

False Apollo and Spring Butterflies of NE Greece

Holiday Report 8 – 15 April 2019

led by Michael de Courcy Williams & Martin Warren



False Apollo female (Helen Burnett)

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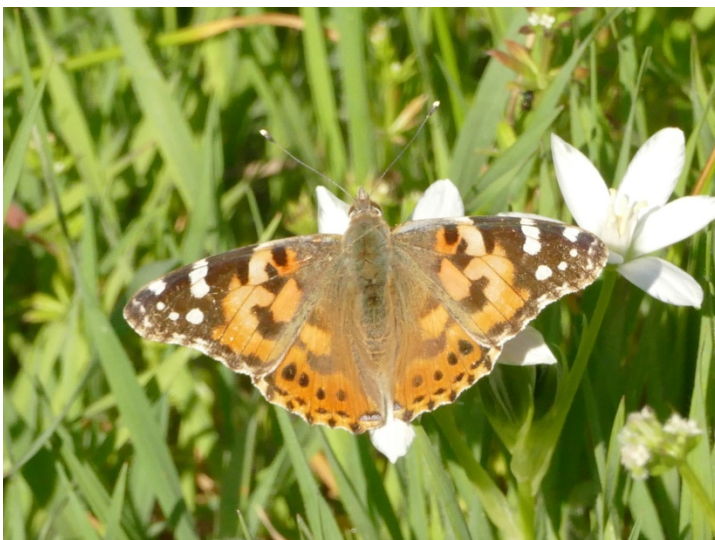
Introduction

The False Apollo is a very geographically restricted butterfly in Europe and also has a very early-season flight period, occurring on the wing in north-east Greece during late March to mid April. Despite the high chance of variable weather at this time of year we have managed to get good sightings of large numbers of individuals in the previous two years that Greenwings has run the tour. Hopes were high of repeating this during 2019 and on-site checks by the local guide Michael just prior to the tour showed good numbers of False Apollo flying at a range of sites. Ominously the weather changed into a rather "difficult" pattern as the group arrived in Thessaloniki. Despite the poor weather conditions and with patience based on the sure knowledge that good populations occur on our sites we managed to get sighting of this magnificent and unusual species. The tour was based first in the NE Greece coastal town of Alexandroupoli, in the county of Evros, close to the border with Turkey. The inland limestone valleys with their networks of deciduous and evergreen oak forests interspersed with small clearings and small-scale cultivations provided an ideal habitat for the False Apollo and related Festoon butterfly species. From our sea-side base we moved westwards and inland to the snowy peaks of Falakro and Orvilos mountains. Here we were based in the mountain village of Volakas in the county of Drama.

The 12 guests joining our two guides were Helen, Bernard, David, Nick, Peter, Tony, Emma & Aidan, Mel & Liz and Melvyn & Elizabeth.

Day 1: 8th April 2019

Two incoming flights from the UK completed our group rendezvous in Thessaloniki airport. After we picked up a second bus we were loaded up and started our three hour drive along the coastlands of NE Greece. Breaking the journey at half way for lunch under Paggaiio mountain revived the group but the cool, rainy conditions prevented any early sighting of butterflies on the trip. Instead we pressed on for Alexandroupoli to be greeted with more rain. Despite the inclement conditions some of the group were off out to see what could be found nearby. The southerly airflow brought with it a mass migration of Painted Lady butterflies and Martin counted 100 in just 15 minutes along the coast at 6pm. At least 20 of these came in straight from the sea. After a long journey, rest was needed by all, followed by dinner in the hotel.



Painted Lady (Martin Warren)

Day 2: 9th April 2019

Destinations: 1 = Sensitive site 1; 2 = Sensitive site 2; 3 = Makri (coastal path)

The weather did not look promising for a successful day's butterflying but hopes and expectations were high. Very heavy overnight rain, especially in the hills, along with the previous day's rain meant we had to change the itinerary around because access roads to one the main sites would certainly be unpassable due to an extensive stretch of muddy ground, which would be too much for the buses to handle especially in such a remote location. A second site which had good numbers of False Apollo when checked the previous week by Michael was accessible by a good quality dirt track so without delay we headed into the hills. The closer we got to our destination the more the clouds drew in and blocked out the warmth of the sun.

In the cool and damp conditions very little was on the wing. The most promising find was a roosting Southern Festoon, a promise of potential! A few Grecian Coppers brightened up the gloomy conditions along with Small Copper and ever present numbers of Painted Lady on their migrations. We decided to try our luck at to the south-eastern edge of the locality in the hope that being a little further away from the higher ground we might be bless with some sunshine. Unfortunately the water level at the fording point over the stream was just too high to attempt a crossing, especially as there would be two more such crossings to be made.

As conditions were a little better we stayed in the vicinity until lunchtime. A highlight here was finding Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper, confirmed from a photo back at the hotel by Bernard. A Camberwell Beauty teased everyone with a rapid fly by and Eastern Dappled White put in an appearance amongst other whites and Orange Tips. In search of better sunshine we headed for the coast at a locality near the village of Makri. With views to the sea just below a hillside path runs through old olive groves on limestone to the Cyclops cave. Unfortunately we were greeted by a downpour of rain! All hopes of butterflying for the day were dashed so we made our way to a nearby taverna for drinks coffee and a snack to revive the dampened spirits.



Roosting Festoon (Mel Mason)



Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper (Helen Burnett)

Day 3: 10th April 2019

Destinations: 1 = Hotel (Hili townland); 2 = Sensitive site; 3 = Mesembria (river valley)

Our second day dawned with a brighter prospect and a chance of a break in the ever present clouds. Some butterfly hunting was possible in the grounds of the hotel but we were eager to get back to some good sites. As Michael knew that False Apollo had been flying in our site of the previous day the best option was to keep returning in the hope of a decent break in the weather, which would surely see our target on the wing once again. On arrival we found the roosting Southern Festoon of the previous day in the same place and not much had changed, including the cloudy and cool conditions.



Grecian Copper male and female (Peter Law)

We set off in search of the *Aristolochia* food plants of the Festoons and False Apollo as surely the females would be desperate to egg lay after quite long break. The three main species of the location were easily found and were widespread over an extensive area. These included the large-leafed species with saxophone shaped flowers, *A. hirta*, as well as the smaller rounded-leafed species with upright trumpet-shaped flowers of *A. pallida* (flowers with yellow cap) and *A. rotunda* (flowers with dark cap). Apart from Eastern Dappled White and Sooty Copper not much else was prepared to brave the poor conditions. With cloud increasing and lowering under the influence of the surrounding hills we decided to depart for the coast in search of sunshine. Our last destination was the maquis and flowery fields of the coastal hills at Mesembria. We managed a little butterfly hunting with sightings of Grecian Copper and Eastern Dappled White before things cooled off and became too late. With time on our hands we stopped in a coffee shop in the village of Dikella before returning to the hotel.



Eastern Dappled White (Peter Law)



Sooty Copper (Helen Burnett)

Day 4: 11th April 2019

Destinations: 1 = Sensitive site 1; 2 = Profitis Ilias; 3 = Makri (coastal path)

With a promise of better weather and some actual sunshine we headed straight back to one of the sites visited previously. This was more like it, butterflies were flying around! Numerous whites were seen, including Eastern Dappled White and Eastern Bath White, Coppers included Grecian, Sooty and Small and Southern Festoons had even left their roosts. Soon the False Apollo were doing the same and struggling out of the undergrowth were quickly spotted with almost simultaneous calls from Martin and Michael. The main target of the trip kept itself well-hidden until our very last opportunity before we were due to depart the region!



False Apollo male (Helen Burnett)



Southern Festoon (Dave Potter)

The welcome sunshine brought out the butterflies and provided everyone with good sightings and opportunities to photograph both males and females of False Apollo, some in pristine condition. A sighting of a single Eastern Festoon concluded the hat-trick of early season Festoons. Large Tortoiseshell put in an appearance and eagle-eyed Helen found some Eastern Baton Blues. After everyone had opportunities to seek out False Apollo we later decided to return to a coastal locality to see what else might be out in better conditions in the hope of seeing Nettle Tree Butterfly. A stop was made at a track on Profitis Ilias, surrounded by majestic Oriental Plane trees. This gave us the only sighting of a possible Powdered Brimstone along with the more familiar Brimstone. The coastal path at Makri provided a welcome range of typical species on the wing at this time including Orange Tip, Eastern Dappled White, Green Underside Blue, Queen of Spain Fritillary and a few others.



Green Underside Blue (Helen Burnett)



Eastern Festoon (Nick Ballard)

Day 5: 12th April 2019

Destinations: 1 = Nestos Gorge; 2 = Picnic stop (Mt Falakro: locality of Gefyres); 3 = Mount Falakro, near hotel (rocky headland at Aghios Nikolaos)

Leaving Alexandroupoli behind our plan was to travel to Falakro mountain with a long stop and lunch break mid journey at the Nestos gorge. This is a renowned site botanically and also for butterflies. The steep rocky limestone walls of the gorge harbour some special plants, most notably the endemic and tertiary relic species *Haberlea rhodopensis* of the family Gesneriaceae, known only from Rodopi mountains. We were lucky enough to see some in flower before a tremendous thunderstorm swept down the valley and left us with unrelenting, heavy rain. After the now habitual consolation coffee at the canteen and largely soaked through we departed early for Falakro. Instead of lunch in Nestos we finally had it in a brief stop on the low slopes of Falakro in a locality known as Gefyres where Large Tortoiseshell was seen. In another 20 minutes we were at our second hotel in the village of Volakas. With a bit of time on our hands and because it wasn't actually raining we headed out to a rocky limestone headland near the hotel, known as Aghios Nikolaos. It was too late and cold for anything worthwhile and the day's count was a staggering two species!



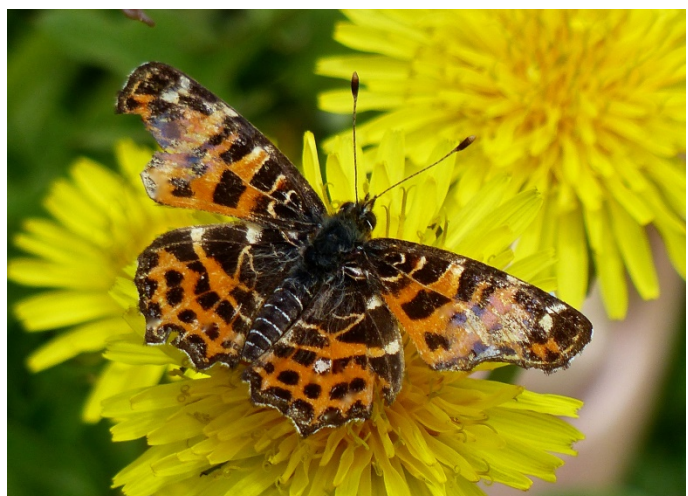
Large Tortoiseshell (Mel Mason)



Eastern Baton Blue (Helen Burnett)



Clouded Yellow *helice* form (Mel Mason)



Map (Helen Burnett)

Day 6: 13th April 2019

Destinations: 1 = Granitis; 2 = Potamoi (Aghios Rafail)

In the morning Falakro was obviously still covered with widespread and thick snow so we tried to keep to relatively low-lying sites. With the help of Bernard we chose a site near the village of Granitis, more famous for being a locality for Falakro Anomalous Blue (*P. eleniae*), which only flies much later in the summer. Under the bright but cool conditions this limestone hillside with its grassland and scrub was likely to provide us with a range of typical butterflies of the region. A highlight among the Queen of Spain Fritillary was a beautiful Weavers Fritillary, posing nicely. A range of skippers were evident as well as Wood Whites of the "sinapis" group, most probably *L. sinapis* itself. Another population of Eastern Baton Blue was also present. We moved on to another location beyond the village of Potamoi, along the Dopsatos river. Here in the warm sunshine a range of butterflies were evident. Particular highlights included good populations of Gruner's Orange Tip, amongst more familiar Orange Tip and Eastern Wood Whites, amongst the more common Wood White. The spring populations of Eastern Wood White are the easiest to distinguish from other species because of their distinctive heavy underside markings. The Balkan populations, including those in Greece, form the western limit of the main range of the species and occur as a subspecies (*L. duponcheli* ssp. *lorkovici*), with the outlier populations in NW Italy and SW France assigned to a different subspecies (*L. duponcheli* ssp. *duponcheli*). A nice find was Chequered Blue amongst Eastern Baton Blue and the more common Green-underside Blue.



Weaver's Fritillary underside (Nick Ballard)



Chequered Blue (Mel Mason)



Eastern Wood White (Mel Mason)



Wood White (Mel Mason)

Day 7: 14th April 2019

Destinations: 1 = Katafyto reservoir (Mt Orvilos); 2 = road verge nr Dasoto; 3 = road verge nr Livadaki; 3 = Potamoi (Aghios Rafail)

Despite an indifferent forecast we set off for the region around Orvilos Mountain. The majestic peak of Tsolias was shrouded in cloud and the scattered snow patches showed the season to be very much delayed. With Blackthorns only just in flower Martin led a search for Brown Hairstreak eggs. Numerous examples were found included unhatched eggs as well as those that had only recently hatched. These were good records of an elusive butterfly. Apart from Dingy Skipper and ever present Painted Lady not much was evident. We embarked on a search for the sun, which seemed to be always shining on a nearby hillside. A roadside stop near the village of Dasoto gave us a first generation Map Butterfly and Peter snapped a Short-tailed Blue. Since every butterfly life stage counted we were also able to record Small Tortoiseshell caterpillars on some roadside nettles! Pressing on in search of the sun along a back road to Potamoi meant we had lunch in the rain near a woodland trail. Cloudy and cool conditions meant that Potamoi was less productive than the previous visit. With more Gruner's Orange Tip flying around there were no other additional species recorded. On returning to the hotel there was just time to snap a group photo to round off the trip.



Martin and Michael searching for Brown Hairstreak eggs (Mel Mason)



Brown Hairstreak egg (Mel Mason)



Gruner's Orange-tip (Nick Ballard)



Gruner's Orange-tip (Emma Whitfield)

Day 8: 15th April 2019

After a very early breakfast laid on by the hotel we were soon on the road to Thessaloniki to pick up everyone's respective flights back home. The drive went smoothly and we arrived in good time to check in for the flights back home after a successful trip with many interesting sightings despite the unfavourable weather.



Overview

The trip was successful because we all had somewhat limited but nevertheless excellent opportunities to see and photograph the very beautiful, rare and enigmatic False Apollo in its natural setting. In addition to seeing both males and females of False Apollo, most in very good condition, there were good numbers of Southern Festoon but just a single Eastern Festoon was spotted to complete the hat-trick of early-season *Aristolochia*-feeding swallowtail butterflies. A range of the unusual looking *Aristolochia* host plants of these butterflies were also seen in flower including *A. hirta*, *A. pallida* and *A. rotunda*, some of which had eggs and a few early-stage caterpillars of Southern Festoon. A number of other eastern European butterflies were evident including Oburthur's Grizzled Skipper, Grecian Copper, Eastern Baton Blue, Eastern Dappled White, Eastern Bath White and Eastern Wood White. Many of these were the first sightings of the species for a good number of the participants. We also had frequent encounters with a range of other spectacular and beautiful species including Large Tortoiseshell, Camberwell Beauty, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Sooty Copper, Green-underside Blue and Chequered Blue. Everywhere we went we were accompanied by often large numbers of Painted Lady butterflies that were pressing ever northwards on what was evidently a major migration event, benefiting from the southerly air flow.

A change of scenery with a visit to higher mountains in the second part of the week brought a handful of other species including Weavers Fritillary, the delicately coloured Gruner's Orange Tip, Map Butterfly and Short-tailed Blue. A check of the Blackthorn bushes at Orvilos, only just in flower, revealed a good number of eggs of Brown Hairstreak, some had already hatched but many were yet to hatch. Evidently good populations of this elusive butterfly were present. All of the 43 species seen, including some species not recorded in previous tours here, are most useful records in a generally poorly worked area for butterfly recording.

Butterfly list: Greenwings trip to NE Greece, 8–15 April 2019

English name	Scientific name	Trip	9/4	10/4	11/4	12/4	13/4	14/4
Dingy Skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>	✓					1,2	1,3
Mallow Skipper	<i>Carcharodus alceae</i>	✓	2	1,3	1		1,2	
Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus malvae</i>	✓			1		1,2	
Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus armoricanus</i>	✓	2					
Southern Festoon	<i>Zerynthia polyxena</i>	✓	1	2	1,2		2	
Eastern Festoon	<i>Zerynthia cerisyi</i>	✓			1			
False Apollo	<i>Archon apollinus</i>	✓			1			
Scarce Swallowtail	<i>Iphiclides podalirius</i>	✓	2		1		2	
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	✓	3				2	
Wood White complex	<i>Leptidea sinapis complex</i>	✓	2	3	1		1,2	2,3,4
Eastern Wood White	<i>Leptidea duponcheli</i>	✓					2	
Orange-tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>	✓	2	3	1,2,3		2	2,4
Gruner's Orange-tip	<i>Anthocaris gruneri</i>	✓					2	4
Eastern Dappled White	<i>Euchloe ausonia</i>	✓	2	2,3	1,2,3			
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	2,3	1,3	1,3		2	
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓	2	1,3	1,3		2	
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>	✓		3	1		2	2,3
Eastern Bath White	<i>Pontia edusa</i>	✓			1			
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>	✓	2		1,2			
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	✓			2		2	2
Powdered Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx farinosa</i>	(?)			2?			
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>	✓	1,2		1		2	
Grecian Copper	<i>Lycaena ottomana</i>	✓	1,2	2,3	1			
Sooty Copper	<i>Lycaena tityrus</i>	✓		2	1			
Green Hairstreak	<i>Callophrys rubi</i>	✓			1		2	
Brown Hairstreak	<i>Thecla betulae</i>	(E)						1(E)
Short-tailed Blue	<i>Cupido argiades</i>	✓						2
Eastern Baton Blue	<i>Pseudophilotes vicrama</i>	✓			1		1,2	
Chequered Blue	<i>Scolitantides orion</i>	✓					2	
Green-underside Blue	<i>Glaucopteryx alexis</i>	✓		3	1,2,3		2	4
Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>	✓	2	3	1			
Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>	✓			1,3		1,2	
Weaver's Fritillary	<i>Boloria dia</i>	✓					1	
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	✓			3			
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	✓	1,2,3	1,2,3	1,2,3	1,2,3	1,2	1-4
Peacock	<i>Aglais io</i>	✓			1		2	
Small Tortoiseshell (larvae)	<i>Aglais urticae</i>	✓						2(L)
Camberwell Beauty	<i>Nymphalis antiopa</i>	✓	2		1			
Large Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>	✓			1	2		
Map	<i>Araschnia levana</i>	✓						2
Glanville Fritillary (larvae)	<i>Melitaea cinxia</i>	(L)		2(L)				
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓			2,3		2	

Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>	√	2	1	3			
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>	√			1			

(E = eggs, L = caterpillars) Total = 43 species + 1?

Key to stops

9/4:1 = Sensitive site 1; **2** = Sensitive site 2; **3** = Makri (coastal path)

10/4:1 = Hotel (Hili townland); **2** = Sensitive site 1; **3** = Mesembria (river valley)

11/4:1 = Sensitive site 1 **2** = Track (Profitis Ilias); **3** = Makri (coastal path)

12/4:1 = Nestos Gorge; **2** = Picnic stop (Mt Falakro: locality of Gefyres); **3** = Mount Falakro, near hotel (rocky headland at Aghios Nikolaos)

13/4: 1 = Granitis; **2** = Potamoi (Aghios Rafail)

14/4:1 = Katafyto reservoir (Mt Orvilos); **2** = road verge near Dasoto; **3** = road verge near Livadaki; **4** = Potamoi (Aghios Rafail)

Bird list: Greenwings trip to NE Greece – 8-14 April 2019 (courtesy Aidan Whitfield)

English name	Scientific name	8/4	9/4	10/4	11/4	12/4	13/4	14/4
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>						✓	
Dalmatian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>	✓						
Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>			✓				
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>					✓		
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓
Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	✓						
Short Toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>				✓		✓	
Booted Eagle	<i>Aquila pennata</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	✓						
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓				
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓		✓		
Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>						✓	
Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>					✓		
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		✓	✓				
Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>		✓					
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>					✓		✓
Common swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			✓	✓			
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus veridis</i>							✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓	✓			
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>			✓				
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				✓			
Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		✓					
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		✓			✓	✓	
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>					✓	✓	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>						✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>							✓
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>						✓	✓
Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					✓		
Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>			✓		✓		
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓			
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓					✓
Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>							✓
Sub-alpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantilans</i>			✓	✓			✓
Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Iduna caligata</i>							✓
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			✓				
Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>							✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				✓			
Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		✓					
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓			
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		✓	✓				
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓			✓		
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					✓	✓	✓
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓			✓	✓
Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			✓				
Girl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirius</i>		✓		✓			
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>				✓			

Total = 57 species