

# Butterflies of Montes Universales 27 July - 2 August 2019



# **Greenwings Wildlife Holidays**

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## Introduction

This is the second Greenwings trip to this 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 35°c, 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 Paul W, Helen, Roy, Koenraad, Paul R, Ken, Vernon, Mark, Paul S, Andrew and Tony.

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



- Day 1: Arrival at Valencia airport, transfer to hotel with a stop at the Xavier's Rambla
- Day 2: Xavier's Rambla and road to Pozondon
- Day 3: Noguera, Bronchales and Sierra Alta
- Day 4: Moscardon, El Vallecillo
- Day 5: Huelamo, Tragacete and Guadalaviar
- Day 6: El Vallecillo and Ojo del Cabriel
- Day 7: Return to UK.

#### Day 1, Saturday 27th July

This year's arrival destination was Valencia airport, which is a mere two hours' drive from Albarracin (as opposed to four and a half from Madrid which was deemed to be too lengthy after 2018's trip).

This gave the group an opportunity to stop at Xavier's Rambla on the way into Albarracin for a first taste of the amazing array of butterfly species to be seen in this region.

Mid afternoon temperatures tend to suppress activity so there weren't anything like the numbers seen in the early to midmorning period, but there was still time to get acquainted with some of the special species of the area, with Spanish Chalkhill Blue, Oberthur's Anomalous Blue, Spanish Gatekeeper and Sage Skipper all easily observable.

Furthermore, a damp spot by the river on the other side of the road provided plenty of puddling Cinquefoil Skippers along with other butterflies such as Iberian Scarce Swallowtail, Chapman's Blue and Berger's Clouded Yellow.



At around 5pm the group left for the hotel, set in the delightful, historic walled town of Albarracin. The guides had their own apartment, which was used throughout the trip for nightly meetings, and the first of these gave an overview of the trip along with other general information. It was decided that the species seen in the narrow window today would be merged with tomorrow's, given that the same site would be the morning stop.

#### Day 2, Sunday 28th July



By 9.30am, the group arrived back at Xavier's Rambla, where things were just starting to get moving. Although the rambla has dried out by this time of year, evidence that it contains water earlier in the year is provided by the quantity of herbs growing in the gully where the stream flows until the late spring/summer heat evaporates it.

These herbs attract a variety of different species, with Spanish Chalkhill Blue being the most frequent. However, Cinquefoil, Sage and Southern Marbled Skippers were also recorded, along with Bath White, Southern Small White, Long Tailed Blue, Lang's Short

Tailed Blue, Southern Brown Argus, Dusky Heath, all three Gatekeepers, Dusky Meadow Brown and Iberian Marbled White.

The site is also notable for its variety of Graylings, with Great Banded being the commonest this time round, although Tree, Striped and Rock Grayling were also present, along with the Grayling we are familiar with in the UK.

Of course, the species on everyone's radar was Southern Hermit, and after a tip off from a Dutch enthusiast who the group bumped into at the Rambla, the first of these was finally found close to the bridge, near to where the



vans were parked. A couple more were also spotted, and everyone was able to follow them and take images. Hermit was also seen at the site.

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.

Sadly, the water had dried up this year, but there were still plenty of dry, arid terrain species to be seen, including Black Satyr and more Southern Marbled Skippers.



There was panic for a short while as Koenraad's phone had gone missing, but it was soon located and the group took lunch before spending a further hour on the other side of the road, where Mother of Pearl Blue was seen along with the first of what was to prove many Azure Chalk-hill Blues during the trip.

More Hermits and Southern Hermits were recorded before the group moved onto a riverside location some 5km away, where many, many dozens of butterflies were puddling, most notably Cinquefoil Skipper and Spanish Chalk-hill Blue.

The evening's count was impressive – 59 different species had been seen, the same as the total number resident in the UK!

#### Day 3, Monday 29th July

The first site visited today was just beyond Noguera, up a dirt track which leads to a glorious, sheltered series of meadows fed by a small river.

The steep faces of the hillsides meant that much of the terrain was still in shade, but on the sunlit side there was plenty of activity, so the group walked up the track concentrating on the meadows on this side.

High Brown Fritillaries were particularly noticeable, alongside Graylings and Rock Graylings.

However, in amongst these were smaller numbers of notable species, such as Spotted Fritillary, Southern White Admiral, Oriental Meadow Brown and the beautiful *iphinoides* form of Chestnut Heath.

A couple of Queen of Spain Fritillaries were recorded but the really interesting butterflies were seen when the group headed back towards and then beyond the parked vans and checked out the damp track and adjacent meadows. Here, Mother of Pearl and Azure Chalk-hill Blues were found, along with a small number of fresh Iberian Scarce Swallowtails puddling in the moist areas of the path.





Paul N spotted a strange looking Copper in the boggy, orchid rich meadow and the guide eventually tracked it down – a mint fresh Iberian Sooty Copper, far more resplendent than the *tityrus* form found further north. This male had a wonderful copper sheen and an orange/fawn underside. It was particularly satisfying for the two individuals returning this year having participated in 2018's inaugural trip, as this was the one target species not seen on that occasion.

Whilst taking lunch, the group were able to enjoy the activity on the thistles growing in a damp gully opposite the parking area. These included several different Fritillaries, Southern Gatekeeper and even a Small Tortoiseshell!

The afternoon stops were at high altitude, the first being the highest accessible point in the region, the 1,854m Sierra Alta, just west of the town of Bronchales. There weren't huge numbers of butterflies in this exposed location, but along with hilltopping Swallowtails and thyme-feeding Purple Shot Coppers, one notable species was recorded – Southern Mountain Argus. This is the *montensis* form and is rather more endowed with orange lunules than its more northerly brethren.



The final port of call was a series of meadows 2km away from Sierra Alta. These had clearly seen grazing at some point and the terraced nature indicated that they had been used for agriculture in the past. However, they have largely been left over to nature now, and they provided a good array of grassland butterflies, and even an Apollo, one of only two seen on the trip.

#### Day 4, Tuesday 30th July

About a mile beyond the village of Moscardon lie a couple of large, grassy meadows surrounded by woodland. These are as green and verdant as any in this predominantly arid area and unsurprisingly attract butterflies on a grand scale.

The vehicles were left at the roadside near a series of water troughs, used by livestock



which pass through alongside their shepherds. Straight away, serious numbers of butterflies were seen nectaring on the lavender, scabious and eryngium by the roadside. These included many Hairstreaks, which in spite of the level of general wear, were identifiable as llex, Sloe and Blue Spot.

The abiding memory though will surely be the profound numbers of Great Banded Graylings flying amongst the grasses. There were literally multi hundreds, although mixed in with them were other Grayling species, including a sizeable number of False Graylings.

Almost as numerous were Azure Chalk-hill Blues,

making a mockery of the group's eagerness to photograph the few seen during the first couple of days. They seemed to be everywhere, fighting for nectar sources with the myriad of Graylings and Iberian Marbled Whites.

Paul W and Helen managed to identify an Esper's Marbled White, no easy thing amongst the hundreds of *lachesis*. A couple more Iberian Sooty Coppers were found, with one of the guides driving back to collect Andrew who had missed the individual seen the previous day.



There was one more surprise just prior to lunch,



when the guide found a Nettle Tree Butterfly holding territory round a damp spot near the parked vehicles. Lunch was taken in this area, with everybody able to watch the butterfly activity around them.

The afternoon site was another network of meadows just beyond the village of El Vallecillo. This was the location where all last year's three Zapater's Ringlets were seen, but in spite of a thorough search the group couldn't find any this time.

However, there were many, many other species

flying at this fabulous location, where the damp meadow gives way to a sheltered track that

runs through light woodland. More Hairstreaks and Purple Shot Coppers were recorded, but the major sighting was of a Panoptes Blue, happily nectaring on low growing thyme amongst the Dusky Heaths and Graylings.

Also seen were Twin Spot and Lesser Marbled Fritillary, whilst a boggy patch of muddy terrain saw Escher's Blue, Silver Studded Blue and Damon Blue. The sharp eyes of Paul S also picked out an Essex Skipper amongst the large numbers of Small Skippers.

Helen managed to get an image of a tatty looking lycaenid, which was later identified as a Large Blue, whilst both Turquoise and Mother of Pearl



Blue were observed by the trackside. Other notable species recorded were Cardinal, Safflower Skipper, False Ilex Hairstreak and Provençal Fritillary.

The evening's count showed that by the end of the third full day, an impressive 93 species had been seen.

## Day 5, Wednesday 31st July

Today saw the longest single drive of the week, with the group first visiting a hillside near the village of Huelamo to look for the exceedingly rare Sandy Grizzled Skipper. This search ultimately proved fruitless, but there were splendid views to be had of the rolling hills nearby.

The next site was just beyond Tragacete, at a location where Zapater's Ringlet had been reported from. Upon arrival, the group were surprised to see lush, green vegetation but with barely a butterfly around to take advantage of it. Lunch was taken whilst the guides walked up the track, returning later to report that there was plenty of puddling going on towards the river source several hundred yards away.



Soon the group was able to see this spectacle for themselves. A variety of Fritillaries were nectaring on a thistle patch and the damp track hosted many, many dozens, and sometimes clouds of Blues, mainly Azure Chalk-hills but including several Mother of Pearl Blues, which had hitherto been scarce on the trip.

The group split up and an hour later had their first sight of a coveted Zapater's Ringlet, found by the guide flying beside the stream further up into the forested area. The butterfly was released in the shade allowing

everyone to take underside shots, but sadly a gust of wind disturbed it and it was off in haste and couldn't be relocated.

The other notable event was the sighting of the second Apollo of the trip, which casually floated by while everyone was awaiting the release of the Zapater's Ringlet. Koenraad was particularly enthused, given that this was the first he'd seen.

By mid afternoon, it was time to visit the final site for the day. Ken, a returning guest from the inaugural Montes trip last year, had information regarding a site for Spanish Argus, which

was too important to ignore. A steep ascent was made to Puerto de el Portillo at an altitude of 1,790m. Two groups headed off in different directions, but both were ultimately successful in tracking down this lycaenid, at its only known location in the region.

A total of 20 or so were observed, most of which were found in a sheltered area just beneath the ridge opposite the watchtower. The larval host plant, storksbill, was growing in profusion in this spot and proved irresistible as a nectar source for these tiny butterflies.



Not much else was flying in this arid, sparsely vegetated, rocky location, but there was a sense of satisfaction that two of the three target species for the day had been seen and that Ken's information had proved so accurate and reliable.

## Day 6, Thursday 1st August

There was only one thing on most of the groups' minds on this final full day – to track down more Zapater's Ringlets. A repeat visit to the meadows at El Vallecillo was therefore undertaken, only this time with the luxury of arriving mid-morning, rather than in the afternoon.



This proved to be a judicious decision, as within 20 minutes of arrival, a fresh Zapater's Ringlet was seen flying down a grassy bank. The guide blew his whistle to attract as many peoples' attention as possible, and the majority of the group managed to get clear views and images of this much sought after species. Sadly, after a few minutes the insect ascended the steep bank and flew into the pine forest higher up the hill.

There were several more sightings during the time spent at this site, including Ken seeing one nectaring from scabious a good way along the wooded track, whilst Andrew and Paul R

witnessed another flying close to where the first had been spotted, only for it to again ascend the steep slope and out of view.

There were plenty of other species on view, including some not hitherto seen on the trip. Paul W spotted a Large Grizzled Skipper nectaring by the trackside, whilst a couple of Idas Blues were also recorded.

Lunch was taken at the site, followed by a further hour or so to search for more Zapater's Ringlets, before the decision was taken to move on to the nearby Ojo de Cabriel (eye of the Cabriel River).

The guide's plan to park at the top of the steep track to avoid the hazardous drive down was, in retrospect, not the best one, as the group had to negotiate a rockier than anticipated descent. Furthermore, the track leading to the waterfall and the area where butterflies are to be found puddling was overgrown and had a couple of fallen trees presenting obstacles.

Eventually, everybody got there though, much to the surprise of two Spanish ladies who were skinny-dipping without a care in the world until 13 butterfly enthusiasts wielding camera equipment arrived!

The site DID produce Spanish Purple Hairstreak, but the insect was tricky to get close to in the shrubs, although there were plenty of other species taking fluids in more convenient spots.

The guide took the decision to bring the van down as the walk back would have been simply too exhausting, which was music to Mark's ears, as he had taken a tumble and cut his forearm.

One last surprise was the presence of what was first thought to be Great Sooty Satyrs on the rocky ledges adjacent to the car park. However, after doing some research, it was concluded that these were Black Satyrs.

One last enjoyable evening was had round the dinner table, and with at least 101 species recorded, it was unanimously agreed that the trip had been a success.

# Day 7, Friday 2nd August

With all guests having booked late afternoon/evening flights, there was time for a three hour visit to the nearby Xavier's Rambla once again. This provided a little variety after several successive days spent at greener, damper locations, and once again Southern Hermit was seen, along with several other species that one only tends to find at these arid, rocky sites, such as Southern Marbled Skipper, Spanish Chalkhill Blue, Striped Grayling and Bath White.

The journey back took around two hours, and guests were all safely dropped at Valencia airport in good time for their checkin.



#### 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 problem free.

Valencia Airport was far more convenient for this trip than Madrid was on the previous year's tour, and it allowed time for two additional visits, one on the way into Albarracin on arrivals day and another on the way back to the airport.

Nobody could possibly complain about the range of species seen. A tally of over 100 at this time of year would be commendable anywhere in Europe, and of course this part of Spain has species that cannot be seen in any other country, including some real gems such as Zapater's Ringlet, Southern Hermit, Oberthur's Anomalous Blue and Iberian Sooty Copper.

Whilst the landscapes are not so dramatic as many further north, such as in the Pyrenees, Picos de Europa and the Alps, the ease by which sites can be accessed is far superior. Time spent on the road is time wasted in the field, and with even the furthest site being barely an hour away, it ensures that guests do not get too uncomfortable whilst travelling.

Lastly, it should also be mentioned that Albarracin itself is an absolute delight and quite a surprise to behold for first time visitors. Factor in how cheap this part of Spain is compared to other destinations in Europe, and it all makes for a highly enjoyable holiday, which this trip certainly was.



Bu	utterflies of Monte	s Universales 2019	Sat 28th Jul	Sun 29th Jul	Mon 30th Jul	Tues 31st Jul	Weo 1st Aug
			Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
	Papillionidae	Swallowtails & Apollos					
1	Swallowtail	Papilio machaon	~	~	~	~	~
2	Iberian Scarce Swallowtail	Iphiclides podalirius feisthamelii	~	V	~	~	~
3	Apollo	Parnassius apollo		~		~	
	Pieridae	Whites and Yellows					
4	Large White	Pieris brassicae				~	
5	Small White	Pieris rapae	~	~	~	~	V
6	Southern Small White	Pieris mannii	V	V			
7	Green-veined White	Pieris napi			~	~	V
8	Bath White	Pontia daplidice	~				
9	Clouded Yellow	Colias crocea	~	~	~	~	~
10	Berger's Clouded Yellow	Colias alfacariensis	V		· ·	V	V
11	Brimstone	Gonepteryx rhamni	V	~	· ·	~	V
 12	Cleopatra	Gonepteryx cleopatra	~	~	•	~	V
13	Wood White	Leptidea sinapis complex	~	~	~	~	· ·
15	Lycaenidae	Hairstreaks, Coppers & Blues	•				
14	Spanish Purple	Laeosopis roboris					~
	Hairstreak	·					
15	Sloe Hairstreak	Satyrium acaciae	~	~	~		~
16	Ilex Hairstreak	Satyrium ilicis			~		~
17	False Ilex Hairstreak	Satyrium esculi			~		
18	Blue-spot Hairstreak	Satyrium spini	~		~		~
19	Small Copper	Lycaena phlaeas	~	~	~	~	~
20	Iberian Sooty Copper	Lycaena tityrus bleusi		~	~		~
21	Purple-shot Copper	Lycaena alciphron		~	~		~
23	Long-tailed Blue	Lampides boeticus	~	~	~	~	~
25	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	Leptotes pirithous	~				~
26	Holly Blue	Celastrina argiolus		~	~		~
27	Large Blue	Phengaris arion			~		~
28	Panoptes Blue	Pseudophilotes panoptes			~		
29	Silver-studded Blue	Plebejus argus	~		~	~	~
30	Idas Blue	Plebejus idas					~
31	Southern Brown Argus	Aricia agestis cramera	~	~	~		~
32	Mountain Argus	Aricia montensis		~		~	
33	Spanish Argus	Aricia morronensis				V	
34	Damon Blue	Polyommatus damon		~	~	V	~
35	Escher's Blue	Polyommatus escheri		-	· ·	V	-
36	Amanda's Blue	Polyommatus amandus			· ·	v	
37	Chapman's Blue	Polyommatus thersites	~	~	~	~	~
38	Oberthur's Anomalous Blue	Polyommatus fabressei	~	~	~	v	~
20		-					
39	Turquoise Blue	Polyommatus dorylas			~	~	~

40	Mother-of-Pearl Blue	Polyommatus nivescens	~	~	~	~	~
40 41	Meleager's Blue	Polyommatus daphnis	V	<b>v</b>	•	~	
41 42	Azure Chalkhill Blue	Lysandra coridon caelestissima	V V	~	~	~	~
			•		-	~	•
43	Provence Chalkhill Blue	Polyommatus hispana			?		
44	Spanish Chalkhill Blue	Polyommatus albicans	<b>v</b>	~	~		~
45	Adonis Blue	Polyommatus bellargus	~				
46	Common Blue	Polyommatus icarus	~	~	~	~	~
	Nymphalidae	Aristocrats & Browns					
47	Nettle Tree Butterfly	Libythea celtis			~		
48	Southern White Admiral	Limenitis reducta		~	~	~	~
49	Peacock	Aglais io	~	~	~		~
50	Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta			~		~
51	Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui	~	~	~	~	~
52	Small Tortoiseshell	Aglais urticae		~		~	
53	Comma	Polygonia c-album	~	~	~	~	~
54	Cardinal Fritillary	Argynnis pandora	~	~	~	~	V
55	Silver-washed Fritillary	Argynnis paphia		~	~	~	V
56	Dark Green Fritillary	Argynnis aglaja		~	V	~	V
57	High Brown Fritillary	Argynnis adippe		~	~	~	V
58	Niobe Fritillary	Argynnis niobe		~		~	
59	Queen of Spain Fritillary	Issoria lathonia	~	V	~	~	V
60	Twin-spot Fritillary	Brenthis hecate			~	~	~
61	Lesser Marbled Fritillary	Brenthis ino			~	V	V
62	Knapweed Fritillary	Melitaea phoebe			-	-	~
63	Spotted Fritillary	Melitaea didyma	~	~			V
64	Provençal Fritillary	Melitaea deione		•	~		•
65	Iberian Marbled White	Melanargia lachesis	~	~	~	~	~
66	Esper's Marbled White	Melanargia russiae	•	•	~	•	· ·
67	•		./	./	~	~	· ·
	Rock Grayling	Hipparchia alcyone			v v	~	V V
68 60	Grayling	Hipparchia semele	レ レ				
69 70	Tree Grayling	Hipparchia statilinus	V	V	V		V
70 74	Striped Grayling	Hipparchia fidia	-				
71	The Hermit	Chazara briseis	~		~		~
72	Southern Hermit	Chazara prieuri	~				
73	Black Satyr	Satyrus actaea	•				~
74	Great Banded Grayling	Brintesia circe	~	~	~	~	~
75	False Grayling	Arethusana arethusa			~	~	~
76	Zapater's Ringlet	Erebia zapateri				~	~
77	Meadow Brown	Maniola jurtina		~	~	~	~
78	Dusky Meadow Brown	Hyponephele lycaon	~	~	~	~	~
79	Oriental Meadow Brown	Hyponephele lupina		~	~	~	~
80	Gatekeeper	Pyronia tithonus	~	~	~	~	~
81	Southern Gatekeeper	Pyronia cecilia	~	~	~	~	~
82	Spanish Gatekeeper	Pyronia bathseba	~	~			
83	Small Heath	Coenonympha pamphilus		~		~	~
84	Dusky Heath	Coenonympha dorus	V		~	~	~
85	Chestnut Heath	Coenonympha glycerion		~	V	~	~

86	Spanish Chestnut Heath	Coeonympha glycerion iphinoides					
87	Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria	~	~		~	V
88	Wall Brown	Lasiommata megera	~	~	~		~
89	Large Wall Brown	Lasiommata maera		~			~
90	Hesperiidae	Skippers					
91	Large Grizzled Skipper	Pyrgus alveus					~
92	Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper	Pyrgus armoricanus					
93	Olive Skipper	Pyrgus serratulae	~		~	~	
94	Cinquefoil Skipper	Pyrgus carlinae cirsii	~	V	~	~	~
95	Rosy Grizzled Skipper	Pyrgus onopordi	~				~
96	Safflower Skipper	Pyrgus carthami			~	~	V
97	Red-underwing Skipper	Spialia rosae (sertorius)	~		~	~	V
98	Sage Skipper	Muschampia proto	~			~	~
99	Mallow Skipper	Carcharodus alceae	~	V	~		
100	Marbled Skipper	Carcharodus lavatherae	~		~		~
101	Southern Marbled Skipper	Carcharodus baeticus	~				
102	Tufted Marbled Skipper	Carcharodus flocciferus	~		~		~
103	Lulworth Skipper	Thymelicus acteon	~		~		V
104	Essex Skipper	Thymelicus lineola				~	V
105	Small Skipper	Thymelicus sylvestris	~	~	~	~	~
106	Silver-spotted Skipper	Hesperia comma	~	~	~	~	~
107	Large Skipper	Ochlodes sylvanus		~	~	~	~





























