



Montes Universales

Greenwings holiday to the Montes Universales, Spain, 28 July to 4 August 2018

by Emma Whitfield

The holiday was led by Simon Spencer, BC EBG's Chairman, and David Moore who has led other Greenwings holidays in France and is one of the UK Butterflies team. Mark Bunch was an additional driver and the guests on the holiday were David and Barbara, Barrie, Ken, Robert, Allan, Dave, Peter, Geoff, Aidan and Emma. We stayed at the Hostal Los Palacios in Albarracín.

The Montes Universales is in a very quiet corner of Spain, largely unknown even to the Spanish. It is a Reserva Nacional about 200 km east of Madrid between Teruel and Cuenca. The mountains of the Sierra de Albarracín rise to 1900 metres from a base of 1000 metres and the area is mainly wooded with fertile low-lying areas sown for wheat, together with grass and scrub areas with low intensity grazing. The limestone mountains form the watershed between the Atlantic and Mediterranean and a number of rivers start here including the Tagus which flows

west to Lisbon and the Guadalquivir which flows east to Valencia. In the summer the area has a mixture of dry riverbeds and spring-fed streams which retain lush vegetation despite the high temperatures (around 35 degrees). The area has two endemics: **Azure Chalkhill Blue** (*Lysandra caelestissima*) and **Zapater's Ringlet** (*Erebia zapateri*) and several species with localised distribution in the Iberian Peninsula: **Mother of Pearl Blue** (*Polyommatus nivescens*), **Southern Hermit** (*Chazara prieurii*), **Striped Grayling** (*Hipparchia fidia*), **Spanish Chalkhill Blue** (*Lysandra albicans*) and the **Spanish Zephyr Blue** (now *Kretania hesperica*). Simon made two previous visits to the area in 2013 and 2016 (see EIG newsletters 14 and 20).

Day 1 - meeting up and drive to Albarracín

It was with high hopes that all 14 of us met up at Madrid Airport on 28 July for this first organised holiday to the

Montes Universales. Most of the group were relatively experienced butterfly enthusiasts and we were all looking forward to visiting a new area and finding new butterflies. Simon explained that July was the best month for most of the butterflies but that the endemic **Zapater's Ringlet** was an August species so we would be right at the beginning of its flight period and might not see it at all.

The leaders had collected the minibuses so we set off for Albarracín. We stopped for lunch en route at a restaurant and then called in at our first butterfly spot which was a mixture of grassland and pine trees next to a reservoir, the Embalse de la



Albarracín
(photo by Aidan Whitfield)



Montes Universales cont.

Toba on the CM2015 road. There were plenty of butterflies on the wing including **Spanish Purple Hairstreak** (*Laeosopis roboris*), **Tree Grayling** (*Hipparchia statilinus*), **Rock Grayling** (*Hipparchia hermione*) and **Iberian Marbled White** (*Melanargia lachesis*). Back in the minibus, the scenery became more and more dramatic as we approached Albarracín with its craggy hills and the river Guadalaviar rushing through the gorge. We booked into our hotel, the Hostal de los Palacios, which had a fantastic view over the town with its Moorish walls, cathedral and castle and narrow medieval streets which promised to be an intriguing place to explore. We met up in the restaurant in the centre of the town for our first evening meal together and soon realised that we were really off the beaten track as they didn't speak any English. Fortunately Robert lives in Spain and was able to act as interpreter for those of us who didn't speak any Spanish.

Day 2 - three sites near Albarracín

Javier's Rambla

We set off early after breakfast to drive the few kilometres to this rambla, the local name for a dry river-bed, and were excited to find butterflies still basking in the sun and easy to photograph. There were several species of **Skippers** so we were able to practise our identification skills with the help of Simon, David and Mark. These included **Southern Marbled** (*Carcharodus baeticus*), **Sage** (*Muschampia proto*), **Cinquefoil** (*Pyrgus cirsii*) and **Large Grizzled** (*Pyrgus alveus*). There were also

several species of **Fritillary**: **Knapweed** (*Melitaea phoebe*) and **Provençal** (*Melitaea deione*), and also **Spanish Heath** (*Coenonympha glycerion iphioides*) and **Dusky Heath** (*Coenonympha dorus*), together with **Spanish Gatekeepers** (*Pyronia bathseba*) and **Southern Gatekeepers** (*Pyronia cecilia*). Simon was very pleased that we found several **Southern Hermit** (*Chazara prieuri*) as he had only found a single individual here on his previous visits.



Javier's Rambla (photo by Aidan Whitfield)



Southern Hermit (*Chazara prieuri*)
(photo by Barrie Staley)



Provençal Fritillary (*Melitaea deione*)
(photo by Emma Whitfield) ▼

Returning to the minibus we went down to the river and found large numbers of **Whites** and **Blues** puddling in the damp patches on the banks including **Oberthur's Anomalous Blue** (*Polyommatus fabressei*), **Chapman's Blue** (*Polyommatus thersites*) and **Spanish Chalkhill Blue** (*Lysandra albicans*).



Great Sooty Satyr (*Satyrus ferula*)
(photo by Robert Chubb)

Road to Pozondón, bridge with tunnel

This was another stop at a dried-up river bed with a damp area by a tunnel under the road which attracted large numbers of puddling butterflies, where we added **Escher's Blue** (*Polyommatus escheri*) to our list. We also found out that as the day wore on and we grew sweatier, we attracted butterflies to feed on us! We found both **Hermit** (*Chazara briseis*) and **Southern Hermit** and a butterfly was photographed which the leaders thought was **Great Sooty Satyr** (*Satyrus ferula*) but we had to wait until the end of the holiday to have it confirmed as it a long way from its nearest known range in the Pyrenees. We stopped here for our lunch in the shade and were amazed at the numbers and variety of butterflies on the wing, including **Cleopatra** (*Gonepteryx cleopatra*), **Clouded Yellow** (*Colias crocea*) and **Berger's Clouded Yellow** (*Colias alfacariensis*).

Mother of Pearl Blue
(*Polyommatus nivescens*)
(photo by Emma Whitfield)



Niobe Fritillary (*Argynnis niobe*)
(photo by Peter Gravett)

Lane beyond rock paintings

We finished the day on a rough grassy track past the cave paintings near Albarracín where we split into 2 groups and observed several species of **Fritillaries**: **Cardinal** (*Argynnis pandora*), **Niobe** (*Argynnis niobe*), **Twin-spot** (*Brenthis hecate*), **High Brown** (*Argynnis adippe*) and **Knapweed**.

Our first day had certainly been very successful. We had already seen several of the local species but we hadn't found **Zapater's Ringlet** yet.

Day 3 - Noguera

We travelled a bit further to Noguera, up a rough track in a steep-sided valley. The plants by the stream were lush and covered in butterflies nectaring mostly on thistles, particularly the **Argynnis Fritillaries**: **High Brown**, **Silver-washed** (*Argynnis paphia*), **Dark Green** (*Argynnis aglaja*), **Niobe**, **Cardinal**, and **Queen of Spain** (*Issoria lathonia*) together with **Silver-spotted Skippers** (*Hesperia comma*). These gave good opportunities for photographing them. We also saw our first **Azure Chalkhill Blues** (*Lysandra caelestissima*) and **Mother of Pearl Blues** (*Polyommatus nivescens*) and a couple of rather tatty **Purple-shot Coppers** (*Lycaena alciphron*).

After lunch we took another fork in the track which was more wooded where a **Large Tortoiseshell** (*Nymphalis polychloros*) was spotted by some. There were lots of butterflies puddling in the ford which ran across the track, including **Spanish Swallowtails** (*Iphiclides feisthamelii*) and **Wood Whites** (*Leptidea sinapis*), with other butterflies nectaring on the brambles. There were also large dragonflies and Beautiful Demoiselles

taking advantage of the verdant location. We had to stop for a while to allow four horses to pass us on the track and a Spanish family walking past were obviously intrigued as to what we were all doing. Having explained that we were interested in butterflies, they very helpfully told us that they had seen some big ones and some small ones!



Montes Universales cont.



The group at Sierra Alta (photo by Mark Bunch)

Bronchales and Sierra Alta

We drove up to Bronchales in the pine forest for a short stop and found a **Purple-shot Copper** egg-laying on sorrel. There were also **Grayling** (*Hipparchia semele*), **Rock Grayling**, **Great Banded Grayling** (*Brintesia circe*) and **Oriental Meadow Brown** (*Hyponephele lupina*). Then we drove a bit further up the track to Sierra Alta (1854 m), one of the highest points in the mountain range with superb views over the countryside and a firewatch tower. The hill top was an open area of dry grassland where we spotted an **Apollo** (*Parnassius apollo*) and large numbers of **Swallowtails** (*Papilio machaon*) and **Spanish Swallowtails** hill-topping. Despite the fact that the area seemed so dry there were good numbers of **Fritillaries** and **Great Banded Graylings**.

Day 4 - Moscardón

We spent the morning of our fourth day near Moscardón in a beautiful rich meadow with flowering thyme and salvia. There were pine woods on the sides of the valley and a shepherd brought down his flock of sheep to drink from the long wooden water troughs that were fed by a small spring. There was an abundance of butterflies and we soon attracted them with Barrie collecting a **False Grayling** (*Arethusana arethusa*) on his camera lens and Barbara and I had **Southern White Admirals** (*Limenitis reducta*) on our hands. There were a good variety of

Blues to test our identification skills - **Damon** (*Polyommatus damon*), **Turquoise** (*Polyommatus dorylas*), **Silver-studded** (*Plebejus argus*), **Adonis** (*Lysandra bellargus*), **Mother-of-Pearl**, **Oberthur's Anomalous**, **Azure Chalkhill**, **Spanish Chalkhill** and **Southern Brown Argus** (*Aricia cramera*).

We also identified a **Spanish Heath** (*Coenonympha glycerion iphioides*), there were large numbers of **Fritillaries** especially **Silver Washed** and **Cardinal** and we saw our first **Black-veined White** (*Aporia crataegi*). **Skippers** seen here included **Mallow** (*Carcharodus alceae*), **Red-underwing** (*Spialia sertorius*), **Safflower** (*Pyrgus carthami*), **Cinquefoil**, **Small** (*Thymelicus sylvestris*), **Lulworth** (*Thymelicus acteon*) and **Silver-spotted**. The meadow had plenty of

other insects such as a Praying Mantis tucking into a **Great Banded Grayling**, a Jersey Tiger Moth, the Burnet *Zygaena fausta* and a Green Forester moth. ▼



Spanish Heath (*Coenonympha glycerion iphioides*) (photo by Allan Ferguson)



Azure Chalk-hill Blue (*Lysandra caelestissima*) (photo by Ken Bailey)



Spanish Chalkhill Blue (*Lysandra albicans*) (photo by Barrie Staley)



Montes Universales cont.

Monument to the Nacimiento del Rio Tajo

After lunch we drove to the source of the River Tajo (Tagus) which has a picnic area and several huge metal statues representing the river and the three local provinces of Teruel, Cuenca and Guadalajara. The source itself was a spring-fed pond full of frogs. We spread out over the meadow and a dry river bed but the butterflies weren't so abundant here though we did see several **Skippers** and **Blues**. However, no **Zapater's Ringlet** yet.

Bridge over the Rio Tajo and Javier's Rambla

We stopped by a small bridge over the river Tagus where we found more puddling **Blues** and **Whites** next to the river and also a **Safflower Skipper** egg-laying. Our last stop of the day was at Javier's Rambla to check the river and we found large numbers of **Blues**, **Skippers** and **Whites** puddling in a different spot. There were a lot of butterfly wings scattered on the mud which we assumed were discarded by the dragonflies preying on them.



Esper's Marbled White
(*Melanargia russiae*)
(photo by David Coupe)

Day 5 - Vallecillo

We set off with high hopes of finding the elusive **Zapater's Ringlet** and drove up a track to Vallecillo. Our first stop was a meadow in the woods full of flowering lavender and a hundred bee hives that we kept well clear of. Here we found a variety of butterflies including our first **Esper's Marbled White** (*Melanargia russiae*) as well as **Dusky Meadow Brown** (*Hyponephele lycaon*), **Azure Chalkhill Blue**, **Oberthur's Anomalous Blue**, **Berger's Clouded Yellow** (*Colias alfariensis*), **Spotted Fritillary** (*Melitaea didyma*), **Olive Skipper** (*Pyrgus serratulae*) and **Hermit**.

We carried on up the track until we reached a wide meadow in the trees where there was a shepherd with his flock of sheep. We had a brief look around here before driving further up the track to a marshy area with a small stream. The vegetation was very lush here with plenty of thistles and a huge abundance of butterflies nectaring and puddling, together with hundreds of honey bees drinking at the water's edge. David was determined to find the **Zapater's Ringlet** (*Erebia zapateri*). He soon spotted one flying very fast down the track and chased it but it disappeared before he could get a photo. We spread out to look for it and a few of the group saw one a bit later but, again, it was very fast and there was no chance of photographing it. We all enjoyed walking through the long grass getting good views of the large **Fritillaries** and **Great Banded Graylings** nectaring on the thistles. We also saw **Blue-spot Hairstreak** (*Satyrium spini*) and **Ilex Hairstreak** (*Satyrium ilicis*). After lunch in the shade of the trees some of us headed up a side track where we found **Purple-shot Copper**, **Black-veined White**, **Dusky Heath**, more large **Fritillaries** and several **Brimstones** (*Gonepteryx rhamni*).

When we completed our butterfly list at the end of the day, Simon realised that we had seen 65 butterflies in total which was a record for him.

Day 6 - Ojos del Cabriel

We drove down a dusty track to this site which led us down to the Ojos del Cabriel, a series of permanent springs that form the source of the river Cabriel, with a mill and a very picturesque path along the river bank. We started in a plantation of poplars where we found various butterflies in the long grass including **Spanish Heath**, **Southern Brown Argus** and **Rock Grayling** perching on the tree ▼



Montes Universales cont.

trunks. We then walked along the river past the mill to an open area of flat rocks where a variety of **Blues** were puddling in the dimples in the rocks - **Lang's Short-tailed** (*Leptotes pirithous*), **Spanish Chalkhill**, **Azure Chalkhill** and **Oberthur's Anomalous**. Mark took advantage of the clear flowing water to have a paddle to cool down. David found a **Spanish Purple Hairstreak** on the other side of the bank and we spotted a beautifully coloured Ocellated Lizard. **Esper's Marbled White** was also found here, only the second site where we saw it.

Zapater's Ringlet (*Erebia zapateri*) (photos by David Coupe (upperside) and Geoff Woodcock)



Vallecillo

As we had seen most of the target species by this point, we decided that we would return to Vallecillo to see if we could find **Zapater's Ringlet** again, as not all the group had seen it the day before. It wasn't long before David spotted one puddling by the stream but it didn't stay for long as there were so many bees drinking at the same spot. It flew up and landed briefly in the vegetation behind the water where most of us managed to get a photo of it and then flew off again. Success at last, as we had all managed to see it and it was a very fresh specimen with beautiful orange patches on its forewings. We took a group photo here to celebrate seeing the **Zapater's**. After lunch we spread out again but no new species were found.



Rio Cabriel

We drove further up the long track to a small bridge crossing the Rio Cabriel where the river was completely dried up apart from a few small pools where we found a large frog and a Viperine Water Snake (*Natrix maura*) which swam across the pool in full view. There were more puddling **Blues** here along with several **Spanish Swallowtails**.

Roadside near Albarracín by river Guadalaviar

Our last stop was by the side of the road next to the river to check the elms as Simon thought we might find **White-letter**

Hairstreaks (*Satyrium w-album*) but there were none so we concluded that it was too late in the season. Some of the group opted for a paddle instead of walking up the road as it was very hot by this point in the day which seemed a sensible idea with the benefit of hindsight!

Tufted Marbled Skipper (*Carcharodus flocciferus*) (photo by Ken Bailey)



Day 7 - Javier's Rambla

For our last full day we returned to Javier's Rambla to give us the opportunity to spend more time photographing butterflies early in the morning before they became more active. We saw plenty of **Skippers** - **False Mallow** (*Carcharodus tripolinus*), **Southern Marbled**, **Red-underwing**, **Sage**, **Cinquefoil**, **Silver-spotted** and **Large** (*Ochlodes sylvanus*). This was the eleventh site where we had seen **Cinquefoil Skipper** which is normally considered a rare and endangered species but we found it on more sites than any other skipper. We also ▼



Striped Grayling
(*Hipparchia fidia*)
(photo by Dave Wright)

saw **Hermit** and **Southern Hermit** again and were able to get good photographs of a beautiful **Striped Grayling**. The butterflies were nectaring on the echinops and helichrysum which was very aromatic and gave off a mild scent of curry as we brushed past. On the river bank there were **Whites** and **Blues** puddling as before.

Noguera

We returned to the beautiful spot at Noguera and after lunch set off up the track with the ford and the stream running alongside. There were **Spanish Swallowtails** puddling in the mud and the range of **Blues** that we had

become accustomed to seeing - **Oberthur's Anomalous**, **Mother-of-Pearl**, **Azure Chalkhill** and **Spanish Chalkhill**. **Purple-shot Copper** were nectaring on mint and there were plenty of the large **Fritillaries** again - **Queen of Spain**, **Cardinal**, **Dark Green** and **High Brown**. A **Lesser Marbled Fritillary** (*Brenthis ino*) was also identified. Dragonflies were laying eggs directly in the stream and Beautiful Demoiselles perched just above the water, flashing their blue wings.

It was the end of the holiday and at dinner that night we were able to reflect on a very successful trip. The hotel itself was comfortable and the restaurant gave us the opportunity to get to know each other and swap experiences.

Day 8 - Drive back to Madrid via Huelamo

We had all our bags packed early and set off for the airport at Madrid. We called in for a quick break looking for **Sandy Grizzled Skipper** (*Pyrgus cinarae*) in a meadow near the road next to a river 2 km from Huelamo but unfortunately did not find it. We had a quick lunch in a service station on the outskirts of Madrid before heading to the airport and splitting up to go our separate ways.

All in all, it was a fantastic holiday in a beautiful location. The weather was extremely reliable with wall to wall sunshine and although it was a bit hot by mid-afternoon it cooled off at night so we could sleep comfortably. Albarracín itself was a lovely medieval town to explore and the group as a whole saw 99 species, including a record 65 in one day. All of us (including the leaders) saw species which we hadn't seen before. The butterflies were found in good numbers and generally in good condition. There was a plethora of **Fritillaries**, **Skippers**, **Graylings** and **Blues** feeding on the eryngium and thistles. The other plus points were that we didn't have to spend too long travelling in the minibuses to the various sites and the roads and tracks were in good condition.

Bird numbers were limited as it was August although we did see some Choughs, Alpine Swifts, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes and Black Redstarts around Albarracín and Griffon Vultures flying high overhead in several places.

Simon said that he would send the results of our butterfly surveys to Miguel Munguira at Madrid University.

Thanks must go to all the leaders, drivers and Greenwings for organising a great holiday. •

Emma Whitfield
emma.c.whitfield@btinternet.com