

Sussex Purple Emperors

15th July 2021

Led by Terry Goble & Ben Greenaway



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Sussex Purple Emperors Day Trip

July 15th 2021

This trip was led by Terry Goble and Ben Greenaway. Ben joined us to give us the benefit of his work and experience of studying purple emperors in the Southwater Woods complex. He gave another dimension to the tour with his observations and knowledge of the woods and the purple emperors ecology. It was a real asset to have him working with us.

Once everyone had assembled at Knepp walker's car park we introduced ourselves and briefly outlined the day ahead. We started with a short drive to Southwater Woods. This was once the Sussex stronghold for Purple Emperors until it was usurped by the astonishing population that has appeared at Knepp. However, it was still an excellent site for woodland butterflies and we had the added bonus of Ben releasing a female Empress that had survived an attempt by a parasitoid (tachinid fly).



We walked along the rides enjoying numerous sightings of the very busy Silver-washed Fritillaries and the slightly more sedate glidings of the White Admiral. There were several other species, such as Skippers, Ringlets, Red Admirals, Meadow Browns and the occasional Marbled White. In addition, there were other creatures of interest as we spotted Southern Hawker, probably Common Darter and some of the common damselflies. Several Black-and-Yellow longhorn beetles were also seen.



Besides the invertebrates there were also the sounds of Blackcap, Song Thrush and Blackbird to enjoy as we ambled around in the morning sunshine. When we came to a suitable spot Ben released the Empress onto some bracken. She sat for a while, giving a great photo opportunity,

before she gave a restless flick of her wings and took off. It was a real privilege to watch her at such close quarters.

Ben then showed us some of the fruits of his studies in the woods and took us to see an active and then an empty pupa case. He told the group about the discovery of the fact that at the pupa stage the emperor glows in ultraviolet light which makes these incredibly well camouflaged pupa cases a lot easier to find.



After a few very enjoyable hours in these delightful semi-ancient woodlands, it was time to head off to buy lunch and use the local facilities. After negotiating

the traffic at the service station, we headed off to Knepp for an afternoon walk and to sit down for our lunch.



White Stork © Harry Faulk

After parking up we strolled through the Knepp centre and just prior to the start of the trails we watched the Stork's nest, which still contained three very healthy almost adult sized chicks. One parent was sitting in the tree near-by, whilst the other flew off to feed. It had a surreal quality watching these huge birds soaring over the Knepp woodlands, a sight that has been absent for hundreds of years. The population appears to be faring really well and these UK born chicks will be back and breeding in four years and they will no doubt spread along the woodland belt in Sussex.

We then walked to the 'beaver' lake to watch the Great Crested Grebes and their 'humbug' chicks and more importantly enjoy our lunch. Ever on the lookout we also noted during our break that there were Black-tailed Skimmer, Blue-tailed and Azure damselflies zooming around. A Grey Wagtail was also seen, whilst an almost constant 'yaffling' of Green Woodpecker and 'check' of Great Spotted Woodpecker could be heard.



Black-tailed Skimmer © Terry Goble

We then embarked on a Purple Emperor search in intermittent sunshine and clouds. However, it was a warm day, so we were optimistic of at least some aerial sightings. We also kept an eye out for other wildlife and did manage to see an obliging Chiffchaff on top of a small tree, also noted were Linnets darting around in the open areas. Dragonflies were surprisingly rare, and a sighting of an Emerald damselfly was a treat, but we mostly saw Southern Hawkers.

As for the Emperors, we did have regular sightings as they soared around the tops of oaks, dog fighting and occasionally landing on an oak leaf. On occasions they descended a little to give some great views and it was amazing to see so many over the course of the walk, despite this being a poor year.



Fallow Deer © Helen Bovill

Mammals were not forgotten as we enjoyed sightings of Red and Fallow deer, with spectacular palmated antlers still in velvet. We also saw some of the introduced domestic animals free roaming such as the Tamworth pigs and long-horn cattle. These animals act as the habitat drivers that lost species would otherwise be doing.

After a very enjoyable walk we came onto the last part of the track back to the car park and it was nearly time for the end of the day. However, it didn't quite work out like that as we spent the last 45 minutes enthralled by the antics of Purple Emperors around a sap run. We watched as they chased

each other, came low over the willows and chased any other butterflies, including Purple Hairstreaks that crossed their path.

We were then joined by Matthew Oates who has spent forty years studying these majestic butterflies and we chatted amiably with the group imparting nuggets of wisdom around how iridescence is used to intimidate rivals! We were just about to wander back to the cars when news came through of a grounded male purple emperor a few hundred meters away. We didn't want to miss this opportunity and so hurried to the location and were rewarded with a magnificent male emperor down on the path with his long yellow tongue sucking up some foul smelly substance! We were able to watch him for about ten to fifteen minutes, taking



Purple Emperors © Harry Faulk



Purple Emperor © Lydia Massiah

hundreds of photographs and admiring the beauty of this animal, particularly when the light lit up the brilliant iridescence on his wings.

It was a spectacular way to end the day and a very happy group made their way back to the car park, watching the occasional Stork soar overhead along with at least one Buzzard joining in the thermals. We drove back to the car park and said our goodbyes as

the day finally came to an end and the group dispersed towards their various destinations.



Purple Emperor © Harry Faulk



Purple Emperor ©Helen Bovill

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Systematic Lists

Butterflies

Small Skipper
Large Skipper
Large White
Small White
Red Admiral
White Admiral
Peacock
Purple Emperor
Silver-washed Fritillary
Comma
Meadow Brown
Purple Hairstreak
Marbled White
Gatekeeper
Ringlet
Speckled Wood

Thymelicus sylvestris
Ochlodes sylvanus
Pieris brassicae
Pieris rapae
Vanessa atalanta
Limenitis camilla
Inachis io
Apatura iris
Argynnis paphia
Polygonia c-album
Maniola jurtina
Neozephyrus quercus
Melanargia galathea
Pyronia tithonus
Aphantopus hyperantus
Pararge aegeria

Other notable invertebrates

Southern Hawker
Common Darter
Azure Damselfly
Blue-tailed Damselfly
Emerald Damselfly
Large Red Damselfly
Solider Beetle
Black-and-Yellow Longhorn Beetle
Thick-legged Flower Beetle
Dock Bug
Buff-tailed Bumblebee
Red-tailed Bumblebee
White-tailed Bumblebee
Sweat bee sp.
Vapourer Moth

Aeshna cyanea
Sympetrum striolatum
Coenagrion puella
Ischnura elegans
Lestes sponsa
Pyrrhosoma nymphula
Cantharis rustica
Rutpela maculata
Oedemera nobilis
Coreus marginatus
Bombus terrestris
Bombus monticola
Bombus lucorum
Halictid sp
Orgyia antiqua

Mammals

Red deer
Fallow deer
Grey squirrel

Cervus elaphus
Dama dama
Sciurus carolinensis

Birds

Mute Swan
Mallard
Common Pheasant
Great Crested Grebe
Rock Dove

Cygnus olor
Anas platyrhynchos
Phasianus colchicus
Podiceps cristatus
Columba livia

Wood Pigeon
Eurasian Collared Dove
Common Moorhen
Eurasian Coot
European White Stork
Black-headed Gull
Herring Gull
Eurasian Buzzard
Green Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Common Kestrel
Eurasian Jay
Eurasian Magpie
Eurasian Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
House Sparrow
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Chaffinch
Linnet
Bullfinch
Eurasian Goldfinch
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Eurasian Skylark
Barn Swallow
Reed Warbler
Chiffchaff
Blackcap
Common Whitethroat
Wren
Common Starling
European Robin
Song Thrush
Blackbird

Columba palumbus
Streptopelia decaocto
Gallinula chloropus
Fulica atra
Ciconia ciconia
Chroicocephalus ridibundus
Larus argentatus
Buteo buteo
Picus viridis
Dendrocopos major
Falco tinnunculus
Garrulus glandarius
Pica pica
Corvus monedula
Corvus frugilegus
Corvus corone
Passer domesticus
Motacilla alba
Motacilla cinerea
Fringilla coelebs
Linaria cannabina
Pyrrhula pyrrhula
Carduelis carduelis
Cyanistes caeruleus
Parus major
Alauda arvensis
Hirundo rustica
Acrocephalus scirpaceus
Phylloscopus collybita
Sylvia atricapilla
Sylvia communis
Troglodytes troglodytes
Sturnus vulgaris
Erithacus rubecula
Turdus philomelos
Turdus merula

Silver-washed Fritillary © Helen Bovill



Purple Emperor © Lydia Massiah



Marbled White © Helen Bovill



Purple Emperor © Helen Bovill



Purple Emperor © Lydia Massiah



Purple Emperor © Terry Goble



Purple Emperor pupa © Lydia Massiah



Purple Emperor © Helen Bovill



Purple Emperor © Lydia Massiah



Silver-washed Fritillary © Harry Faull



White Admiral © Helen Bovill



Purple Emperor © Harry Faulk



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Black-and-yellow Longhorn © Helen Bovill



Purple Emperor © Terry Goble



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Gatekeeper © Helen Bovill



Purple Emperor © Harry Faulk



Silver-washed Fritillary © Helen Bovill