#)), and other underrepresented areas, or correcting for this bias by weighting (Netherlands).

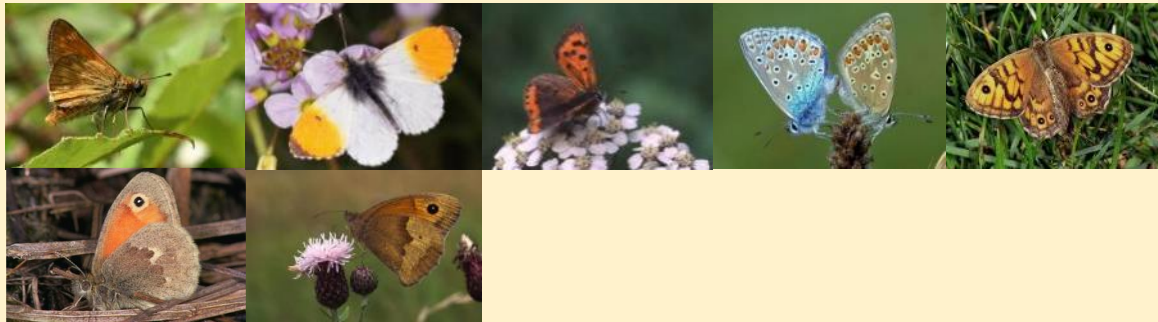
Calculating the EU27 Grassland Butterfly Indicator (GBI)

Butterfly trends can be calculated at various scales by integrating observations from specific habitats, individual monitoring schemes (BMS), or larger regions by aggregating data from multiple schemes. For the EU Grassland Butterfly Indicator (GBI), we combined annual abundance indices collected at the scheme level and aggregated data across the European Union Member States to estimate annual indices and trends for the EU-27 for each of the selected 17 grassland butterfly species (Box 1). These indices are then combined to produce a time series of multi-species indices and inform the EU Grassland Butterfly Indicator. For full details on the method, see Annex I.

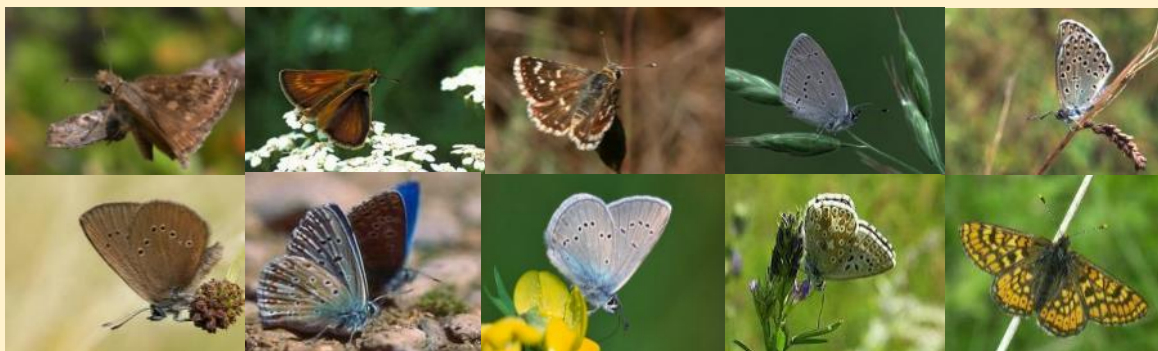
Phenology and Site indices

Time series of individual butterfly counts are recorded at regular intervals (e.g., weekly, fortnightly, monthly) over the extent of the adult activity season (i.e. flying imago). These time series often have missing counts due to unsuitable weather conditions or the recorder's unavailability. Because the number of adult butterflies flying every week is strongly determined by species' seasonal patterns (phenology), it is essential to account for these patterns and correct for missing observations when estimating the annual abundance of a given species at a given site. This correction is achieved by calculating and imputing expected counts for weeks with missing counts, allowing us to estimate standardised annual abundance indices.

To predict expected weekly counts, we first estimated the standardised flight curve by fitting a generalised additive model (GAM) to the weekly counts recorded at the different sites (Dennis *et al.* 2013, 2016), using sites and monitoring week as predictors. To account for regional and annual differences in species phenology, we estimated flight curves for each year and bioclimatic region (Schmucki *et al.* 2016). Therefore, we divided our European dataset into 15 rectangular geographic windows that encompass specific subsets of BMS (Table S1), within which we estimated annual flight curves for each of the 17 species and environmental zones (Metzger 2018). From these models, we derived regional annual flight curves standardised to 1 (area under the curve = 1) and estimated the expected values for each week and location during the monitoring season. These weekly estimates were then used to correct for missing values in the weekly time series. The corrected time series (observed and imputed weekly counts) were used to calculate the annual abundance index for each site and monitoring season. The standardised abundance indices correspond to the expected total number of butterflies observed at a given site.



Widespread species: *Ochlodes sylvanus*, *Anthocharis cardamines*, *Lycaena phlaeas*, *Polyommatus icarus*, *Lasiommata megera*, *Coenonympha pamphilus* and *Maniola jurtina*



Specialist species: *Erynnis tages*, *Thymelicus acteon*, *Spialia sertorius*, *Cupido minimus*, *Phengaris arion*, *Phengaris nausithous*, *Lysandra bellargus*, *Cyaniris semiargus*, *Lysandra coridon* and *Euphydryas aurinia*

Box 1. Counts of 17 butterflies were used to build the European Grassland Butterfly Indicator, comprising seven widespread and ten specialist species.

Collated abundance index

For each monitoring scheme (BMS), we estimated series of annual abundances by calculating the collated indices from local abundance indices. The collated index indicates the total number of adult butterflies of a given species that are expected to be reported on a 1 km transect. Except for three rare species for which few data were available, we calculated the annual collated abundance index for each species and monitoring scheme (BMS) for which at least three years of data were available. For the three rare species (*P. arion*, *P. nausithous*, *S. sertorius*), we estimated the collated index directly at the EU27 scale by using all available site indices without first collating at the BMS level.

To calculate the collated index, we fitted a generalised linear model (GLM) for each BMS with site and year as predictors. In this model, we accounted for different transect lengths by including relative length as an offset. Using this model, we estimated standardised collated indices based on the average abundance estimated for a standardised 1 km transect. This model also includes a weighting factor proportional to the portion of the flight period monitored. This weight accounts for relative sampling effort and reduces the influence of sites with potentially less reliable annual abundance indices due to reduced monitoring effort (i.e. fewer visits). To avoid unreliable estimates, we also excluded all abundance indices that were more than 3 times the mean absolute deviation from the median and were thus identified as extreme and unreliable estimates within the scheme.

Multi-schemes (EU27) species abundance index

To estimate species abundance across the 27 EU Member States, we calculated a multi-scheme abundance index using the weighted geometric mean across schemes (BMS). First, we converted the collated abundance indices to a logarithmic scale (base 10). On this scale, we set the first year of each time series to a value of two (2), which corresponds to an abundance of 100 on the exponential scale (i.e. $10^2 = 100$). The logarithmic scale allows us to align time series of different lengths and facilitates the interpretation of the relative rate of change. When calculating the abundance of EU27 species, the geometric mean was weighted by the proportion of the species' range monitored by each scheme (BMS). Using the latest IUCN distribution map (www.iucnredlist.org), we calculated the weighting based on the overlap between the convex hull (area) of the monitoring site and the range of the species.

Since the first year of the time series is set to 100, the weighted geometric mean (Grassland Butterfly Index - GBI) calculated across BMS is also 100 in the first year. The GBI of all subsequent years is therefore considered relative to the initial value of 100. For time series (BMS) that started after the first year of the GBI (i.e. 1991), the new series is rescaled by setting the first year to the value of the multi-scheme species abundance index calculated from the already active BMS. For example, if a scheme starts five years after the first year of the multi-schemes index, the new scheme's time series will be set to the multi-schemes index value calculated in year five from the already contributing schemes. In this way, we can align the new time series with the older ones without distorting the time series of the multi-scheme species abundance index. If values were missing in the series after the first year, we used the value of the last non-missing year to fill the time series. In this way, the imputed values are informed by the scheme without influencing the multi-scheme trend in either direction for the years for which data are not available.

Multi-species trend and the EU27 Grassland Butterfly Indicators

The EU Grassland Butterfly Indicator (GBI) is the trend of the combined index calculated for the 17 grassland species across the 27 EU Member States (Figure 3). Following the same approach as for the multi-scheme index, we aggregated the annual multi-scheme index for the 17 grassland butterfly species by computing the geometric mean across all species, assigning equal weight to each species, and setting the first year to 100. For species with shorter time series, we rescaled the time series by setting the first year to the geometric mean for that year. By calculating the geometric mean of the standardised rather than the absolute abundance indices, each species is given equal weight. The resulting time series of the annual multi-species geometric means (grassland butterfly index) is then used to calculate the trend and the annual indices for the EU Grassland Butterfly Indicator.

Like the bird indicators (Gregory *et al.* 2005), this approach provides a consistent measure of biodiversity in which an increase in one species can be offset by a proportional decrease in another species, resulting in a stable trend (indicator). On the other hand, if the number of declining species exceeds the number of increasing species, the multi-species trend will reflect an overall decline; conversely, if the number of increasing species exceeds the number of declining species, the trend will reflect an overall increase. Further details on the methods used to calculate population trends and the indicator at the EU27 level can be found in Annex I.

Chapter 4 / Grassland Butterfly Trends

The European Grassland Butterfly Indicator is built from the trends of 17 European butterfly species. In this chapter, we provide an overview of the trends in grassland butterflies across the EU27. The EU27 aggregated trends are calculated for each species by calculating the weighted geometric mean across Butterfly Monitoring Schemes (BMS) in the EU Member States. This method enables weighing the contribution of each BMS relative to the area of the species' range it encompasses.

Species trends in EU27

Across the 17 indicator species, none show a significant increase, four are stable, twelve show a significant decline and for one species, *Euphydryas aurina*, no significant linear trend could be detected in the EU27 countries (Figure 3). More species show declining trends than in the previous report covering the period 1991-2023, mainly due to more data being available and longer time-series, generating significant trends for species with uncertain trends in the previous report (Van Swaay et al., 2025b).

Four species are listed on the new European Red List of Butterflies (Van Swaay, 2025a) as Near Threatened in the European Union: *Erynnis tages*, *Lysandra bellargus*, *Phengaris arion* and *Phengaris nausithous*. Except for *E. tages*, these species show a linear decline on the eBMS transects in the EU. Although currently classified as stable, *E. tages* has been declining since 2010, following an initial increase, suggesting that its trend may continue to decline in the near future.

Three butterfly species are mentioned in the Annexes of the Habitats Directive: *Euphydryas aurinia*, *Phengaris arion* and *Phengaris nausithous*. The two *Phengaris* species show a significant decline in the EU, with the trend for *E. aurinia* uncertain.

When interpreting the species trends, it is important to recognise that:

- With fewer BMS in earlier years, the data cover a lower proportion of the species' populations and thus are likely to provide a less representative sample at the beginning of the time series (see also figure 1). As the number of countries and monitoring programmes increases over time, both the representativeness and the accuracy of the indices increase (see details in Annex II).
- Species monitored on relatively few sites and/or with very large year-to-year fluctuations in abundance are likely to have indices with wider confidence intervals around and uncertain trends. With longer time series, more species will show significant trends, even when a species has large annual fluctuations.
- Although all EU27 member states have a Butterfly Monitoring Scheme, some have few sites and/or started relatively recently (i.e. as part of the ABLE and SPRING projects (2019 - 2022)), resulting in time series of different lengths and geographic coverage.
- As new countries and schemes join and contribute with new data, trends can change and differ from previous versions of the indicator. For some species, the addition of new regions can even impact the direction of the trend.
- For 13 of the 17 species, the median value of the linear trend is declining (Figure 4), though not all these trends are significant.
- If these declines continue unchanged up to 2030, some of the GBI species will show declines approaching over 90% by then.

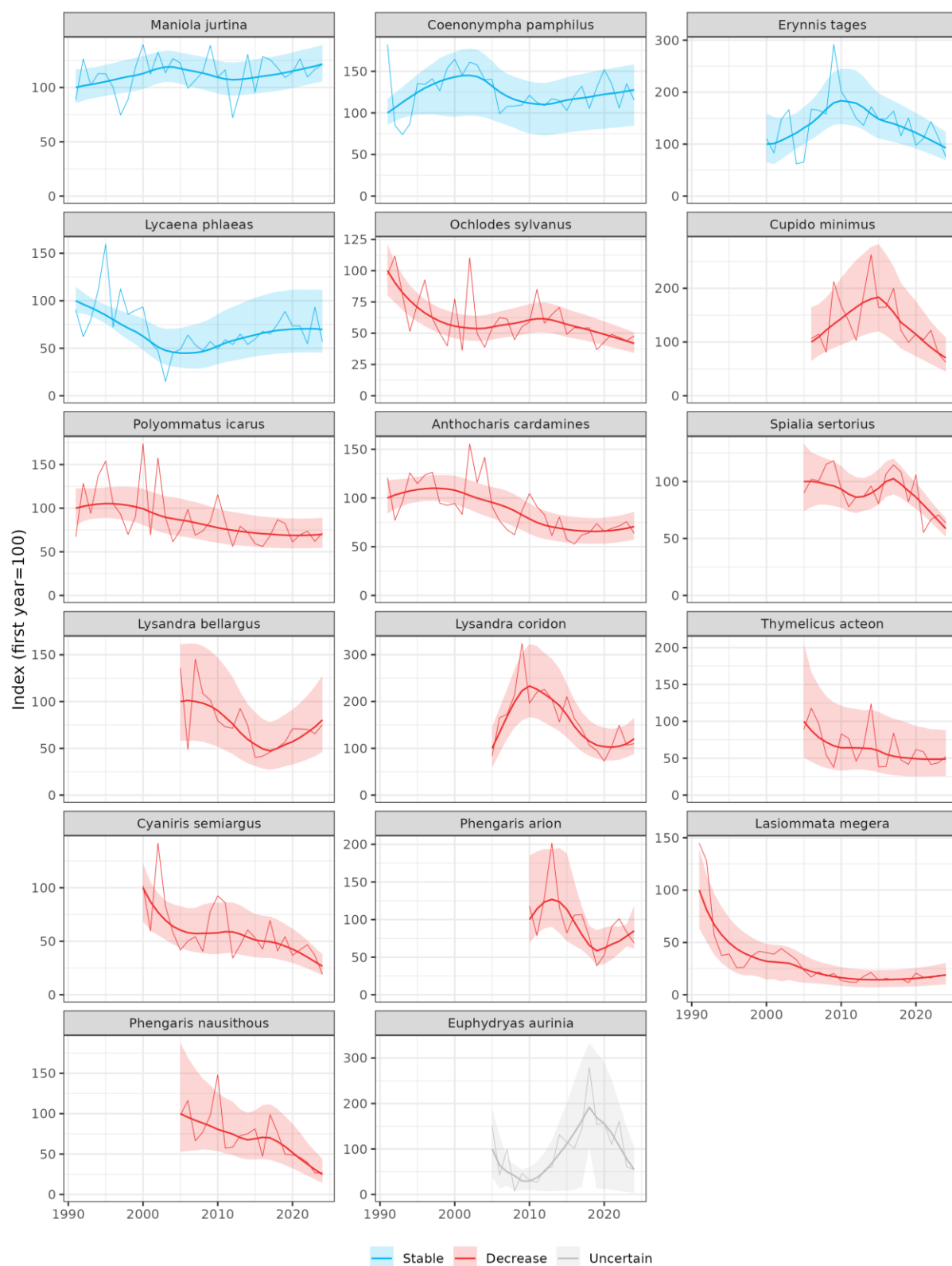


Figure 3: Indexes (thin line) and LOESS smoothed trends (thick line) in the EU27 for all 17 butterflies listed on the Grassland Butterfly Indicator from 1991 (or later, if the first year for which indexes could be calculated was after 1991) to 2024. The index of the first year is set to 100, and the shaded area represents the 80% bootstrap confidence interval of the smoothed trend. The color indicates the linear trend.

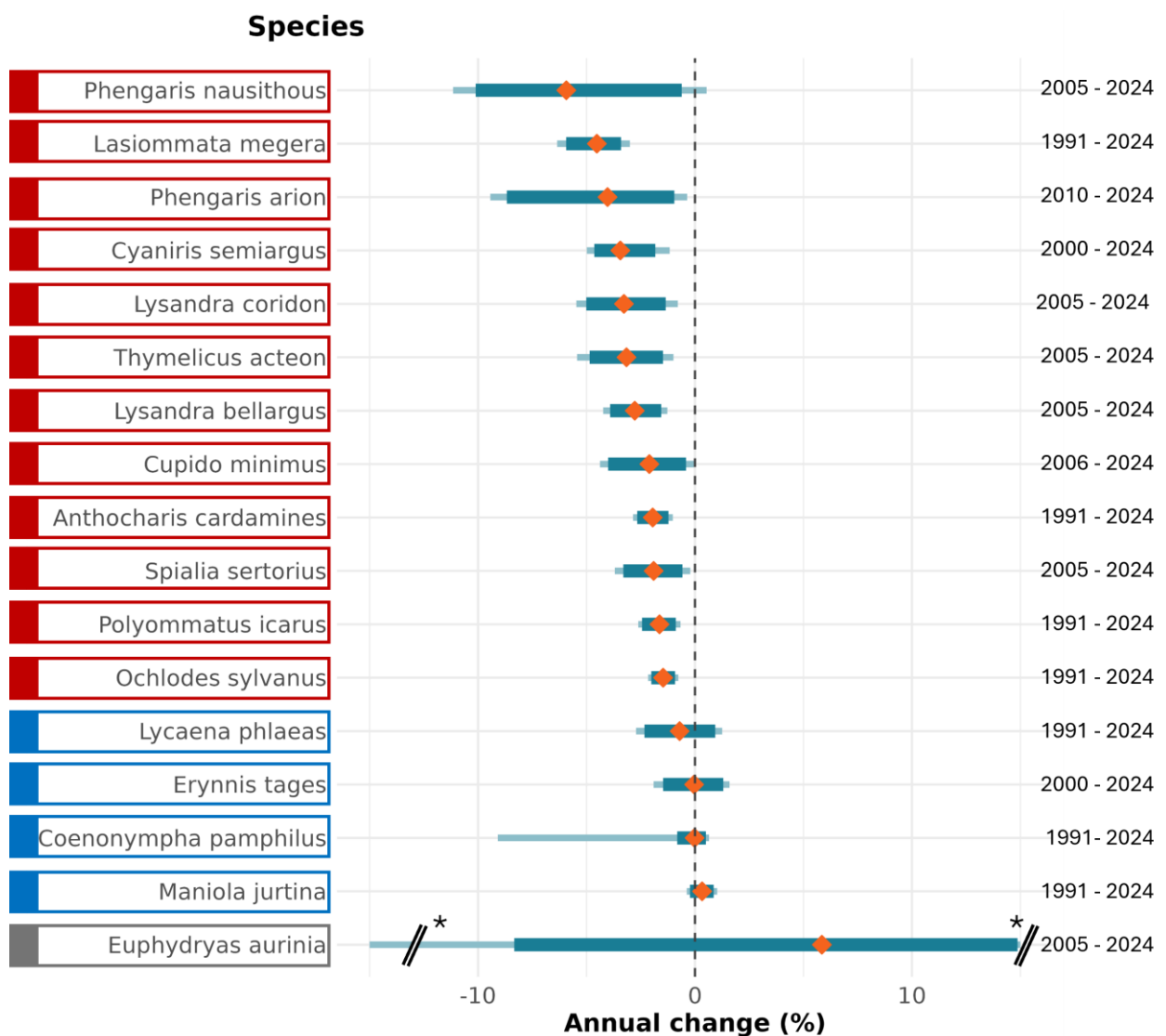


Figure 4. Median annual percentage changes (linear trend) in EU27 population abundance indices (orange diamond) with bootstrap confidence intervals, CI 80% (dark teal blue) and CI 90% (light teal blue). Species trends are classified as Decrease (red), Stable (blue), Increase (green) and Uncertain (grey). * While the median trend of Euphydryas aurinia shows a notable increase, the trend is highly uncertain with confidence intervals extending beyond the x-axis of the figure.

Chapter 5 / Grassland Butterfly Index

The EU27 Grassland Butterfly Index (GBI, Figure 5) is 47% lower in 2024 than in 1991, the first year for which we can compute the indicator (based on two operational Butterfly Monitoring Schemes in the EU27). The decline across the whole of Europe is 47% over the period 1990-2024, with a smaller confidence interval as more transects (especially from the United Kingdom and Switzerland) are used.

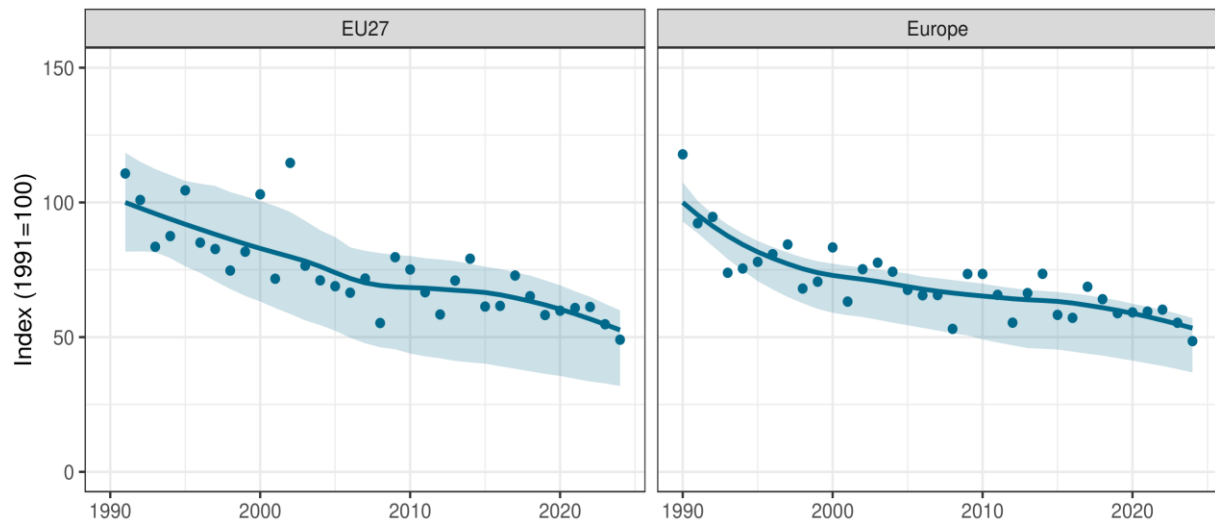


Figure 5. The Grassland Butterfly Indicator (smooth line) through annual index (points) calculated for the EU27 countries from 1991 to 2024. The shaded area represents the 95% CI of the smoothed trend. Note that the Europe-wide GBI could be calculated from 1990, as we need the annual index to be informed by at least two monitoring schemes.

In Northwestern Europe, the decline of butterfly populations is primarily attributed to habitat loss resulting from the intensification of agricultural grasslands (Warren et al., 2021). This process includes the conversion of semi-natural habitats into intensively-managed high-yield monocultures, often accompanied by the widespread use of agrochemicals such as fertilisers, herbicides, and insecticides. These practices reduce habitat heterogeneity and degrade the quality of nectar and larval food plants, which are essential for butterfly survival (Osumanu & Kosoe, 2023; Deynze et al., 2024; Sánchez-Bayo & Wyckhuys, 2019; Habel et al., 2019).

Even within nature reserves, agricultural intensification exerts significant pressure (Percel et al., 2025). Lowering of groundwater levels—often a consequence of drainage for agriculture—alters wet ecosystems, which are critical habitats for specialised butterfly species. Nitrogen deposition, especially ammonium from intensive livestock farming, leads to soil enrichment and the encroachment of coarse grasses and shrubs (Vogels et al., 2023). This process diminishes the availability of open, nutrient-poor microhabitats that many butterfly species depend on (Ockinger et al., 2006). The use of herbicides negatively impacts the diversity and abundance of nectar sources and host plants, while insecticides pose a direct threat to butterflies, often as non-target insects. These pressures all contribute to the fragmentation and degradation of butterfly habitats, even in areas designated for conservation. (Osumanu & Kosoe, 2023).

In Northern Europe (Scandinavia, Finland, and the Baltic states), as well as in Eastern and Southern Europe, and the Alps, the abandonment of grasslands, along with climate change, is also a significant driver, as shrub and secondary forest encroachment reduce habitat for grassland butterflies.

The 47% decline of the GBI observed over the last 34 years probably reveals only part of the historical decline in grassland butterflies, as many populations were extirpated from the landscape before 1990. In the Netherlands, for example, the distribution of butterflies (including those found in grasslands) has dropped by more than 80% since 1890 (Van Strien *et al.* 2019). Similar patterns were also observed in Flanders (Maes *et al.* 2022). European butterflies are also affected by climate change. While some parts of Europe have seen an increase in the numbers of some widespread generalist butterflies with warmer climate, the recent series of extremely hot and dry summers has reversed this trend and resulted in additional declines (Johansson *et al.* 2020). Extreme climatic events, such as pluvial floods and winter heatwaves, also appear to be impacting butterfly populations (Shan *et al.* 2024, McDermott Long *et al.* 2017).



Chapter 6 / Conclusions

- This report gives an update of the Grassland Butterflies Index, with the trend (1991-2024) of 17 butterflies characteristic of grasslands in the EU27.
- The indicator is based on national Butterfly Monitoring Schemes (BMS) active in all EU27 Member States (Figure 1). Chapter 7 provides guidance on how to start and maintain a BMS.
- Since 1990, more than 9,600 separate transects have contributed to the EU27 GBI indicator (Figure 2). In Europe, we count more than 16,150 transects, with 6,551 outside the EU27, mainly in the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Norway (Figure 2).
- From the 17 indicator species, none show a significant increase, four are stable, twelve show a significant decline, and for one species, *Euphydryas aurinia*, no significant linear trend could be established in the EU27 countries (Figure 3).
- The Grassland Butterfly Indicator has declined by 47% since 1991 across the European Union (EU27; Figure 5). More urgent restoration (and protection) action is required to stimulate recovery and reverse this trend, not only for butterflies but also for other wild insect pollinators and their ecosystem services.
- In North-western Europe, the intensification of agricultural practices is the greatest threat to grassland butterflies. Protecting the remaining semi-natural grasslands in these areas and reversing fragmentation is essential to halt further losses. Nitrogen deposition and pesticides from intensive agriculture can reach the centres of even large nature reserves. Therefore, the use of nitrogen and pesticides must be reduced along with effective mitigation measures to prevent such unintended effects on grassland ecosystems and to reduce the threat to grassland butterfly populations.
- In other parts of Europe, abandonment of farming practices is also a key factor in the decline of grassland butterflies. Sustainability and the perpetuation of long-established farming traditions will require clear recognition and support for young farmers and their families committed to sustainable farming practices and work with nature. Redirection of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funding to support sustainable farming of High Nature Value (HNV) areas is crucial and can provide a lifeline for grassland butterflies in the EU.
- The increasing frequency and intensity of heatwaves, wildfires and droughts observed in the last decades have also contributed to the decline of grassland butterflies, especially in northern Europe and in mountainous areas. Although further research is needed to determine the exact magnitude of the impact of climate change, urgent actions to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and limit global warming would certainly benefit most grassland butterflies.
- The completion and appropriate management of the Natura 2000 network across Europe is a crucial step in helping grassland butterflies. Restoration and creation of landscapes with mosaics of habitats, both within and outside Natura 2000 areas, are essential to protect grassland butterflies in the EU. Specific actions in Natura 2000 Management Plans that would help reverse declines in Habitats Directive listed Species (and Red Listed species) that are also in the GBI set of 17 species.

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Annex I / Statistical method

BMS data collection

All data was first collected at a regional or national level, and after validation, added to the eBMS database (version 7.0) from which we extracted three tables with information on 1) Butterfly count, 2) Monitoring visit date, and 3) Monitoring site location and length (area).

Step 1 – Species annual site index (per transect)

Regional flight curve

For each species and year, flight periods were estimated based on the combined effects of geographic location and climatic conditions (Schmucki *et al.* 2016). To optimise the estimation of the annual flight curves, we stratify our dataset into 15 geographic regions (Table S1) within which we aggregated monitoring transects per environmental zone, as defined in Metzger (2018). This stratification was broad enough to include a large number of sites per region, allowing us to borrow strength and share information across adjacent monitoring schemes, and estimate reliable annual flight curves in spatially contiguous and homogeneous bioclimatic regions. We used the regionalised generalised additive model (GAM) approach (Dennis *et al.* 2013, Schmucki *et al.* 2016), fitting a yearly GAM with a negative binomial distribution to the weekly (j) butterfly counts, using a “cubic spline” smoothing effect for weeks and a fixed effect for sites (i) (eq.1, Code 1). To optimise model fitting, we excluded all sites with fewer than three visits within a year and restricted the total number of sites per region to a maximum of 300. When the number of sites available within a region exceeded 300, we applied a spatially stratified resampling approach, prioritising the best-informed sites (those with the highest sampling effort). We used a 50km grid to stratify the sample across the entire region, ensuring that the sample was not biased toward sub-regions with the highest sampling effort. All flight curves were calculated with the R package *rbms* (Schmucki *et al.* 2024), which uses *mgcv* v1.8-4 (Wood, 2017) to fit the GAM.

$$E[y_{i,j}] = u_{i,j} = \exp[SITE_i + s(WEEK_j; f)] \quad (\text{eq.1})$$

where: $y_{i,j}$ represents the count at site i on week j ,

$SITE_i$ the site effect,

$s(WEEK_j; f)$, the smoothing function on week j with f degree of freedom.

R code

```
ts_flight_curve <- rbms::flight_curve(ts_season_count,
                                     NbrSample = 300,
                                     MinVisit = 3,
                                     MinOccur = 1,
                                     MinNbrSite = 1,
                                     MaxTrial = 4,
                                     GamFamily = 'nb',
                                     SpeedGam = FALSE,
                                     ComplSeason = TRUE,
                                     TimeUnit = 'w')
```

Code 1. Specification and arguments used to estimate the annual flight curve for each species and bioclimatic region in each of the 15 regions (Table S1), using the *flight_curve()* function implemented in the *rbms* package (Schmucki *et al.* 2024).

Table S1. Regions and monitoring schemes used to compute the flight curve for each bioclimatic region across Europe. Where the environmental zones are: Atlantic Central (ATC), Atlantic North (ATN), Alpine South (ALS), Alpine North (ALN), Continental (CON), Mediterranean Mountain (MDM), Mediterranean North (MDN), Mediterranean South (MDS), Pannonian (PAN), Lusitanian (LUS), Boreal (BOR), Nemoral (NEM). This classification is based on Metzger (2018) <https://sdi.eea.europa.eu/catalogue/idp/api/records/6ef007ab-1fcd-4c4f-bc96-14e8afbcb688>.

Region	BMS included	Environmental zones
1	Republic of Ireland, United Kingdom	ATC, ATN
2	France, Netherlands, Belgium (Flanders), Belgium (Wallonia), Luxembourg, Germany	ALS, ATC, ATN, CON, LUS, MDM, MDN, MDS, PAN
3	Portugal, Spain, Spain (Catalonia), Spain (Sierra Nevada), Spain (ZERYNTIA), France	ALS, ATC, CON, LUS, MDM, MDN, MDS
4	France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Germany	ALS, ATC, ATN, CON, LUS, MDM, MDN, MDS, PAN
5	France, Spain (Catalonia), Italy, Greece, Malta	ALS, ATC, CON, LUS, MDM, MDN
6	Denmark, Germany, Sweden	ALN, ALS, ATC, ATN, BOR, CON, NEM, PAN
7	Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia	ALN, BOR, CON, NEM
8	Estonia, Finland, Sweden	ALN, BOR, CON, NEM
9	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania	BOR, CON, NEM
10	Germany, Poland, Czechia	ALS, ATC, ATN, CON, NEM, PAN
11	Germany, Switzerland, Slovenia, Italy, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary	ALS, ATC, ATN, CON, MDM, MDN, MDS, PAN
12	Greece, Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus	ALS, CON, MDM, MDN, MDS, PAN
13	Slovenia, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, Austria (Vienna)	ALS, CON, MDM, MDN, PAN
14	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden	ALN, BOR, CON, NEM
15	Germany, Switzerland, Slovenia, Italy, Croatia, Czechia	ALS, ATC, ATN, CON, MDM, MDS, PAN

Annual site index

The standardised annual flight curve has a total area under the curve equal to 1, and each point on the curve corresponds to the proportion of the total abundance expected over the entire season. This curve is used as an offset within a generalised linear model (GLM) fitted on the observed count and used to predict weekly counts at each site (eq.2, Code 2). The weekly counts predicted from this model can then be used as input for the missing weekly counts.

When combined with the observed counts, we obtain local time series of weekly butterfly counts for each site and species over the entire monitoring season. These time series can then be used to calculate standardised annual abundance indices for each site, year and species. The abundance index is calculated as the sum of the weekly counts of adult butterflies observed and estimated throughout a standardised number of weekly counts over a monitoring season. This index represents the total number of adult butterflies of a given species expected to be counted during a monitoring season at a given site and year for a standardised sampling effort (e.g. 26 weeks between April and September).

$$E[y_{i,j,k}] = u_{i,k}(j) = \exp[SITE_i + YEAR_k + \gamma_k(j)] \quad (\text{eq.2})$$

where: $y_{i,j,k}$ represents the count at the site i and year k ,
 $SITE_i$ the site effect,
 $YEAR_k$ the year effect and,
 γ_k the standardised flight curve for year k at week j .

```
# R code
# fit GLM
m2 <- glm(COUNT~ 0 + factor(SITE) + factor(YEAR) +
          offset(log(NM)),
          data = my.data,
          family = poisson(link = "log"))

# Where NM is the standardised flight curve estimated for week j
# on year k obtained from the object ts_flight_curve computed in
# Code Box 1.
```

Code 2. Specification of the GLM fitted on observed count and utilised to account for species phenological pattern to input missing values and calculate standardised annual site abundance indices.

Step 2 – Species annual collated indices (per BMS)

Collated index

The local annual site indices computed in step 1 are then used to calculate time series of collated annual indices for each species and monitoring scheme. The collated index is estimated by fitting a GLM to the standardised annual abundance indices, using the transect length as an offset and the proportion of the flight period covered (sampled) by the weekly visits as weight (eq.3, Code 3). This weight accounts for a species-specific realised sampling effort observed at each site and year (Brereton *et al.* 2018). From this model, we can estimate the expected annual abundance (i.e., the number of butterflies) of a given species that is expected to be recorded on a 1-km transect. These estimates correspond to the annual collated indices calculated for each species, year and scheme. While the weight included in our model downweights the contribution of poorly sampled sites, we also exclude all annual abundance indices where the mean absolute deviation was three times above the median within a scheme, thereby identifying them as being extreme and unrealistic, potentially due to unreliable flight curves or model estimates for local abundances. From this GLM fitted on standardised annual site indices, we derive annual estimates of the average number of butterflies of a given species expected to be recorded along a standardised 1-km transect. We computed these indices for each species and year within each monitoring scheme (BMS).

$$E[y_{i,k}] = u_{i,k} = \exp[SITE_i + YEAR_k + \delta_i] \quad (\text{eq.3})$$

where: $y_{i,k}$ represents the annual site index estimated at the site i and year k ,
 $SITE_i$ the site effect,
 $YEAR_k$ the year effect and,
 δ_i the length of transect at site i (measured in km).

R code

```
# SINDE $\text{X} \sim 0 + \text{factor}(\text{SITE}) + \text{factor}(\text{M\_YEAR}) + \text{offset}(\log(\text{TL}))$ 

# fit GLM
m3 <- glm(SINDE $\text{X} \sim 0 + \text{factor}(\text{SITE}) + \text{factor}(\text{YEAR}) +$ 
          offset(log(TL)),
          weights = my.data$fc_prop,
          data = my.data,
          family = poisson(link = "log"))

# Where SINDE $\text{X}$  is the standardised local abundance index, TL the
# transect length measured in kilometres, and fc_prop the
# proportion of the flight curve covered by the weekly visits. The
# weight is used in the likelihood function, affecting the
# influence each point has on the
```

Code 3. Specification of generalised linear model used to calculate annual collated indices for a 1km transect. Collated indices are calculated per species and BMS.

Confidence intervals of the collated index

We used a non-parametric bootstrapping approach to estimate the precision (uncertainty) of the indices, indicators and trends. Non-parametric bootstrapping is suitable for the GBI as it allows cascading uncertainties across multiple modelling stages (Dennis *et al.* 2013). Here, the site indices were randomly resampled (1,000 bootstrap samples with replacement), with the number of transects sampled remaining the same as in the original data. Each bootstrap sample was then used to calculate the annual collated species indices (time series) per species and BMS (Code 3), from which we derived the annual species index for the EU27 (multi-schemes) and the multi-species index (GBI). For each metric, we used the bootstrap sample percentile to estimate specific confidence intervals (80% and 90%).

Assessment and validation of species index estimates

Using the time series of annual collated abundance indices calculated for each species monitored in each BMS, we ask experts to assess the validity of the estimated collated indices. If the annual indices were judged unreliable by the experts, we excluded part or the entire time series from the following calculations. This mainly concerns shorter or early years of time series, which are often characterised by high uncertainty (CI) due to the smaller number of monitoring sites in the establishment phase of new monitoring schemes. We also systematically excluded each time series that had less than three years of data. In some cases, we excluded early years in which the collated indices are informed by only a few sites (BMS establishment phase) and where the uncertainty is very high.

Step 3 - Species collated indices for EU27 and Europe

Multi-BMS abundance index

For each BMS, the annual species index (expected number of butterflies per 1 km) was converted to the logarithmic scale (base 10) and standardised to a value of 2 for the first year. The logarithmic scale provides comparable estimates of the relative rate of change over time. For each species (Box 1), we matched the time series of the standardised collated indices across the BMS in the region of interest (i.e. the EU27 Member States). The first year of the time series was set to the year in which data from at least two schemes were available.

The geometric weighted mean (eq.4, Code 4), calculated based on the exponentiated standardised index (i.e. $10^2 = 100$ for the first year) across schemes, was then used to create time series of the collated index of multiple schemes for each species. The geometric mean was weighted by the area of the species' range sampled in each BMS. This area, measured in hectares, was estimated using the overlap between the convex hull of the monitoring sites in each BMS and the species distribution map (www.iucnredlist.org). For BMSs that started collecting data after the first year, the first year of the time series was scaled (adjusted) according to the value of the weighted geometric mean calculated for the already active schemes. For example, if the weighted geometric mean of three schemes in year x is 95, the first year of a fourth scheme that started in year x is set to 95.65 and the rest of the time series is adjusted accordingly (i.e. the first year is set to 95.65; Table S2 *red*). The weighted geometric mean of the following year x+1 is then calculated for the four schemes. This approach allows us to align several time series with different lengths and different starting years and thus create a multi-BMS index without affecting the trend at the entry point and previous years. If values were missing after the first year, we input the last (previous years) non-missing value in that time series (Table S2. *blue*).

$$\bar{x} = \left(\prod_{i=1}^n x_i^{w_i} \right)^{1/\sum_{i=1}^n w_i} \quad (\text{eq.4})$$

where: x_i is the standardised abundance index for BMS i ,
 w_i the weight of BMS i and
 n the number of BMS

```
# R code
# Weighted Geometric Mean

MultiBMS_INDEX = prod((INDEX)^(weight))^(1/sum(weight))
```

Table S2. Example for aligning time series of multiple lengths and input values for missing years. For simplicity, this example uses an equal-weighted geometric mean to calculate the Multi-BMS index.

Year	BMS-1	BMS-2	BMS-3	BMS-4	Multi-BMS index
1990	100	100	100	NA	100
1991	97	95	101	NA	97.63501
1992	95	94	98	95.65166 <-- 95.65166	
1993	89	90	97	93	92.19806
1994	85	89	NA --> input 97	91	90.39731
....
2024	75	67	80	76	74.34639

Step 4 – Multi-species Index & EU27 Grassland Butterfly Indicator (GBI)

The Grassland Butterfly Indicator (GBI) corresponds to a time series of annual indices that aggregate the multi-BMS index (EU27) for 17 species. In the same way that we combined the index across BMS in step 3, we calculated the geometric mean for each year, assigning the same weight to each species. For species with shorter time series, the first year of the series was set to the value of the indicator in that year. If values were missing within or at the end of the time series, the value of the last non-missing index was used. Using this approach, we can calculate a single time series of multiple species indices, with annual values corresponding to the grassland butterfly index. From these annual indices, we produced a smoothed time series corresponding to the grassland butterfly indicator. The smoothed indicator was created using LOESS smoothing with a span of 0.75 and a degree of 2 (Soldaat *et al.* 2017).

Applying this approach to bootstrap samples, we created 1,000 time series of collated (step 2), multi-BMS (step 3) and multi-species (step 4) indices from the bootstrap samples. These samples were then used to estimate 80% and 90% confidence intervals (CIs) for each of the measures, including the smoothed GBI. The upper and lower bounds of the confidence interval were estimated using the corresponding quantiles of the bootstrap samples. All values were rescaled so that the first year of the median of the smoothed indicator was 100 (Figure 5).

For each species, the linear trend of the annual multi-BMS indices was estimated by fitting a simple linear model (regression) to the log-transformed indices. The slope of the regression (coefficient of the year) was then used to estimate the annual rate of population growth (or decline). The coefficient obtained from the bootstrap samples was used to estimate the median and the 80% and 90% CI of the trend calculated for each species (Figure 4). These metrics (multiplicative slope) were used to classify and assess the uncertainty of the trend of each species, based on the same parameters (Table S3) used in TRIM (Pannekoek & van Strien, 2005).

Table S3. Parameters used to classify the species trend, based on the 80% confidence intervals of the multiplicative annual growth rate derived from the linear model fitted on the log(index).

Annual growth rate (multiplicative rate)		Classification
Lower limit larger than	1.05	Strong increase
Lower limit larger within	[0, 1.05]	Moderate increase
Upper limit lower within	[0.95, 0[Moderate decline
Upper limit lower than	0.95	Strong decline
Upper limit lower than & Lower limit larger than	1.05 0.95	Stable
Upper limit larger than & Lower limit lower than	1.05 0.95	Uncertain

Annex II / Changes in trend

The availability of more counts from additional transects across more countries can result in slightly different trends for some species. For species where a difference occurs, this annex compares the trends shown in Figure 3 for the EU with those for the period 1991–2023 as reported in Van Swaay et al. (2025b).

- *Anthocharis cardamines*: Now slightly lower index-values in last ten years, mainly because of updates from Austria and Italy.
- *Cyaniris semiargus*: 2024 was a bad year for this species in almost all BMS; in several countries, it had its lowest value since the start of butterfly monitoring.
- *Erynnis tages*: the first years show a large uncertainty in countries with fledgling schemes; for this reason, we now let the time series begin in 2000 when the schemes are more mature and the annual indices more robust.
- *Euphydryas aurinia*: a species with natural large year-to-year and year-site fluctuations, which make it difficult to calculate an EU trend.
- *Lasiommata megera*: the indexvalues for 1991-1994 are now also included.

For the 12 other species, there are only minor differences.

Each update of the GBI is calculated from the first year (1991) onwards using all new data. As the ABLE (Roy et al., 2020) and SPRING projects (www.ufz.de/spring-pollination) helped new BMS to start, these schemes are now old enough to be included and contribute to the indicator. Often, these new BMS are in countries with a rich butterfly fauna (e.g. Italy, Romania, and Greece) and have a relatively large impact on the GBI. As a result, the exact value of the GBI in a given year can change. Where the previous decline was 50% (van Swaay, 2025b), it is now 47%. This does not mean that the GBI is improving, but the inclusion of new BMS results in a slight increase in the GBI estimate.

Because new schemes require at least three years of monitoring data before they begin contributing to the GBI index, when new schemes are included, they contribute not only to the most recent year but also to the previous few years. Other factors that can cause changes to the GBI include the addition of older data and the revision or correction of erroneous data in the system. As schemes' contributions to the EU GBI are at the species level, if a scheme contributes to an increasing species, it will raise the index for the past few years. Note that in Figure 2, the number of BMS in 2024 is slightly lower than in 2023, as some schemes have been merged and others were unable to provide all their data for this update.

Annex III / Glossary

- ABE: Assessing Butterflies in Europe: an EU project aiming at capacity building for butterfly monitoring, collecting butterfly monitoring data into the eBMS, producing tools for analysis of the data and produce trends and indicators. ([read more about ABE](#))
- BGR: Biogeographical Region
- BMS: Butterfly Monitoring Scheme
- CAP: Common Agricultural Policy
- CBD: Convention on Biological Diversity
- eBMS: European Butterfly Monitoring Scheme, the database that holds all butterfly monitoring data
- EMBRACE: Expanding Monitoring of Butterflies for Restoration and Conservation across Europe 2021-2026
- GBIF: Global Biodiversity Information Facility
- HNV: High Nature Value
- NRR: Nature Restoration Regulation
- SPRING: Strengthening Pollinator Recovery through INdicators and monitoringG ([read more about SPRING](#))