

Butterflies of the French Pyrenees

25th May - 1st June 2023



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Introduction

This popular springtime holiday once again took in the butterflies and general wildlife of the delightful eastern French Pyrenees, with its vast array of habitat ranging from semi-arid Mediterranean maquis and garrigue to medium altitude meadows and wetlands. The guests joining us were Lynn & Rod, Philip & Kim, Adrian, Regine, Robert & Karen, Kerry, Peter C, Caroline and Peter R.

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

Day 1: Arrivals day. Airport car park, Sournia quarry.

Day 2: Torre de Goa, area around village of Py

Day 3: Porte Puymorens, Eyne, Llo, Carançes Gorge

Day 4: Above Mosset, Aunat, Ste Colombe-sur-Guette

Day 5: Sournia hillside & quarry

Day 6: Força Real, Carançes Gorge

Day 7: Above Mosset, beyond Conat

Day 8: Return to UK.

Day 1: Airport car park, Sournia quarry.

There were no delays to the arrival of any of the guests and the group were on the way to Vernet-Bains prior to midday, with some of the guests taking the opportunity to photograph the many Spanish Gatekeepers, *Pyronia bathseba*, on the bramble flowers in the rental vehicle car park. Holly Blue, *Celastrina argiolus*, was also seen here too.

After checking in at the well-situated Hotel Princess, the group travelled to the north to a quarry near Sournia, where cloud was gathering and as a consequence few butterflies were on the wing. There was sufficient brightness to record Red Underwing Skipper, *Spialia sertorius*, Chequered Blue, *Scolitantides orion*, and Western Marbled White, *Melanargia occitania*, amongst a handful of other commoner species, before the cloud thickened and the rain started falling.

Thankfully, this was to be the only rain interruption until the afternoon of the final day.

Day 2: Torre de Goa, area around the mountain village of Py

The skies were clear and the sun shining on this morning and after a 30 minute drive, the group arrived at the car park beneath the 1,200m Torre de Goa.

Given the early hour, the lower track was explored first, with Chequered Blue being the most prominent species, run closely by Green Hairstreak, *Callophrys rubi*. There were several Adonis Blues, *Polyommatus bellargus*, sunning themselves at the side of the track, whilst on the dirt itself, a handful of Knapweed Fritillaries, *Melitaea phoebe*, were holding territory.

Most of the group then decided to ascend to the highest point where the tower is situated. The climb is not an easy one, but spectacular views are the reward, along with good numbers of hill-topping butterflies, with Iberian Scarce Swallowtails, *Iphiclides feisthamelii*, being the most visible.





Purple-shot Copper © Regine H

However, the species the ascent had been principally undertaken for was Purple-shot Copper, *Lycaena alciphron*, and there were several outstanding examples of this large and beautiful lycaenid, including one that was fixed firmly to the track and allowed close approaches for a prolonged period.

Swallowtails, *Papilio machaon*, were also flying around the tower, alongside a plethora of Wall Browns, *Lasiommata megera*.

There was time for a brief sortie down the lower track before leaving, and it turned out that Robert & Karen had seen a number of Provence Orange Tips, *Anthocharis euphroides*. The rest of the group understandably spent time looking for this delightful species, with everybody succeeding and getting images.

The group then moved on to the next mountain valley, stopping at a series of grassy meadows just prior to the village of Py. These meadows have always been a minefield for butterflies and this year was no exception, with an astounding range being present in an area no bigger than a football field.

It was sometimes difficult to concentrate with such an explosion of butterflies in flight, and some of the many treasures found were Tufted Marbled Skipper, *Carcharodus flocciferus*, Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper, *Pyrgus armoricanus*, Escher's Blue, *Polyommatus escheri*, Sooty Copper, *Lycaena tityrus*, Meadow Fritillary, *Melitaea parthenoides*, Pearly Heath, *Coenonympha arcania*, and Black Veined White, *Aporia crataegi*.

By now, clouds were thickening, so a decision was made to ascend to 1,300m to look for some higher altitude species. Lunch was taken here and given the greyer skies, it wasn't long before the group chanced upon a grounded Clouded Apollo, *Parnassius Mnemosyne*, followed swiftly by Apollo, *Parnassius apollo*. These heavy-bodied butterflies are always the first down when conditions deteriorate, and everybody was able to get extremely close to them given that their powers of flight had been temporarily taken away.



Black-veined White © Lynn G

A few brighter interludes followed and Lynn spotted a fresh Amanda's Blue, *Polyommatus amandus*, resting on a flower stem, whilst other new species for the trip included Green-underside Blue, *Glaucopsyche alexis*, Pearl-bordered Fritillary, *Boloria euphrosyne*, and Large Wall Brown, *Lasiommata maera*.



Green-underside Blue © Rod G

Light rain began to fall, so it was necessary to move back down in altitude, with a stop not far from the hotel providing Cleopatra, *Gonepteryx cleopatra*, and Mallow Skipper, *Carcharodus alcaea*.

It had been a successful and very productive first day, with 56 different species seen. Most of these were new for the tour, meaning that the aggregate total had already reached 61.

Day 3: Porte Puymorens, Eyne, Llo, Caranças Gorge

The previous night, a decision was made to drive directly to the site at Porte Puymorens as the weather forecast had suggested a gradual breakdown as the day progressed.

The journey took nearly two hours but included some spectacular scenery, including the viaducts that carry the *petit train jaune*, and the high meadows replete with wild narcissi.

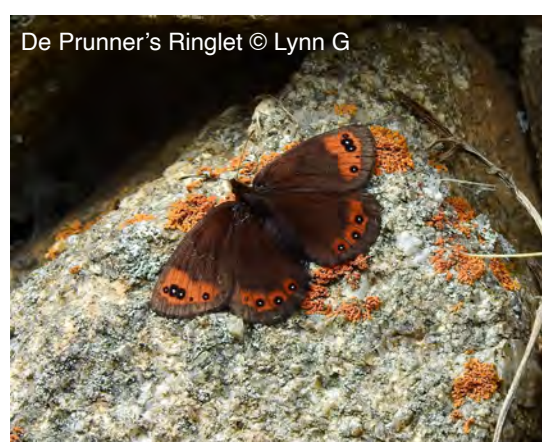
Sure enough, the weather was fine upon arrival at the site and it didn't take long to find the first Violet Coppers, *Lycaena helle*, with several males lekking at the lower (and damper) part of the meadow, jousting for airspace with Green Hairstreaks and Pearl Bordered Fritillaries.

On the opposite side of the road, the group took in the sight of differently-coloured *Dactylorhiza* orchids, and butterflies such as Southern Grizzled Skipper, *Pyrgus malvoides*, Wood White, *Leptidaea sinapis*, Sooty Copper, Queen of Spain Fritillary, *Issoria lathonia*, Small Tortoiseshell, *Aglaia urticae*, and Brimstone, *Gonepteryx rhamni*.



Violet Copper © Regine H

With the mission accomplished, lunch was taken and the group moved on to the villages of Eyne



De Prunner's Ringlet © Lynn G

and Llo, where Geranium Argus, *Aricia eumedon*, was picked up along with Osiris Blue, *Cupido osiris*, De Prunner's Ringlet, *Erebia triaria*, Berger's Clouded Yellow, *Colias alfacariensis*, Duke of Burgundy, *Hamaeris lucina*, and the montane form of Marsh Fritillary, *Euphydryas aurinia*, which differs greatly from the lower elevation *beckeri* form.

The afternoon was concluded with a visit to Carançes Gorge, although things had started to cloud over by this point and apart from a surprise Chequered Blue, little was flying. Still, it gave everyone the opportunity to sit down and have a drink, and with 6 new species added during the day, the week's total had now hit 67.

Day 4: Above Mosset, Aunat, Ste Colombe-sur-Guette

Today was when the longest journey of the week was undertaken, over Col de Jau and into the Aude département. Just prior to the col, a stop was made to explore two glorious meadows replete with orchids and a plethora of wild flowers.

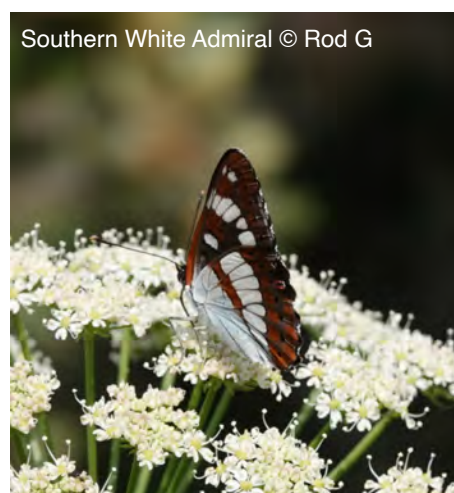
The main targets were Purple-edged Copper, *Lycaena hippothoe*, which sadly did not appear to be on the wing, and Bright-eyed Ringlet, *Erebia oeme*, which did turn up, but only in the form of one individual which was relentlessly flying and only settled once briefly.

However, plenty of other species were present, including many Mazarine Blues, *Cyaniris semiargus*. The other notable was Pearly Heath, which was the last we saw of this species during the tour.

The weather thankfully held as the drive into the Aude valley was made and, an hour or so later, the group arrived at a quiet roadside spot close to the village of Aunat.

Again, there were orchids to be seen at the sides of the road and there were excellent numbers of butterflies active, the commonest of which was probably Silver-studded Blue, *Plebejus argus*, which is a species not seen closer to the main base.

There was a welcome appearance from Southern White Admiral, *Limentis reducta*, and the week's only Heath Fritillaries, *Melitaea athalia*.



Southern White Admiral © Rod G

Sadly, Map, *Araschnia levana*, was absent but the other highly prized target here, Chequered Skipper, *Carterocephalus palaemon*, did make a fleeting appearance rather belatedly as the group

were preparing to leave. Unfortunately, it flew within seconds of being spotted and in spite of much searching, could not be relocated.

On the way back, it was decided to have a further, brief stop near the village of Ste Colombe-sur-Guette. This paid dividends with Scarce Swallowtail, *Iphiclides podalirius*, being seen almost immediately. The *Maginot* line which separates this species from its close cousin, *feisthamelii*, is in the Aude département, with *podalirius* being absent from the Pyrenees-Orientales.

A further notable moment came in the shape of the discovery of a mating pair of Green-underside Blues, *Glaucopsyche alexis*, which were photographed extensively prior to everybody heading back to Vernet-les-Bains, with the 7 new species taking the week's total to 74.

Day 5: Sournia hillside & quarry

It was now time for a change of scenery, habitat and butterflies. The area around Sournia, an hour's drive to the north east of Vernet-les-Bains, is at considerably lower elevation meaning that the range of butterflies is rather different.



Blue-spot Hairstreak © Rod G

First stop was a scrubby hillside covered in sweet-smelling lemon thyme, where the first Marsh Fritillaries, *f. beckeri*, were recorded. This form is larger and much redder than the other forms of this butterfly, and the behaviour is different too, with the males perching on leaf tips at shoulder level and intercepting other butterflies that enter their airspace, rather like Dukes of Burgundy.

A small number of delightful Blue-spot Hairstreaks, *Satyrium spini*, were recorded, whilst Western Marbled White, *Melanargia occitanica*, were also seen.

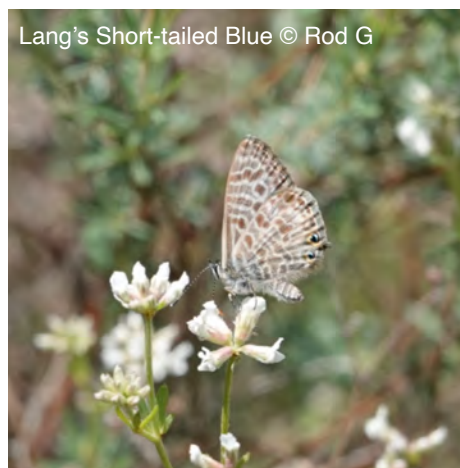
More Southern White Admirals were present near the lowest part of the track, whilst Osiris Blue and Spanish Gatekeeper were other notables.

Lunch was taken in a roadside parking bay where everyone could take in the butterflies that were active in the sunshine. Jon wandered off into a nearby terrace and came back with a Spanish Festoon, *Zerynthia rumina*, which proved to be the only one sighted all week and was eagerly welcomed by everyone.

Rod then found the week's only Lang's Short-Tailed Blue, *Leptotes pirithous*, which was in the quarry, along with Cardinal, *Argynnis pandora*, Cleopatra, *Gonepteryx cleopatra*, and Dark Green Fritillary, *Speyeria aglaja*.

Perhaps the most surprising find was Provence Chalkhill Blue, *Polyommatus hispana*, a species whose flight period is normally over by the end of May, yet this individual still looked quite fresh.

The other species seen for the first time was Ilex Hairstreak, *Satyrium ilicis*, meaning that 7 new sightings had been made, making a total now of 81. This was celebrated by a refreshing round of drinks at the auberge in Sournia prior to heading back to the hotel.



Lang's Short-tailed Blue © Rod G

Day 6, Tuesday 30th May - Força Real, Caranças Gorge

The weather forecast suggested a deterioration in conditions inland from mid-afternoon, so it was time to head east to the 501m limestone outcrop at Força Real.

Arriving shortly after 10am, it was clear blue sky and warm temperatures. Importantly, winds were light too which encourages hill-topping behaviour in butterflies.

At first, whilst the views were excellent, the butterflies were not, with Spanish Gatekeepers practically the only species on the wing, but as conditions warmed up, more species began to fly, with Wall Brown, Swallowtail and then the week's first Long-tailed Blues, *Lampides boeticus*, being seen near the summit.

Not long after, an extremely large butterfly appeared at the back of the old hermitage at the top of the hill. It was a Two-tailed Pasha, *Charaxes jasius*, and it (along with another that turned up shortly afterwards) gave a fabulous display for over half an hour, swooping majestically around the group and frequently landing in the nearby shrubs. At one stage it even settled on some curry plant flowers, allowing close approaches. It also spent time on the wall surrounding the hermitage.

Several Blue-spot Hairstreaks were also nectaring at this hotspot, whilst Cleopatra and Bath White, *Pontia daplidice*, were also recorded.

In the early afternoon, a second visit to Caranças Gorge was made. The weather had started to deteriorate by now, although once again the opportunity to have a drink and a sit down in pleasant surroundings was most welcome.

Upon arriving back at the hotel, Kerry, who had not felt well enough to join the group for the day's outing, surprised everybody by recounting that he had seen a Geranium Bronze, *Cacyreus marshalli*, in the environs of the hotel. This meant that three new species had been added during the day, meaning that 84 different butterflies had now been recorded on the trip.

Day 7: Above Mosset, beyond Conat

This final full day was one where rain was expected, so a decision was made to head north towards Mosset as that part of the sky looked brightest at breakfast time.

Sure enough, upon arrival it was mainly sunny and the group set out to explore the roadside meadows looking for Purple-edged Copper above all else.

Sadly, this species eluded everybody once again, although Regine did find and photograph a new species for the week in the form of Weaver's Fritillary, *Boloria dia*.

There were several other Fritillaries on the wing here, most notably Meadow Fritillary and Glanville Fritillary, *Melitaea cinxia*.

With the cloud beginning to thicken, it was decided to drive up a quiet mountain valley beyond the village of Conat, where there are a series of roadside meadows popular with a variety of butterfly species.



Upon arrival, it was still bright enough for a handful of butterflies to remain active, but that soon changed as skies darkened and rain began to fall.

Following lunch, it was decided that there was no point continuing as the rainfall was becoming heavier, and indeed it became so heavy that any thoughts of stopping to admire the historic walled town at Villefranche-de-Conflent were abandoned.

Day 8, Thursday 1st June, return to Perpignan airport via

Due to a scheduling change by Ryanair, it was necessary to leave the charming hotel in Vernet-les-Bains at 7 o'clock in order to arrive at the appropriate check-in time. Regine had caught a taxi earlier as her flight to Germany had taken off first thing and thankfully there were no hold-ups en route and everybody arrived promptly for their flights home.

Footnote and acknowledgements

The total number of butterfly species seen was 87, which is highly creditable given the time of year. Highlights were undoubtedly the Two-tailed Pashas on Força Real, the Violet Coppers at Porte-Puymorens and the incredible variety of butterflies seen in a small meadow near the village of Py.

The weather conditions were largely very favourable with only the final day being significantly

affected, meaning that the target species were all seen, although numbers generally were down on previous tours in this area.

Greenwings must thank guests for their participation and convivial company. There were challenges at times but everyone remained positive and enthusiastic in spite of some guests not feeling well on some days.

The scenery was spectacular as ever and the range of butterflies highly satisfactory. In general, the hotel provided excellent service, with occasional issues being easy to resolve. Once again, this region proved it is amongst the best in Europe for late spring butterflies.

Systematic Species Checklist

Butterflies Sightings are marked with a ✓			25th May	26th May	27th May	28th May	29th May	30th May	31st May
			Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Family Papilionidae									
1	Iberian Scarce Swallowtail	<i>Iphiclides feisthamelii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Scarce Swallowtail	<i>Iphiclides podalirius</i>				✓			
3	Common Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Apollo	<i>Parnassius apollo</i>		✓					
5	Clouded Apollo	<i>Parnassius mnemosyne</i>		✓		✓			
6	Spanish Festoon	<i>Zerynthia lumina</i>					✓		
Family Pieridae									
7	Orange Tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
8	Provence Orange Tip	<i>Anthocharis euphenoides</i>		✓	✓	✓			
9	Black-veined White	<i>Aporia crataegi</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓
10	Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias alfacariensis</i>			✓				
11	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
13	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Wood White	<i>Leptidea sinapis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>		✓		✓			
17	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>		✓			✓	✓	
Family Lycaenidae									
19	Green Hairstreak	<i>Callophrys rubi</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
20	Ilex Hairstreak	<i>Satyrium ilicis</i>					✓		
21	Blue-spot Hairstreak	<i>Satyrium spini</i>					✓	✓	
22	Purple-shot Copper	<i>Lycaena alciphron</i>		✓			✓		
23	Violet Copper	<i>Lycaena helle</i>			✓				

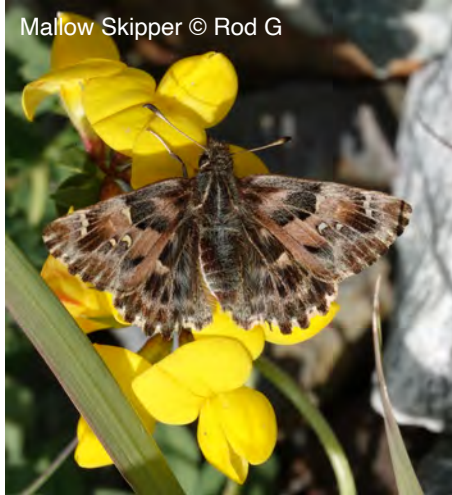
Butterflies			25th	26th	27th	28th	29th	30th	31st
			May	May	May	May	May	May	May
Sightings are marked with a ✓			Day	Day	Day	Day	Day	Day	Day
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
25	Sooty Copper	<i>Lycaena tityrus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
26	Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Geranium Argus	<i>Aricia eumedon</i>			✓				
28	Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>						✓	
29	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
30	Short-tailed Blue	<i>Cupido argiades</i>		✓					
31	Small Blue	<i>Cupido minimus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
32	Osiris Blue	<i>Cupido osiris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Mazarine Blue	<i>Cyaniris semiargus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
34	Green-underside Blue	<i>Glaucopsyche alexis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
35	Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>						✓	
36	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>					✓		
37	Silver-studded Blue	<i>Plebejus argus</i>				✓			
38	Amanda's Blue	<i>Polyommatus amandus</i>		✓		✓	✓		
39	Adonis Blue	<i>Polyommatus bellargus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Escher's Blue	<i>Polyommatus escheri</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
41	Provence Chalkhill Blue	<i>Polyommatus hispana</i>					✓		
42	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Chapman's Blue	<i>Polyommatus thersites</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
44	Baton Blue	<i>Pseudophilotes baton</i>		✓					
45	Chequered Blue	<i>Scolitantides orion</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Family Riodinidae									
46	Duke of Burgundy	<i>Hamearis lucina</i>			✓	✓			
Family Nymphalidae									
47	Peacock	<i>Aglais io</i>		✓		✓			
48	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
49	Two-tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>						✓	
50	Southern White Admiral	<i>Limenitis reducta</i>				✓	✓		
51	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>		✓		✓			
52	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Argynnis aglaja</i>					✓		
55	Cardinal	<i>Argynnis pandora</i>					✓		
56	Weaver's Fritillary	<i>Boloria dia</i>							✓

Butterflies			25th	26th	27th	28th	29th	30th	31st
			May	May	May	May	May	May	May
Sightings are marked with a ✓			Day	Day	Day	Day	Day	Day	Day
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
57	Pearl-bordered Fritillary	<i>Boloria euphrosyne</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
58	Marsh Fritillary	<i>Euphedryas aurinia</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>			✓		✓		✓
60	Heath Fritillary	<i>Melitaea athalia</i>				✓			
61	Glanville Fritillary	<i>Melitaea cinxia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Provençal Fritillary	<i>Melitaea dejone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
63	Spotted Fritillary	<i>Melitaea didyma</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓
64	Meadow Fritillary	<i>Melitaea parthenoides</i>		✓	✓				✓
65	Knapweed Fritillary	<i>Melitaea phoebe</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓
66	Pearly Heath	<i>Coenonympha arcania</i>		✓		✓			✓
67	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
68	Bright-eyed Ringlet	<i>Erebia oeme</i>				✓			
69	De Prunner's Ringlet	<i>Erebia triaria</i>		✓	✓	✓			
70	Grayling	<i>Hipparchia semele</i>	✓						
71	Large Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata maera</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
72	Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	✓				✓		
74	Western Marbled White	<i>Melanargia occitanica</i>	✓				✓	✓	
75	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Spanish Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia bathseba</i>	✓				✓	✓	
Family Hesperiiidae									
79	Mallow Skipper	<i>Carcharodus alceae</i>		✓	✓				
80	Tufted Marbled Skipepr	<i>Carcharodus flocciferus</i>		✓			✓		
81	Chequered Skipper	<i>Caterocephalus palaemon</i>				✓			
82	Dingy Skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
83	Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes sylvanus</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓
84	Large Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus alveus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
85	Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus armoricanus</i>		✓		✓			✓
86	Safflower Skipper	<i>Pyrgus carthami</i>				✓			✓
87	Southern Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus malvoides</i>		✓	✓	✓			
88	Olive Skipper	<i>Pyrgus serratulae</i>				✓			
89	Red-underwing Skipper	<i>Spialia sertorius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

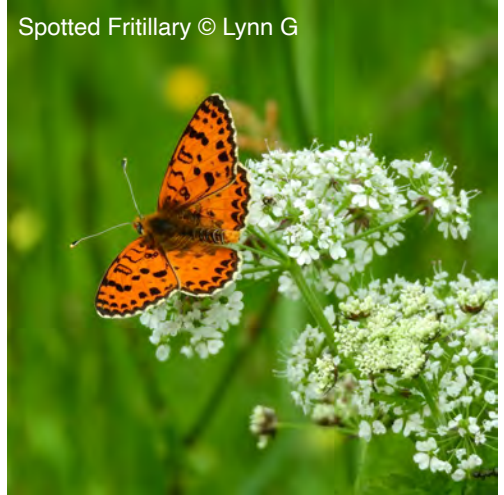
Photo Gallery



Provence Orange Tip © Lynn G



Mallow Skipper © Rod G



Spotted Fritillary © Lynn G



Western Marbled White © Rod G



Tufted Marbled Skipper © Regine H



Short-tailed Blue © Regine H



Swallowtail © Lynn G



Apollo © Lynn G



Meadow Fritillary © Regine H

Marsh Fritillary © Lynn G



Spanish Festoon © Rod G



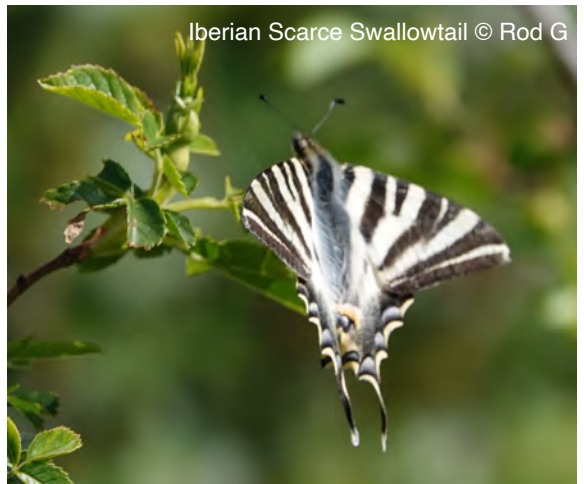
Green-underside Blues © Lynn G



Clouded Apollo © Regine H



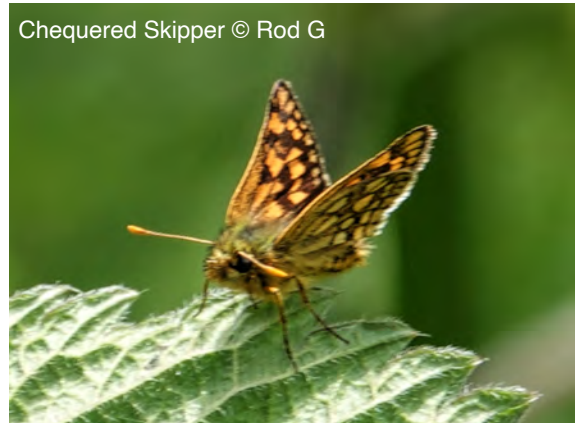
Green-underside Blues © Regine H



Iberian Scarce Swallowtail © Rod G



Lesser Spotted Fritillary © Regine H



Chequered Skipper © Rod G

Iberian Scarce Swallowtail © Lynn G



Provence Orange Tip © Lynn G

Apollo © Rod G



Black-veined White © Rod G

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