

# **Montes Universales**

## 28th July - 4th August 2018 Led by Dr Simon Spencer & David Moore



### **Greenwings Wildlife Holidays**

Tel: 01473 254658 Web: www.greenwings.co.uk Email: enquiries@greenwings.co.uk

#### Introduction

This butterfly holiday was new to Greenwings and took in a largely ignored region of Spain about 200 kilometres east of Madrid. The Montes Universales rise to around 1,900m and are disconnected from other montane regions of Spain. The range of mountains embraces the Sierra de Albarracin and runs from north west to south east. The lower lying areas are composed of arable terrain with arid scrub, poplars, junipers and pine forests at elevation. There are many dry riverbeds which are filled only during stormy periods or from winter snowmelt. The area is dry and hot in summer, with temperatures regularly reaching 35c, but in spite of this, there are plenty of locations where rivers and streams provide relatively lush surroundings, and it is mainly here where large numbers of butterflies can be reliably found. The guests joining us were Peter, Dave W, Barrie, Emma & Aidan, David C & Barbara, Ken, Robert, Allan and Geoff.

What follows is a daily diary for the week, followed by gallery and species lists.

Day 1, Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> July: Arrival at Madrid, transfer to hotel with a stop at the Embalze de la Toba

- Day 2, Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> July: Xavier's Rambla and road to Pozondon
- Day 3, Monday 30<sup>th</sup> July: Noguera, Bronchales and Sierra Alta
- Day 4, Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> July: Moscardon, Nacimiento del Rio Tajo, Bridge over Rio Tajo, Xavier's Rambla
- Day 5, Wednesday 1st August: Vallecillo
- Day 6, Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> August: Ojos del Cabriel & Vallecillo
- Day 7, Friday 3rd August: Xavier's Rambla & Noguera
- Day 8, Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> August: Return to UK.

#### Day 1, Saturday 28th July

With all guests gathered by midday at Madrid airport, the group embarked on the drive to Albarracin. A stop was made for refreshments near Tarancon, but this ended up lasting longer than expected, so it wasn't until late afternoon when the group made a roadside stop beside the Embalze de la Toba, a large reservoir located some distance from any towns.

Straight away, the group were able to get a feel for the kinds of butterflies that would be companions for the week, as Rock Grayling and Grayling were immediately seen in largeish numbers. Sage Skipper was identified as well as Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper, whilst Swallowtail, Cleopatra, Brimstone, Clouded Yellow, Cardinal, Turquoise Blue, Iberian Marbled White and Oriental Meadow Brown were all noted. Emma also noticed a Spanish Purple Hairstreak, so everybody was full of enthusiasm for the week ahead given that the stop lasted no more than an hour and wasn't a designated site of particular interest.

The group reached the hotel around 6pm, and all were struck by the beauty of the walled town of Albarracin, which was to be the base for the week. The evening meals were taken in a restaurant affiliated to the hotel some 200m away, but it was no hardship whatsoever to walk down the narrow, cobbled lanes every evening and beyond into the main square.

#### Day 2, Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> July

The sites visited today were both less than 5km from Albarracin. The first was Xavier's Rambla, a dried river bed which probably only has flowing water in late winter/early spring. The vegetation was rather

sparse and generally quite thorny, so it was surprising to find an impressive range of butterflies in this dry looking location.

The first species to properly show itself was Oberthur's Anomalous Blue, which is endemic to NE Spain. There was no shortage of them even in the first 50m or so of the Rambla. Soon, Sage Skipper was spotted (unsurprising given the number of sage plants growing here) and Southern Marbled Skipper was seen shortly after. The large and very pale Spanish Chalkhill Blue was about in reasonable numbers and Cinquefoil Skipper, often a rare beast in Europe, was recorded in the dozens all the way along the Rambla.

As the group made their way further up the rambla, there was considerable excitement as Southern Hermit was identified. In fact, five or six of this rare Iberian butterfly were seen, to the surprise even of the chief guide, who had only encountered one on his previous visit.

It soon became a matter of default acceptance that all three Gatekeepers were around, although Spanish Gatekeeper must have been nearing the end of its flight period as specimens were generally quite worn.

Other notable species seen during the visit were Red Underwing & Silver Spotted Skipper, Iberian Scarce Swallowtail, Western Dappled White, Blue Spot, Ilex & Sloe Hairstreak, Long Tailed & Lang's Short Tailed Blue, Chapman's Blue, Knapweed, Spotted & Provençal Fritillary, Dusky Heath, Great Banded Grayling, Hermit and Dusky Meadow Brown.

Just before midday, the group moved on about 2km up the road towards Pozondon, where there was another site that benefits from early spring meltwater replete with a tunnel under the roadside. In fact, there was still a damp patch in the lowest point and many butterflies were seen taking fluids from this spot, mainly Graylings.

Black Satyr was conspicuous but one of the guides spotted a large looking satyrid, managed to 'pot' it in a vial and it was declared to be a female Great Sooty Satyr, a species not knowingly recorded in this region.

Following lunch taken in the shade of a steep escarpment, the group continued to revel in the butterfly-rich fields, with many more of the earlier species seen again, but with eyes now being more attuned for the unusual, Tree, Rock and False Grayling were all recorded, whilst Escher's Blue, Southern White Admiral, Cardinal, High Brown, Niobe & Queen of Spain Fritillaries all had more attention paid to them than earlier in the day when things were too intense with all the rarer butterflies.

Such was the level of activity that the group couldn't resist a quick stop at Xavier's Rambla again on the way back to Albarracin. The sun had by now turned its attention onto the other side of the road and many puddling butterflies were seen by the riverside, rounding off what had been an exceptional first day.

#### Day 3, Monday 30<sup>th</sup> July, Noguera, Bronchales and Sierra Alta

A half hour drive along largely empty roads meant the group arrived at Noguera prior to 10am, whereupon it was necessary to navigate a few hundred metres up a dirt track to a very promising looking spot nestled between two mountain ridges with a river running through the middle.

Opposite the vans was a gully with thistles growing, which, during the course of the next few hours, provided superb entertainment with all five of the *argynnis* Fritillaries visiting to take nectar. Most welcome of all was Cardinal, an imposing creature, although not easy to fit into a camera's viewfinder! Queen of Spain Fritillary was also present, whilst in the nearby scrub there were Dusky Heath, Oriental & Dusky Meadow Brown, Rock Graylings & Iberian Marbled whites to observe.

It was decided to walk up this track, where Wood White was seen for the first time, but it was the other track which held the principal interest, due mainly to several damp trickles cascading through it from higher up. A puddling Iberian Scarce Swallowtail was a prominent sight, as was the week's only Large Tortoiseshell, which kept flying up and down a short length of track and alighting to take fluids.

It was two *lycaenids* that were the stars though – first, Mother of Pearl Blue and then Azure Chalkhill Blue, the latter of which had until quite recently been deemed a subspecies of Chalkhill Blue. The three species of Gatekeeper were present along this track, and others to mention were Purple Shot Copper, Mallow Skipper, Lang's Short-Tailed Blue, Marbled Fritillary and the week's only Speckled Woods!

Lunch was taken in the shade of the north facing ridge, and soon the group was on the way to the highest altitude location of the tour.

The first afternoon stop was a rocky outcrop in the pine forests above Bronchales. This is Zapater's Ringlet country, but we didn't find any in spite of an hour's searching. So, the group drove off up a dirt track to Sierra Alta which, at 1,854m, provided the best views of the trip. As ever, the high altitude attracted hill-toppers, with both Swallowtail and Iberian Scarce Swallowtail cavorting around the peak. In addition, a solitary Apollo was seen floating around the summit.

There were patches of thyme which were adorned with good numbers of Purple Shot Coppers, and amongst them was a single Mountain Argus which in these parts is the *montensis* form. A thorough comb of the scree slopes saw plenty of other butterflies identified, with a female Hermit being the pick.

#### Day 4, Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> July – Moscardon and Nacimiento del Rio Tajo

Another glorious, sunny day and the group was again on its way by 9.15am to what proved to be a glorious first stop. Having passed the village of Moscardon, the vehicles were parked on the vergeside of an abnormally green tract of countryside where there was a series of water troughs for shepherds to allow their sheep to drink from. Indeed, this actually happened within half an hour of arrival, although the flock was gone within 20 minutes or so.

Of course, the damp areas around these troughs were littered with puddling butterflies, with Azure Chalkhill Blue probably being the commonest. However, there were decent numbers of Damon Blues to be seen here as well, and Allan, who had gone off further into the grassland came back to delight the others with a stunning Spanish Chestnut Heath. This is form *iphinoides*, and differs considerably from the nominate form, having a bold series of underwing ocelli to the point where it more closely resembles Russian Heath.

Another Apollo floated past, but in amongst the maelstrom of Graylings, a new species was recorded that had very likely been present (but un-noticed) prior to today – False Grayling. In fact, once the group had been alerted to its presence quite a few were seen and it proved to be a reliable companion from this point onwards, often helping itself to fluids by way of alighting on the bodies of human beings!

Again, there were Fritillaries galore, with all five of the *argynnis* genus seen again, with the welcome bonus of Twin Spot Fritillary which, although largely faded, was still going strong at this late time in the season.

Two separate pairs of mating Great Banded Graylings were seen, and Emma latched onto the first Black Veined White of the trip. Safflower Skipper was also present whilst Southern White Admiral was present in good numbers, much to the delight of the Vanessid aficianados.

A stop was also made at the source of the River Tagus, but sadly the stagnant pool was over-run with frogs, meaning that butterflies were largely too wary to spend time there at risk of being literally eaten alive. That said, a walk around the adjacent fields saw Olive Skipper and plenty more Graylings.

Eventually, the group moved on, with a brief stop on a bridge over the Rio Tajo seeing an egg-laying Safflower Skipper as well as the week's first Lesser Marbled Fritillaries which were, as seems to be default behaviour with this species, spending more time dithering in the air than nectaring.

#### Day 5, Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> August, Vallecillo and environs

The first stop was beyond Vallecillo, and the group followed a dirt track for several hundred metres before parking in a clearing which was surrounded by dry grassland. Spotted Fritillary, Cinquefoil Skipper, Dusky Meadow Brown, Hermit, Oberthur's Anomalous Blue & Olive Skipper were all recorded, but the most welcome event came with the first sighting of Esper's Marbled White. In truth, there may have been others prior to this but with so many Iberian Marbled Whites flying around, it was difficult to tell. However, Esper's is noticeably larger and more boldly marked and is altogether a very striking insect.

The fields continued towards a line of beehives, so rather than risk any unnecessary confrontation, it was decided to press on further up the track to the morning's second location.

Upon arrival, this area looked extremely promising. It was a large site with much more verdant pasture. Indeed, a couple of shepherds walked by, and it was left to Spanish-speaker Emma to explain what 14 Brits were doing in a rather nondescript and isolated part of this sparsely populated region.

Some of the group pressed on further down the fields, and it was clear that the ground was becoming boggier and soon a large expanse of thistles was seen and those present made their way down to see what was there.

What was there was a highlight of the trip: dozens and dozens of late summer butterflies enjoying this nectar bonanza. The *argynnis* Fritillaries were well represented, whilst Hermit, Great Banded Grayling, Rock Grayling, Southern White Admiral, Comma, Peacock, Spanish Chestnut Heath and many others were all easily observable.

Suddenly, the guide spotted a black butterfly and realised it was a Zapater's Ringlet. He and Robert gave chase but the butterfly flew up the rock face and could not be photographed.

At this point, it was decided to drive back to where the group had been initially dropped off and, unsurprisingly, everyone jumped in the van as soon as they heard what had just been spotted.

Lunch was taken and the group split up to explore the various tracks which were home to abnormally lush vegetation for this area. Butterfly numbers were quite amazing, and when everybody reassembled at the vans, it transpired that three others had seen another Zapater's Ringlet although again, it did not settle.

Once back at Albarracin for the evening's checklist, it turned out that this one site had seen 65 different species of butterfly recorded, quite some going and a personal record for Simon, the lead guide.

#### Day 6, Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> August – Ojos del Cabriel, Vallecillo (repeat visit) and Rio Cabriel

There was a sense of 'unfinished business' in the air so the group made the decision to revisit the Vallecillo site to try and track down more Zapater's Ringlets.

First, however, there was a trip to Ojos del Cabriel, a delightful spot close to Vallecillo with grassy fields and copious water. The drive down the steep gravel track was a little hair-raising, but the scene that greeted the group was an abnormally verdant one, and immediately it was obvious that there were plenty of butterflies active in the grassy field adjacent to the car park, including a beautifully fresh Southern Brown Argus. The group moved on to the waterfall which was lush with vegetation and there were many butterflies settled on the damp rocks, including Azure Chalkhill Blue, Long-Tailed Blue and Spanish Purple Hairstreak.

After an hour spent at this lovely location, the party moved on to revisit the previous day's Zapater Ringlet site, and immediately after parking the vans, one was spotted flying close to the thistle patch. It very accommodatingly decided to settle by a stagnant pool next to an overflow pipe. However, it kept getting disturbed by the many bees that were also present at this watering hole and whilst everybody got to see the insect this time, it was not prepared to stay for very long, so the guide managed to get it in a vial and although it remained grounded upon release for a few seconds, it suddenly flew onto some nearby vegetation provoking a mass reaction to photograph it prior to it flying away. It was in beautiful condition and had obviously recently emerged.

A further couple of hours at the site unfortunately did not see any more recorded, although again the trackside flowers provided a rich feast for other species and in extremely good numbers.

On the way back to the hotel, two further stops were made. The first was a bridge over the by now largely dried up River Cabriel. There were several sunken tracts however where standing water was still present, and the group got a rare audience with a viperine water snake, whilst also reacquainting themselves with the butterfly species most commonly seen puddling, such as Azure Chalkhill Blue, Turquoise Blue, Mother of Pearl Blue & Spanish Chalkhill Blue.

There was time for one newcomer to be recorded though – a faded Mazarine Blue male, which was obviously at the end of its flight period.

A stop by the river not far from the hotel did not generate any White-letter Hairstreaks, in spite of the elms growing there. The butterfly had probably by now finished its flight season, although Southern Marbled Skipper was seen amongst other, commoner species.

#### Day 7, Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> August, Xavier's Rambla & Noguera revisits

The sign of a productive trip is when there is practically nothing new left to search for on the final day! This was the situation on this last full day, so the group agreed to revisit two of the more spectacular sites and by 9.15am everyone was back in Xavier's Rambla.

Again, there were plenty of butterflies, but this time the group went further up into the rambla, where Striped & Tree Grayling were seen (they had largely been overlooked earlier in the week) as well as another couple of Southern Hermits.

The second location visited was the riverside track at Noguera, and again the group were treated to good displays, particularly from the *argynnis* Fritillaries (although this time, Niobe wasn't spotted) and the array of puddling lycaenids.

Several Purple Shot Coppers were observed further up the track, whilst Iberian Scarce Swallowtail and the usual cast of Graylings were also welcome companions.

With the heat starting to become too much (peaks of 35c were the norm during this trip), the group was happy to call it a day in the mid-afternoon, satisfied that the available species had all but been exhausted.

#### Footnote

The overwhelming view shared by the guests is that the trip had been extremely successful, capped off nicely with Zapater's Ringlet, although it was a shame there weren't more of them.

The numbers of butterflies belonging to species that are either endemic to Spain or rare in other countries took everyone by surprise. Spanish & Azure Chalkhill Blues were seen in multi-hundreds, along with Oberthur's Anomalous Blue. Southern Hermit was found easily, although as its name suggests, this is not a butterfly that can be found in dense colonies.

Other delights were the significant numbers of Cinquefoil Skipper and the recording of all five *argynnis* Fritillaries at the same site on two separate occasions. Twin Spot and Lesser Marbled Fritillaries were also welcome additions. The sheer quantities of various Grayling species will remain memorable too; it wouldn't be unreasonable to estimate their collective numbers in the tens of thousands over the course of the week.

There have been images taken of species that have yet to be definitively identified too, including a possible Spanish Zephyr Blue taken by Barrie. The total number of species recorded is therefore not official, but it stands roughly at the 100 mark, which is quite something at the end of July and into early August.

The area is not especially well-trodden by tourists which gave the group a good sense of space and freedom, and although the afternoons could become hot, the weather generally was conducive to searching for butterflies as clear blue skies are almost guaranteed in this part of Spain in late summer and mornings are quite cool to begin with, with temperatures progressively rising as the day wears on.

**Acknowledgements.** Greenwings would like to thank all their guests on this trip for convivial company throughout the week. The hotels catered well for the group and travel arrangements for the guests were relatively problem free.

#### Montes Universales Butterfly Checklist 2018

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Polygonia c-album     Comma     Image: Comma and the second secon			1				1		
Nymphalis polychloros Large Tortoiseshell 1					1	1	1		1
					1				
	Melitaea phoebe	Knapweed Fritillary		1		1	1	1	

Scientific	Common	28th Jul	29th Jul	30th Jul	31st Jul	1st Aug	2nd Aug	3rd Aug
Melitaea trivia	Lesser Spotted Fritillary			1				
Melitaea didyma	Spotted Fritillary			1	1	1		1
Melitaea deione	Provençal Fritillary			1 1	1	1	1	
Melitaea parthenoides	Meadow Fritillary				1			
Limenitis reducta	Southern White Admiral			1	1	1	1	
Pararge aegeria	Speckled Wood			1				
Lasiommata megera	Wall Brown			1 1				1
Coenonympha arcania	Pearly Heath			1		1		1
Coenonympha glycerion	Chestnut Heath			1 1	1	1	1	
Coenonympha dorus	Dusky Heath			1 1	1	1	1	1
Coenonympha pamphilus	Small Heath			1	1	1		1
Pyronia tithonus	Gatekeeper			1 1	1	1	1	1
Pyronia cecilia	Southern Gatekeeper			1 1	1	1	1	1
Pyronia bathseba	Spanish Gatekeeper			1 1	1			1
Maniola jurtina	Meadow Brown			1 1	1	1	1	1
Hyponephele lycaon	Dusky Meadow Brown			1	1	1		
Erebia zapateri	Zapater's Ringlet					1	1	
Melanargia russiae	Esper's Marbled White					1	1	
Melanargia lachesis	Iberian Marbled White		1	1	1	1	1	1
Satyrus actaea	Black Satyr			1	1		1	
Hipparchia alcyone	Rock Grayling		1	1 1	1	1	1	1
Hipparchia semele	Grayling			1 1	1	1	1	1
Hipparchia statilinus	Tree Grayling		1	1			1	1
Hipparchia fidia	Striped Grayling			1 1			1	1
Arethusana arethusa	False Grayling				1	1	1	
Brintesia circe	Great Banded Grayling			1 1	1	1	1	
Chazara briseis	The Hermit			1 1		1		1
Chazara prieuri	Southern Hermit			1				1
Hyponephele lupina	Oriental Meadow Brown			1 1	1	1		
Polyommatus escheri	Escher's Blue			1 1			1	
Cyaniris semiargus	Mazarine Blue						1	
Satyrus ferula	Great Sooty Satyr			1				
Daily totals		1	5 54	4 64	67	65	58	52

Total species 99