

False Apollo and Spring Butterflies in NE Greece

8th - 15th April 2024

Led by Michael de Courcy Williams









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Introduction

Beautiful spring weather with unbroken sunshine created a sense of high hopes for a successful trip as we converged on the group meeting location at Thessaloniki airport. Late summer in 2023 saw a devastating fire in Evros county as August turned into September. Over 900km² were burnt or seriously affected in what was recognised as being the largest fire that the EU had seen since its records began. Unfortunately, many of the best sites for the False Apollo butterfly were burnt out or partially damaged. However, in the week before the trip Michael had seen the butterfly in good numbers at one of its key sites that Greenwings has for this trip. By June the butterfly pupa is safely underground until the following spring flight season and by early summer the butterfly food plant has also set seed and retreated to an underground bulb. Therefore, the key elements for protection of both the butterfly and its foodplant from high summer temperatures and survival from fire are ensured. Likewise many of the important nectaring plants are geophytes, protected underground during the summer fire.

The trip comprised two parts. The first was based at Alexandroupoli, with excursions to the surrounding area. Travelling to the West and with a stop at the Nestos valley, the second part of the trip was based at Volakas on Falakro Mountain, with trips to the surrounding area and Orvilos mountain. The trip was led by Michael de Courcy Williams and the guests were Martine, Regine, Roger, Peter R, Pete JR and Mark.

Day 1, Monday 8th April: Arrival at Thessaloniki airport and transfer to

Alexandroupoli, with a stop at Moustheni.

Day 2, Tuesday 9th April: Kirki forest; Potamos valley and Makri.

Day 3, Wednesday 10th April: Maronia and Petrota.

Day 4, Thursday 11th April: Potamos valley and Aisymi.

Day 5, Friday 12th April: Transfer to Volakas with a stop at the Nestos valley and

the road towards Meliti.

Day 6, Saturday 13th April: Orvilos mountain, visiting tracks on the mountainside and

by the Katafygio Reservoir.

Day 7, Sunday 14th April: Potamoi, Mikrokleisoura and Falakro mountain, towards

Pyrgi.

Day 8, Monday 15th April: Return to Thessaloniki Airport.

Daily diary

The following are notes on the stops during the trip with highlights for each day. A full list of butterflies seen is given at the end of the diary in a checklist of species for each site visited. A gallery of additional photos is provided at the end of the report.

Day 1, Monday 8th April

After a long day's journeying, the group assembled at Thessaloniki Airport. While we waited for the last member to arrive, the rest of us took the time to have coffee and a bite to eat, enjoying the warmth and sunshine just outside the airport. Once we had all assembled we set off on the long drive to our base in Alexandroupoli. Around the half way point we took a break at Moustheni (**Stop 1**). Since the sun was shining it gave an opportunity to get into practice with butterfly spotting under the distinctive 1835m Avgo peak of Pangaio Mountain looming above us. With only about 20 minutes at hand five species were observed along the rough ground around the edge of the car park. It was already late in the day when we finally arrived at our hotel in Alexandroupoli. Following dinner a badly needed early night's rest was in order.

Day 2, Tuesday 9th April

Despite the cool morning the group was eager to get on the move in the early sunshine, which looked very promising. A short drive, first on asphalt and then on a dirt track revealed some of the devastation and destruction to the landscape and forests from last years fire. The track brought us to our first stop in an area that partially escaped the fire in the Kirki forest (**Stop 2**). This area of the Kirki forest offered the best chance of seeing our first major target, the False Apollo butterfly. This site is actually a very elongated one, running along some small streams that flow down the hills among forests and isolated fields of cultivation, many of which are no longer in use. Ideal territory for False Apollo in this area and we immediately started seeing good numbers of both males and females. Everyone spread out to take their time observing and photographing False Apollo, which obligingly posed in a manner quite unaffected by last year's fire or our attentions.



Having nailed some good photographs of the adult butterflies we turned our attentions to looking for their foodplants, which are species *Aristolochia* (Aristolochiaceae). There are a number of *Aristolochia species* in this area, which are important important foodplants not only for False Apollo but also for two species of Festoons that occur here. Three species of *Aristolochia* seem to be particularly important for these butterflies and time was taken to notice the different leaf shape and flower appearance. We managed to find eggs on some plants.





After maxing out on False Apollo, the group started to notice some other species. The very exotic looking Eastern Festoon was seen. Both Powdered Brimstone and Cleopatra were noted. Among ubiquitous Clouded Yellow were Eastern Pale Clouded Yellow. The delightfully glamorous Grecian Copper was easily observed. A siting of the elusive Camberwell Beauty set off a search for this species during the remainder of the trip. Following lunch on site the group moved to our second site (**Stop 3**) in the Potamos valley. This is perhaps one of the best know localities for False Apollo but the fire of 2023 ravaged the forested slopes of this extensive valley system. No False Apollo or either species of Festoon was seen today. We did get sight of Nettle Tree Butterfly and among the Whites was Eastern Bath White and Mountain Small White and this is also a good site for Grecian Coper. A rapid and tantalising flyby down the stream of a Camberwell Beauty gave no opportunity for photos as it quickly flew over the tree tops. A fascinating observation and photo by Peter R, showed that the regional endemic (Thracian Greece, Bulgaria & Turkey) dragonfly Somatochlora borisi is hanging on after the fire. This species was described only in 2001 and is probably a relict species and rather isolated from other dragonfly species in Europe.

After a successful first day and with the sunshine still with us we visited the third site (**Stop 4**) at Makri, not far from the hotel. This is a beautiful track through ancient olive trees overlooking the North Aegean sea. Finally we returned to the hotel for a rest and dinner. Later that evening Martine headed out into the dark with her light tower for some moth photographing, working both days and nights!

Day 3, Wednesday 10th April



A coastal theme was the order of the day, which saw brilliant sunshine and warmth. An hour's drive brought us to a broad limestone and granite headland near Maronia (**Stop 5**). This whole area is a complex of the ancient sites of Maronia and Ismara, overlooking the sea and the North Aegean island of Samothrace. Much of the area has very ancient olive groves, often terraced, with surrounding Mediterranean scrub and bare limestone pavement. Our first skipper, Mallow skipper was on the wing. The Whites formed an additional theme for the day and

Eastern Bath White and Dappled White were distinguished among Orange-tip (females in particular looking very similar). Sooty Copper was nice to see in contrast to ubiquitous

Small Copper. The afternoon saw us move on to Petrota (**Stop 6**), where a rock of limestone rises up steeply to give dramatic views of the coastline from the top, which is also the site of an ancient acropolis. The track up is steep and rocky and not everyone was up for it. Nevertheless the slopes and fields lower down were a riot of flowers and butterflies. Martine came back with a photo of Kreuper's Small White, a very nice addition to the very numerous Eastern Bath White, Eastern Dappled White and Orange-tip (females) and a new record for the area.







Day 4, Thursday 11th April

An other day of bright sunshine had us returning to the forests and valleys to see if we could find more False Apollo. Our first site was a return to the Potamos Valley (**Stop 7**). Here we were reacquainted with False Apollo, albeit in small numbers but we also found both Eastern Festoon and Southern Festoon, also in small numbers. The later was our first encounter with this species, which is normally common and widespread in the area. Clearly, this species had been badly affected by last year's extensive fire. Dingy Skipper was abundant along with Grizzled Skipper and Mallow Skipper. The trio of Eastern Bath White, Eastern Dappled White with female Orange-tip were joined by Large and Small White along with ever present Clouded Yellow. Our first Wood White showed that this species too was likely to have badly affected by the terrible fires of 2023, as it is normally abundant along with Eastern Wood White, which wasn't seen until much later in the trip.







After lunch we headed up the road to visit some forest tracks and stream sides near the village of Aisymi (**Stop 8**). This area was worked at two sites separated a little in distance but accessed from two completely different tracks. Our first location was a clearing in the forest by a stream. Michael brought the bus to an abrupt halt and jumped out as a Camberwell Beauty that had been on the track rose up in front of us. Unfortunately it

circled the van and quickly disappeared over the treetops. No amount of waiting saw it return! Soon afterwards Michael found a large adult Giant Peacock Moth, *Saturina pyri* roosting on track side vegetation. This is Europe's largest moth with a wingspan of up to 15cm and this dramatic moth behaved well, staying still for photographs. Butterflies were far and few between and Mark returned a little later with a photo of strange looking grasshopper. To Michael's delight this was an other local endemic, occurring only in oak forests on the hillsides of NE Greece and Southern Bulgaria. The very little known and wingless Chopard's Stone Grasshopper, *Paranocarodes chopardi* and a new locality for this species. Moving on to an other stream side track we parked the bus and walked the



length of the track until we met the area burnt out by the fire of 2023. Highlights here were our first Large Tortoiseshell, a Coma and more Powdered Brimstone.

Today marked the end of the first part of the trip and along with good sightings of both sexes of False Apollo our total was 37 different species of butterflies seen.





With bright sunshine to welcome us yet again, we packed up the van and left the coastal zone for the mountains a little way to the West. With a stop about half way on our trip we visited the Nestos area. The first site was along a trail that follows the course of the river Nestos (**stop 9**). Here the Nestos meanders through a deep limestone gorge where a dramatic path has been cut in the rock above the river. This area is renowned as a biogeographic boundary in north-east Greece. Because of its limestone base it is rich in flowering plants. Probably one of the most notorious is the presence of the relict species *Haberlea*

rhodopensis and our visit coincided with its short flowering period. This is one of only five species of the plant family Gesneriaceae (colloquially known as African Violets) now found only as local endemics in three genera in Europe, in the Balkan Peninsula and as a single disjunct representative in the Pyrenees. The family is otherwise restricted to the moist tropical and subtropical regions of Asia, Africa, Central and Southern America. It is often referred to as a Tertiary relic, which primarily relates to the diversification of the genus (24.5 million years ago in the late Oligocene epoch of the Tertiary) but recent studies indicate more recent origins for the species of Haberlea (0.72 million years ago, in the Pleistocene). Nevertheless, the lineage of European species certainly has a deep history, originating in the mid-Tertiary. This roughly corresponds to the time of the formation of the Rodopi massif, more than 35 million years ago (Eocene-Oligocene boundary). At this time the family Gesneriaceae was probably more widespread in Europe as the climate was warmer and more humid than it is now. However, as the climate cooled and became drier the diversity of Gesneriaceae declined in Europe to leave just a few regional endemics. The decline particularly affected the genus *Haberlea*, which seems to be established only relatively recently as a distinct genus or to have experienced a severe contraction in distribution, resulting in a bottleneck of lower than expected genetic diversity with a differentiation among populations of the species in its Greek and Bulgarian distribution. This low genetic diversity exhibited in *H. rhodopensis* makes its conservation of particular

concern, especially due to the negative impacts of climate change and loss of habitat. These same concerns probably relate to many butterfly species in the region.







At this site we picked up the first observation of Grüner's Orange-tip, not known East of the Nestos in Greece. Among the Blues we found, for the first time on the trip, Eastern Baton Blue and Small Blue. It was nice to see Southern Festoon and the distinctly odd looking Nettle Tree Butterfly. Following lunch we moved on to the road high above the river, towards the location at Meliti (**stop 10**). From previous years we know this to be a good sight to see an other highly restricted species in Greece, the Dalmatian Ringlet. Here we found it right on the roadside making it an easier possibility to see and photograph here

rather than along the long narrow and steep-sided track below, nearer to the river. Both Grüner's Orange-tip and Orange-tip were in evidence along with a range of other more widespread species. Along with the dramatic views of the countryside toward the sea and mountains to the West. this was a worthwhile stop. As we still needed some time to get to our next destination on Falakro Mountain we departed before it would be dark at the next hotel. The Aloni hotel in Volakas welcomed us with one of their very special dinners in their wonderfully atmospheric rooms.



Day 6, Saturday 13th April

We did not loose the bright sunshine, despite the surrounding mountainous landscape. Fortified with a massive breakfast at the hotel we departed for Orvilos mountain a little to the West of Falakro and the ridge line forms of Orvilos forms the border with Bulgaria. Heading for the area below one of peaks of Orvilos (Tsolias, 2213m) at the Katafyto Reservoir, we stopped first at a track into the limestone hillside (**stop 11**). In the sunshine with numerous plants in flower this proved to be a hotspot, in many ways. We found a number of firsts for the trip. Here was our first encounter with Eastern Wood White, looking very distinctive in it spring brood colour pattern. Later generations become increasingly impossible to distinguish from Wood White as the butterflies loose most of their distinctive







Clouded Yellow and our first Berger's Clouded Yellow of the trip. We also saw but only one Eastern Greenish Black-tip, which we had not seen in the Nestos. Both Grüner's Orange-tip and Orange-tip were around. Among the Blues were Eastern Baton Blue and a first for Chequered Blue, Greenish-underside Blue and Provençal Short-tailed Blue. Adding to the variety of new species for us was Weaver's Fritillary. This unassuming track still had a surprise for a few when a huge Eagle Owl flew down silently and directly over our heads to perched on the opposite side of the small gorge. It looked at us with displeasure for some time before deciding we were indeed harmless and it silently disappeared. That was also a dramatic first for the luck few!

Dragging ourselves away from this treasure trove of a track we headed on to our second site, a little further along and in a more wooded and damper location by the Katafyto reservoir (**stop 12**). The highlight here were the first sightings for this year's tour of Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell, contrasting with Large Tortoiseshell we had seen earlier in the trip. An other first was more the commonplace Brimstone, which also provided an other contrast to



Powdered Brimstone, which was the commoner species in the earlier part of the trip. Sooty Copper was nice to see and an other more prosaic first was Green-veined White. An other track above the reservoir was checked for Mountain small white but without luck. Before leaving Orvilos we had to have an other stop at our hot-spot track. It had been so productive and compact location. Mark found an interesting variety of Grizzled Skipper (taras aberration), with dramatically enlarge white spots. Here too, Martine found the unusual blue form of the female Common Blue. Eventually we finally drew ourselves away and headed off to return later to our hotel, exhausted and sun beaten. After a suitable rest and run through of the butterflies we had seen seen during the day we were more than ready for the wonderfully fortifying dinner that the staff at this family run hotel again served up for us. Martine made use of the last opportunity to go out with her light tower to look for moths

to photograph. Being our last chance we finally took the opportunity to make our way out into the dark to see Martine in action with her light tower (see the gallery at the end for a photo of Martine in action).

Day 7, Sunday 14th April

Our last day started with the usual wonderful breakfast and the promise of yet an other sunny day. We were to find out later that the unusually hot and dry period was having a substantial impact on the mountain areas. However, our first site was alongside a river near the village of Potamoi (stop 13). This is an other wonderful site for the relict plant Haberlea rhodopensis we had seen in the Nestos gorge. Here we were to see more Eastern Pale Clouded Yellow, Grüner's Orange-tip and Eastern Wood White and contrast it with Wood White. Among the Blues were Chequered Blue and Greenish-underside Blue. Knapweed Fritillary on the wing indicated how



advanced the season was. Probably, the most unexpected species to see, although Michael knows it to be present there, was Common Glider, which put on a nice show flashing some iridescent green colouration on its body to remind us of the tropical association of this group of butterflies. It certainly seemed to underline just how advanced the season was, perhaps with a little help from climate change! Having walked far and



wide we had lunch by the riverside and were accompanied by locals who came to enjoy a sunny afternoon doing what the Greek love and barbecuing. With the smoke clouds gathering from the lighting barbecues, we departed for Falakro. On the way back in glorious sunshine we decided to break the trip with a stop where the road crosses a stream, just past the village of Mikroleisoura (stop 14). Provençal Shorttailed Blue and Greenish-underside Blue was visible but the most dramatic sight was a large group of Scarce Swallowtails mudpuddling on the stream bed.

With the day having heated up it was time to see what we could find on Falakro Mountain (**stop 15**). Following lunch under some

large Beech trees we were ready for more. A track to the south of the main peak should have had numerous damp and wet patches amongst small wooded valleys but we found that all were dry and surprisingly unproductive given the mid-altitude of 900-1100m. A lack of snow from the previous winter and the hot dry spring meant that these areas had dried out on the limestone substrate of the mountainside.

Nevertheless, we saw more Grüner's

Orange-tip, Small Blue and early



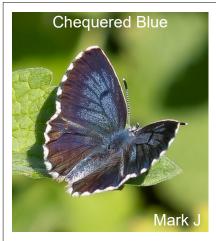
Knapweed Fritillary. No further new species were seen despite considerable searching and one wonders what the impact might be on these mountainous species. Once it became late in the day, we reluctantly dragged ourselves away from our last excursion and headed back to the hotel for a badly needed rest and recuperation. We thoroughly enjoyed our last dinner feast at the hotel with much discussion of the ups and downs of the trip. Subsequently, a final tally showed we had seen 45 different butterfly species in the second and mountain leg where 19 of these were new for this trip. This brought the overall total for the 2024 tour to 56 species, which smashed previous records, most likely due in part at least to the exceptionally good weather and advanced season but also to the huge effort on the part of the guests to leave no opportunity untried.

Day 8, Monday 15th April – Return to Thessaloniki Airport

Due to expected delays with major roadworks on the ring road around Thessaloniki a very early start was needed to ensure prompt arrival at Thessaloniki Airport. Following a quick breakfast we rapidly loaded up the bus for the return journey to Thessaloniki and our onward journeys home. Thankfully we all arrived in good time without any difficulties.

Concluding remarks

The trip of 2024 was characterised by exceptionally hot and sunny weather. With our first outing we were able to see good numbers of both males and females of False Apollo. This was particularly important sign of recovery from the extensive fires of 2023, where more than 900km² of forest was burnt or severely damaged. This fire included many of the known sites for False Apollo. Both Eastern Festoon and Southern Festoon were in much lower numbers, possibly as a direct consequent of loss of habitat due to the fires. An additional interest of local importance was that we encountered two local endemics including the dragonfly, Somatochlora borisi and the wingless Chopard's Stone Grasshopper, *Paranocarodes chopardi* both of which depend on the forest habitats. A record number of 56 butterfly species was seen on this trip, including 37 species on the first coastal leg and 45 species, with 16 additions, seen on the second and mountainous leg of the trip. The good weather combined with the great nature and exceptional field work skills of the guests made for an exceptional and productive tour. Michael would like to thank Martine for making available her moth records from the trip for his database of moths. Greenwings want to thank everyone for their hard work in making the tour of 2024 so memorable.







Checklist of Butterfly species

species seen indicated by (\mathbf{v}) on each day and for each stop (sites indicated by numbers in brackets with details given at the end of the table)

Species		Trip	8 th April	9 th April	10 th April	11 th April	12 th April	13 th April	14 th April	
			Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	
	PAPILIONIDAE			•						
1	Scarce Swallowtail	Iphiclides podalirius	~		(2,4)	(6)	(8)	/ (10)	1 (11)	/ (13-15)
2	Swallowtail	Papilio machaon	~				(7)			(13)
3	False Apollo	Archon apollinus	~		(2)		(7)			
4	Eastern Festoon	Zerynthia cerisy	~		(2)		(7)			
5	Southern Festoon	Zerynthia polyxena	~				(7)	(9)		
	HESPERIIDAE									
6	Mallow Skipper	Carcharodus alceae	~			(5)	(7)			
7	Dingy Skipper	Erynnis tages	~				(7)			(13,14)
8	Grizzled Skipper	Pyrgus malvae	~				(7)		(11)	(13,14)
	PIERIDAE									
9	Eastern Wood White	Leptidea duponcheli	~						(11)	/ (13)
10	Wood White	Leptidea sinapis	~				(7)	(9,10)		(13)
11	Brimstone	Gonepteryx rhamni	~						(12)	(13)
12	Cleopatra	Gonepteryx cleopatra	~		(2)					
13	Powdered Brimstone	Gonepteryx farinosa	~		(2)		(8)	(9)		
14	Berger's Clouded Yellow	Colias alfacariensis	~						(11)	(13)
15	Eastern Pale Clouded Yellow	Colias erate	~		(2)				(11)	(13)
16	Clouded Yellow	Colias crocea	~		(2,3,4)	(5,6)	(7,8)	(9,10)	(11)	(13-15)
17	Eastern Bath White	Pontia edusa	~		(2,3)	(5,6)	(7)			

39	NYMPHALIDAE Nettle-tree Butterfly	Libythea celtis			(L) 1)			()	. ,	/
38	Common Blue	Polyommatus icarus	~		(2,4)	(5,6)	(7,8)	(9)	/ (11)	(13-15)
37	Brown Argus	Aricia agestis	~		(4)	(5)		(9)	1 (11)	(13)
36	Small Blue	Cupido minimus	~					(9)	1 (11)	(15)
35	Provençal Short- tailed Blue	Cupido alcetas	~						(11)	(14)
34	Green-underside Blue	Glaucopsyche alexis	~						(11)	(13,14)
33	Chequered Blue	Scolitantides orion	~						(11)	(13)
32	Eastern Baton Blue	Pseudophilotes vicrama	~		,,,	(-)	(-)	(9)	(11)	(13)
31	Holly Blue	Celastrina argiolus	~	1 (1)	(2,4)	(6)	(8)		(12)	
30	Green Hairstreak	Callophrys rubi	~			(5)	(7)		(11)	(13,14)
29	Sooty Copper	Lycaena tityrus	~			(5)	, ,		(12)	(14)
28	Small Copper	Lycaena phlaeas	~	(1)	(2,3)		(8)			(13)
27	Grecian Copper	Lycaena ottomana	~		(2,3)	(6)	(7,8)			
	LYCAENIDAE			1		<u> </u>	<u> </u>	1 (7 - 7)	,	1
26	Grüner's Orange-	Anthocharis gruneri	~					(9,10)	(11)	(13,15)
25	Orange-tip	Anthocharis cardamines	~		(2,3)	(5,6)	(7,8)	(10)	(11)	(13-15)
24	Eastern Greenish Black-tip	Euchloe penia	/						1 (11)	
23	Eastern Dappled White	Euchloe ausonia	~			(5,6)	(7,8)			
22	Green-veined White	Pieris napi	~						(12)	(13,15)
21	Mountain Small White	Pieris ergane	~		(3)					
20	Small White	Pieris rapae	~	(1)	(3,4)		(7)			(13,15)
19	Large White	Pieris brassicae	~		(4)		(7)	(9)		
18	Krueper's Small White	Pieris krueperi	~			(6)				

40	Queen of Spain Fritillary	Issoria lathonia	/	(1)	(2,4)	(5,6)	(7,8)	(9)	1 (11)	(14)
41	Pearl-bordered Fritillary	Boloria euphrosyne	~							(13)
42	Weaver's Fritillary	Boloria dia	~						(11)	
43	Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui	~		(1,2,3)	(5,6)	(7,8)	(9,10)	(12)	(14,15)
44	Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta	•		(1,2,3)	(5,6)	(7)	(9,10)	(12)	(14)
45	Peacock	Aglais io	~				(8)		(12)	(13,14)
46	Small Tortoiseshell	Aglais urticae	~	(1)					(12)	
47	Comma	Polygonia c-album	~				(8)			
48	Large Tortoiseshell	Nymphalis polychloros	~				(8)			(13)
49	Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell	Nymphalis xanthomelas	~						(12)	
50	Camberwell Beauty	Nymphalis antiopa	~		(2,3)		(8)			
51	Knapweed Fritillary	Melitaea phoebe	~							(13,15)
52	Common Glider	Neptis sappho	~							(13)
53	Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria	~					(9)	(12)	(13,15)
54	Wall Brown	Lasiommata megera	~		(2,3,4)	(5,6)	(7)	(9)		
55	Small Heath	Coenonympha pamphilus	~					(9,10)	1 (11)	(13-15)
56	Dalmatian Ringlet	Proterebia phegea	~					(10)		

Day 1 (8th April), stop 1: Moustheni;

Day 2 (9th April), stop 2: Kirki forest; stop 3: Potamos & stop 4: Makri;

Day 3 (10th April), stop 5: Maronia & stop 6: Petrota;

Day 4 (11th April), stop 7: Potamos & stop 8: Aisymi;

Day 5 (12th April), stop 9: Nestos valley & stop 10: Nestos – Meliti;

Day 6 (13th April), stop 11: Orvilos, track & stop 12: Orvilos Katafyto reservoir;

Day 7 (14th April), stop 13: Potamoi, stop 14: Mikroleisoura & stop 15: Falakro.



















































