

False Apollo & Spring Butterflies

8th - 15th April 2025

Led by Michael de Courcy Williams & Peter Eeles



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Introduction

False Apollo, the main target for this trip, has an early season flight time, varying from February to April in its Greek Aegean range. However, the population in the mainland part of North-eastern Greece has a relatively later main flight time that corresponds with the emergence of a wider range of spring butterflies. Nevertheless, False Apollo needs to cope with the vagaries of early spring weather. Its very hairy body and generally dark colouration, at least on the body and upper wing, probably help it to overcome low nighttime temperatures and benefit from basking when it can warm up quickly in any available sunshine.

The early season of 2025 varied from an early and unusually warm period to a spell of weather with lower than normal temperatures. Just prior to our tour, a site inspection by Michael saw many individuals of False Apollo on the wing, albeit that, at that time, these all seemed to be males. Despite the cool temperatures we had around the time of the tour, it looked as if we were going to be spot on with our timing! In addition to the unpredictable weather, seeing False Apollo on the wing was a very welcome sight as it was only the second season following a very extensive fire in the late summer of 2023 that affected more than 900km² and saw many of the sites with False Apollo burnt or partially burnt over. Certainly climate change helped to fuel the intensity of the fires, but it is also likely that systemic issues of governance and fire protection played significant roles.

Our hope was to see the False Apollo – one of Europe's iconic butterflies and a member of the relatively small group of swallowtails – as we searched for other early spring species. At this time of the year each day brings changes and new species, often resulting in individuals that are freshly emerged and in pristine condition.

Joining us on the trip were the following guests: Andrew, Claire & Sheila, Catherine & Jenny, Mandy, Mark & Caroline, Martin, Nick, Paul K and Paul S. What follows is a daily diary for the week, followed by a gallery and species lists.

Itinerary

Day 1, Tuesday 8 April: Arrival at Thessaloniki airport, transfer to hotel in Alexandroupoli.

Day 2, Wednesday 9 April: Kirki Forest in the Evros Hills.

Day 3, Thursday 10 April: Lissos.

Day 4, Friday 11 April: Kirki Forest, Potamos.

Day 5, Saturday 12 April: Transfer from Alexandroupoli to Volakas, with stops at Nestos, Meliti (800 m), Komnina.

Day 6, Sunday 13 April: Orvilos – Katafyto.

Day 7, Monday 14 April: Potamoi.

Day 8, Tuesday 15 April: Travel from Volakas to Thessaloniki for flights home.

Day 1, Tuesday 8 April

Most of the guests met at Thessaloniki airport and we were soon on our way, passing through some roadworks at Thessaloniki before heading east along the coastal road towards Alexandroupoli, where the remaining guests were to meet us. This was to be our base for the first three days of the tour. The weather was somewhat overcast and quite cool as we travelled, with no butterflies seen during our brief mid-afternoon stop.

Once arrived at the hotel, Mark and Caroline decided to take a look at the surrounding area before dinner and managed to turn up both Mallow Skipper (*Carcharodus alceae*) and Eastern Dappled White (*Euchloe ausonia*) on a path that led down to the beach. Despite the cool conditions, this did give the group hope that we had timed the trip well.

Day 2, Wednesday 9 April

Today was our first full day and we were soon on our way to attempt to locate our main target for the entire trip – the False Apollo (*Archon apollinus*). We eventually reached the Kirki Forest, where the devastation caused by wildfires in seasons before was clear to see. However, Michael reassured us that many species had managed to not only survive the fires, but also recover to some degree. Like many related species, the False Apollo pupates below the soil surface, and this may have allowed the colonies here to survive, since the pupae would have been underground when the worst of the fires struck. Brief views of a Hoopoe also lifted the spirits as we reached our destination.

Michael had undertaken a recce at this site the previous week, where he said he had seen several males flying in the meadows we were about to visit. This homework really paid off since, within minutes of arriving at the site, the first False Apollos were seen flying in the area, typically finding available nectar sources or sunning themselves on suitable substrates. Around 30 adult False Apollo were seen in total, of both sexes, with the females especially alluring with their multicoloured flush on their hindwings.



Conditions were still quite cool and, even as things warmed up, the occasional passing cloud made for good photographic opportunities as all butterflies remained relatively docile. The sighting of several Queen of Spain Fritillary caused some excitement, as did the sighting of the occasional Large Tortoiseshell. Finding a couple of fresh Grecian Copper was also a real highlight of the day.



Just as we were leaving the site, we came across our first and very beautiful Southern Festoon, which led us to believe that the season here was a week or two behind schedule. Unlike False Apollo, the Southern and Eastern Festoons pupate above ground and both species probably took a major hit that reduced populations following the fire of 2023. Although there is no real quantitative data, it is evident that Southern Festoon is now much less frequent than it was in previous seasons.

Other butterflies seen included Scarce Swallowtail, Mallow Skipper, Eastern Bath White, Large White, Small White, Green-veined White, Eastern Dappled White, Orange-tip, Small Copper, Green Hairstreak, Red Admiral and Small Heath. A constant companion, however, was Painted Lady, which seemed to be with us wherever we went during the week and was, hopefully, a sign that we would experience a 'cardui' year once back home.

We decided to stop at an olive grove near to the hotel in which we stayed where Large Tortoiseshell had been observed on previous trips, although conditions were very cool by the time we arrived. However, we did manage to turn up Clouded Yellow, Brown Argus and Common Blue here.



© Peter Eeles

Other notable species for the day included an Oak Hook-tip and several Hummingbird Hawk-moths. Our avian friends also kept us company with Cirl Bunting and both White and Black Storks seen during the day. A highlight, however, was listening to a Nightingale singing while we explored the woodland adjoining the meadows where we had spent most of the day.

Day 3, Thursday 10 April

Today we decided to explore other sites within reasonable driving distance from the hotel that had, in previous years, revealed various specialties found in the area. An extensive limestone gorge with typical Eastern Mediterranean forest vegetation and numerous openings, that all managed to escape the massive fires of 2023, makes this area a largely unexplored, remote and wild landscape. The late season and cool conditions here were clearly having an impact, since very few butterflies were found at the first site, although we did manage our first sightings of



Helice form Clouded Yellow © Sheila W

Brimstone, Powdered Brimstone, Holly Blue and the *helice* form of Clouded Yellow in which the female is a whitish-grey, rather than the sulphur-orange usually found. We also righted a Tortoise that had somehow managed to flip itself onto its back.

Our second site of the day, where we also had lunch, was a little more exciting. Almost as soon as we had arrived, a Scarce Swallowtail was seen laying on a species of *Prunus*. Along with the usual suspects, the site revealed a good number of Large Tortoiseshell that were very obliging as they fed on Dandelions and other nectar sources.

A single Nettle-tree butterfly was also seen, although the highlight from this site was of a single Camberwell Beauty that, with its combination of dark colouring and pale fringes, was unmistakable as it flitted around and over us, only settling for the briefest of moments. We also watched several dung beetles rolling balls of dung.

Our third stop sat above a river valley where, once again, Large Tortoiseshells were putting on a good show, and no doubt attracted to the various Elms and Willows that are two of its favourite larval foodplants, although no egg laying was observed. Mandy found some Yellow-bellied Toads in one of the tributaries, while Paul S and Martin observed the numerous Red-backed Jumping Spiders (*Philaeus chrysops*).



© Peter Eeles

The weather was quite cool by the time we reached the fourth and last site for the day on another remote tributary of the Lissos, although a solitary Brimstone was found roosting. As ever, several Painted Lady were seen.

Paul S also noted several further avian species during the day, including Eastern Subalpine Warbler, Hen Harrier, Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail, Crested Lark and Black Stork.

Day 4, Friday 11 April

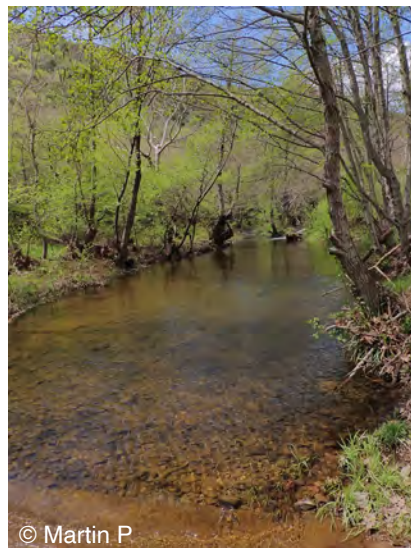
Given the late season, the group felt that it would be a good idea to return to the False Apollo site to see what else may have emerged in the previous two days. With site familiarity, we were all soon exploring the favoured and sheltered areas. Along with the False Apollo, we were also pleased to see a Swallowtail exploring one of the meadows, before heading off at speed.

Paul S found 'a blue' flying among the scrub and, once it settled, gave us our first sighting of a very fresh male Eastern Baton Blue. Several Grecian Coppers and Southern Festoon had emerged since our last visit and it was nice to see them in such good condition. A single Small Tortoiseshell was also a new species for the trip.

We then moved on to Potamos, where we had lunch. The fields where we stopped were full of flowering Brassicaceae, where Eastern Dappled White were making the most of the available nectar. We then crossed over a river to head up a path that rang alongside an infrequently used railway track and which eventually opened out into a series of meadows.

Yet more Grecian Coppers were seen, including several females, along with a few very fresh Southern Festoon. The skippers showed well, with Mallow Skipper, Dingy Skipper and Grizzled Skipper flying alongside one another. A large brown butterfly also caught our eye, which turned out to be a fresh male Wall, and another new species for the trip.

The usual evening get-together, where we examine photos from the day, threw up an interesting specimen. At first glance, it was clearly a Chapman's Blue since it was missing the diagnostic spot on the forewing underside that separates it from the Common Blue. However, Mark was quite right in pointing out several features that are characteristic of a Chapman's Blue that were missing. After further investigation, we read that up to 10% of adult Common Blues lack the distinguishing spot at some sites, and so we chalked this down to an unusual Common Blue.



Other species of note for the day included Egyptian Grasshopper, Black Field Cricket, Red-veined Darter, Greek Smooth Newt, Raven and Griffon Vulture.

Day 5, Saturday 12 April

The weather on our transfer day was overcast, although the scenery more than made up for a quieter day on the Lepidoptera front. Our first stop was at Nestos – with a spectacular flower-filled gorge to walk along. Having reached a high point, the group was happy to just take in the views before returning to the vans, but not before Mark found our first Southern Small White of the trip. An interesting botanical feature of the area is the presence of the relict species *Haberlea rhodopensis*, one of only five species of the plant family Gesneriaceae (colloquially known as African Violets) now found solely as local endemics in Europe. The European species have a deep history, as relicts from the Tertiary (24.5 million years ago in the late Oligocene epoch of the Tertiary). This family is otherwise found only in the subtropics and our visit coincides with the flowering period of this unusual plant.

We spent some time in the meadows where we had parked the vans, where several species were obligingly roosting on various flowers. Sheila and Claire also found our first Speckled Wood of the trip. The few Green-veined White seen led to a discussion of whether these could be Balkan Green-veined White, although the two species can only be separated by examining their genitalia. The little-used railway line that ran parallel with the road to the gorge also contained a number of sheltered areas and a small colony of Eastern Baton Blue was found by Mark and Caroline, which the group enjoyed watching. A couple of interesting orchids were also found – namely the Naked Man Orchid and the Early Flowering Spider Orchid.



Eastern Baton Blue © Martin P

Our next stop was at Meliti at 800m, although the combination of cloud and altitude meant that very little was flying, although we watched good numbers of House Martins flying around us at this wonderful viewing point.

Our final stop was in Komnina, at a flower-filled bend in the road. Several Small Copper were seen here, along with Speckled Wood and a single Eastern Baton Blue. Electric blue dung beetles were also seen along a narrow path that various 'whites' were flying along. Most of these turned out to be Green-veined White and Orange-tip, although Martin and Pete were sure that a Gruner's Orange-tip flew by but couldn't be sure of the identification. This area corresponds to the Eastern limit of its range in northern Greece but more observations in the future may change that for this early season species.

Day 6, Sunday 13 April



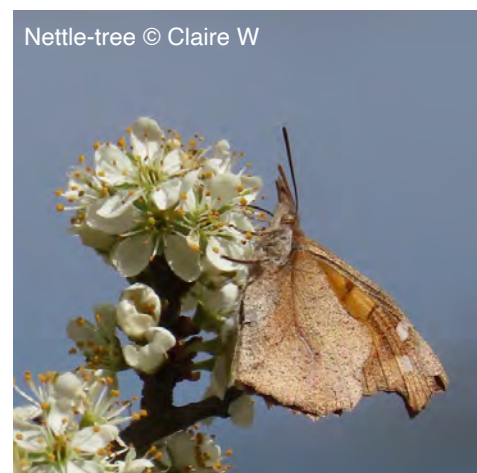
Wood White © Sheila W

The day was spent in Katafyto, near the border with Bulgaria. It was quite breezy and cool when we arrived but, almost as soon as we got out of the vans, Mandy found a couple of Nettle-tree butterflies soaking up the warmth in a sheltered spot behind a white building.

A little further down the road we came to a sheltered area that was extremely productive. Within minutes of arriving there, we had our first confirmed sighting of Gruner's Orange-tip, with several seen during the course of the morning and early afternoon. We also saw our first Wood White for the trip, with Peacock and Comma also adding to our tally, the latter found by Paul K. We also had several sightings of Camberwell Beauty along with several Large Tortoiseshell that seemed

particularly fond of the Blackthorn flowers. The star of the show, however, was undoubtedly the Nettle-tree butterfly that were flying in incredible numbers, and which also enjoyed taking nectar from the Blackthorn. We also heard both Hoopoes and Cuckoos calling as we took in all that this site had to offer, which included a mating pair of Eastern Bath White, found by Martin, and a host of Queen of Spain Fritillary, many of which were very fresh.

Before heading back to the hotel, we stopped a short distance away in a more wooded and wet area that contained some very nice stands of willow. Here we got sightings of Camberwell Beauty and Large Tortoiseshell although, despite several adults flying around the willows, no egg-laying was observed. A small group was watching yet another Large Tortoiseshell that looked particularly brightly coloured – because it was, in fact, a Scarce (Yellow-legged) Tortoiseshell, which caused much excitement, with another



Nettle-tree © Claire W



Ligurian Emperor Moths © Mandy S

seen later that afternoon!

As we returned to the vans, Martin spotted a newly emerged female Ligurian Emperor Moth. Before long, two males had flown in and were flying erratically as they tried to locate the female. Within seconds, one of the males had located his target and paired with the female. It's not an experience you can plan for and was a delight to behold.

Day 7, Monday 14 April - Potamoi

Our last full day was spent exploring a hillside and meadows at Potamoi, although the weather was

largely overcast and butterfly sightings few and far between. While walking up to some meadows, Mark found a larval web on Hawthorn that was clearly that of the Black-veined White, with general agreement that, yes, this did count as a new species for the trip! More Black-veined White larval webs were found on various species of *Prunus*, as well as on Hawthorn.

Once in the meadows, there was not much flying, although several Lady Orchids were found. Catherine and Jenny spotted a single Small Copper darting around, but this was the only butterfly seen for some time. Several promising breaks in the cloud cover disappeared as quickly as they had appeared, but there were a few spells where the brightness resulted in the landscape coming to life.

At the top of a track, Martin managed to find a single blue butterfly nectaring, which turned out to be our first and only Green-underside Blue. A few others blues all turned out to be Eastern Baton Blue. A few Wood White, Wall and both Dingy and Grizzled Skippers were also seen, while an inspection of the various 'whites' flying resulted in a couple of Southern Small White. Nick had made the apparently wise decision of staying near the buses, since he managed to get good photos of both male and female Gruner's Orange-tip.

Here again can be found the regional endemic and relict plant species *Haberlea rhodopensis*, growing low on a shaded rock where it's possible to touch and feel its distinctively hairy leaves.



Green-underside Blue © Sheila W

Paul S, the most experienced ornithologist among us, pointed out various species, including Dipper, Common Sandpiper, Black Stork, Black Redstart, Willow Tit, Nuthatch, Cuckoo, Serin, Grey Heron, Cormorant, Buzzard and Kestrel.

We made one last stop on our way back to the hotel to look at some promising willows, although nothing was seen flying. However, on practically the last flowerhead we examined, we found a roosting Marbled Skipper (although the possibility that this worn individual was an Oriental Marbled Skipper cannot be dismissed, which does fly much earlier than Marbled Skipper here) – another new species for the trip and the perfect way to end!

Day 8, Tuesday 15 April - Travel from Volakas to Thessaloniki for flights home

The last day was spent getting to the airport, which we managed in good time.

Acknowledgements. On behalf of Greenwings, Michael and Pete would like to thank all our guests on this trip for their enjoyable company throughout the week.

Species List

Butterflies			8th April	9th April	10th April	11th April	12th April	13th April	14th April
Imago sightings are marked with ✓, caterpillars are marked with ☆, ova are marked with ○			day 1	day 2	day 3	day 4	day 5	day 6	day 7
	Family Papilionidae								
1	Scarce Swallowtail	<i>Iphiclides podalirius</i>		✓	✓○	✓		✓	✓
2	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>				✓		✓	
3	False Apollo	<i>Archon apollinus</i>		✓		✓			
4	Eastern Festoon	<i>Zerynthia cerisy</i>			✓	✓			
5	Southern Festoon	<i>Zerynthia polyxena</i>		✓		✓			✓
	Family Pieridae								
6	Black-veined White	<i>Aporia crataegi</i>							☆
7	Orange-tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Gruner's Orange-tip	<i>Anthocharis gruneri</i>						✓	✓
9	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
10	Eastern Dappled White	<i>Euchloe ausonia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
11	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓
12	Powdered Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx farinosa</i>			✓				
13	Wood White	<i>Leptidea sinapis</i>						✓	✓
14	Balkan Green-veined White	<i>Pieris balcana</i>					?	?	?
15	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓
16	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Southern Small White	<i>Pieris manni</i>					✓		✓
18	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Eastern Bath White	<i>Pontia edusa</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	Family Lycaenidae								
20	Green Hairstreak	<i>Callophrys rubi</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
21	Grecian Copper	<i>Lycaena ottomana</i>		✓	✓	✓			
22	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓
24	Eastern Baton Blue	<i>Pseudophilotes vicrama</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Green-underside Blue	<i>Glaucopsyche alexis</i>							✓
26	Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
27	Chapman's Blue	<i>Polyommatus thersites</i>				?			
28	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
	Family Nymphalidae								
29	Nettle Tree Butterfly	<i>Libythea celtis</i>			✓			✓	

Butterflies			8th April	9th April	10th April	11th April	12th April	13th April	14th April
Imago sightings are marked with ✓, caterpillars are marked with ☆, ova are marked with ○			day 1	day 2	day 3	day 4	day 5	day 6	day 7
30	Peacock	<i>Aglais io</i>						✓	✓
31	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>				✓		✓	
32	Camberwell Beauty	<i>Nymphalis antiopa</i>			✓			✓	
33	Large Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓
34	Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis xanthomelas</i>						✓	
35	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
36	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
38	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>						✓	✓
39	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		✓				✓	✓
40	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>					✓	✓	✓
41	Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
	Family Hesperidae								
42	Mallow Skipper	<i>Carcharodus alcaea</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	
43	Marbled Skipper	<i>Carcharodus lavatherae</i>							✓
44	Dingy Skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus malvae</i>				✓		✓	✓

Other Notable Species

Birds

Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>
Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>
Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>
Girl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirrus</i>
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>

Griffon Vulture
Nightingale
Grey Wagtail
Black-eared Wheatear
Cormorant
Black Redstart
Willow Tit
Serin
Eurasian Nuthatch
Eastern Subalpine Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Hoopoe

Gyps fulvus
Luscinia megarhynchos
Motacilla cinerea
Oenanthe melanoleuca
Phalacrocorax carbo
Phoenicurus ochruros
Poecile montanus
Serinus serinus
Sitta europaea
Sylvia cantillans
Sylvia melanocephala
Upupa epops

Moths

Silver-Y
Hummingbird Hawkmoth
Speckled Yellow
Ligurian Emperor Moth
Oak Hook-tip

Autographa gamma
Macroglossum stellatarum
Pseudopanthera macularia
Saturnia pavoniella
Watsonalla binaria

Reptiles & Amphibians

Yellow-bellied Toad
Eastern Green Lizard
Greek Smooth Newt
Dice Snake
European Glass Lizard
Common Frog

Bombina variegata
Lacerta viridis
Lissotriton vulgaris subsp. *graecus*
Natrix tessellata
Pseudopus apodus
Rana temporaria

Other Taxa

Egyptian Grasshopper
Field Cricket
Orpheus Flower
Yellow Crab Spider
Southern Green Shieldbug
Naked Man Orchid
Lady Orchid
Early Spider Orchid
Red-bellied Jumping Spider
Red-veined Darter
Violet Carpenter Bee

Anacridium aegyptiaca
Gryllus campestris
Haberlea rhodopensis
Misumena vatia
Nezara viridula
Orchis italica
Orchis purpurea
Ophrys sphegodes
Philaeus chrysops
Sympetrum fonscolombii
Xylocopus violaceae

Photo Gallery



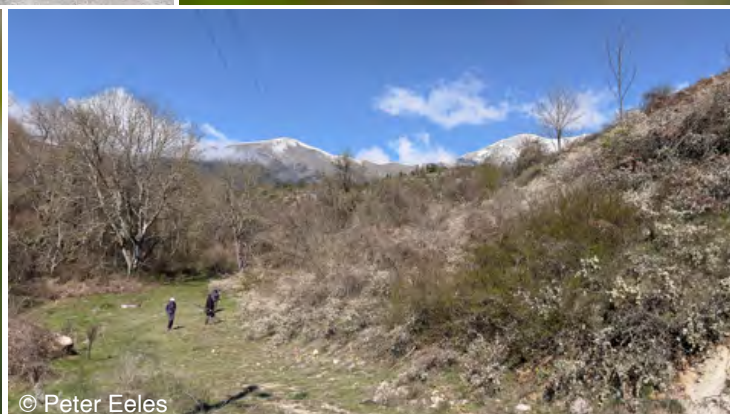
© Peter Eeles



Orange Tip © Sheila W



Early Spider Orchid © Martin P



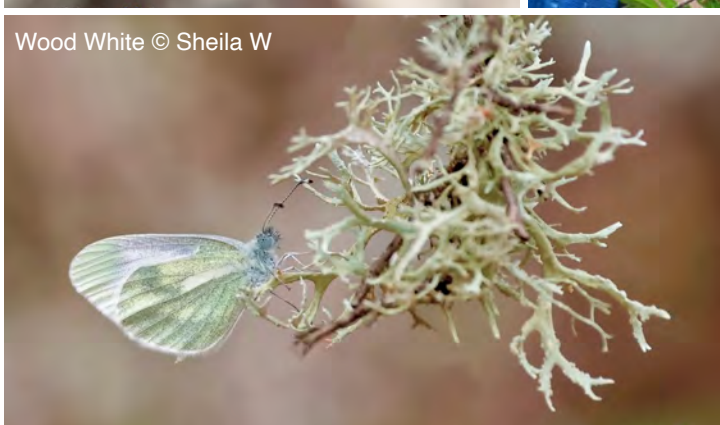
© Peter Eeles



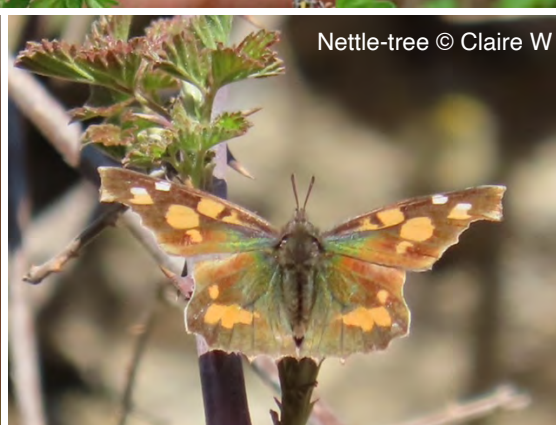
Heliconia form Clouded Yellow © Sheila W



Black-veined White larval web © Claire W



Wood White © Sheila W



Nettle-tree © Claire W



Powdered Brimstone © Martin P



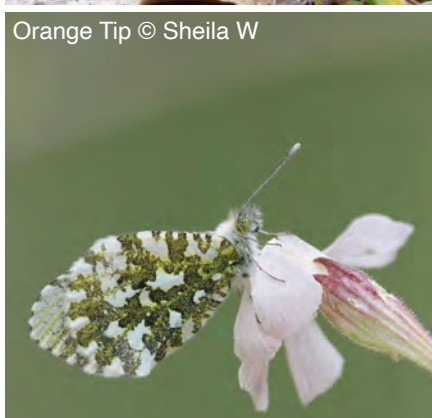
Grecian Copper © Claire W



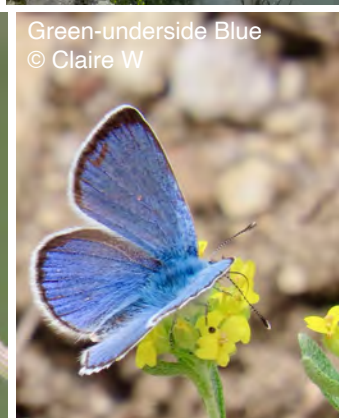
Southern Festoon © Mandy S



© Martin P



Orange Tip © Sheila W



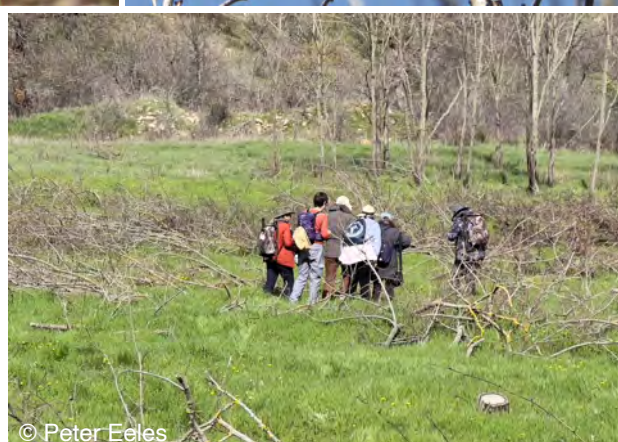
Green-underside Blue
© Claire W



Eastern Subalpine Warbler © Mandy S



Ligurean Emperor Moths © Sheila W



© Peter Eeles



© Claire W

Orange Tip © Claire W



Southern Festoon © Martin P



© Peter Eeles



Marbled Skipper © Claire W



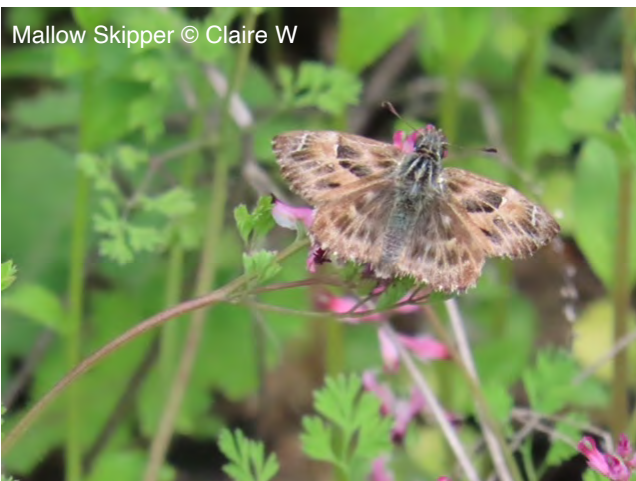
Naked Man Orchid © Martin P



European Glass Lizard © Martin P



Green Hairstreak © Martin P



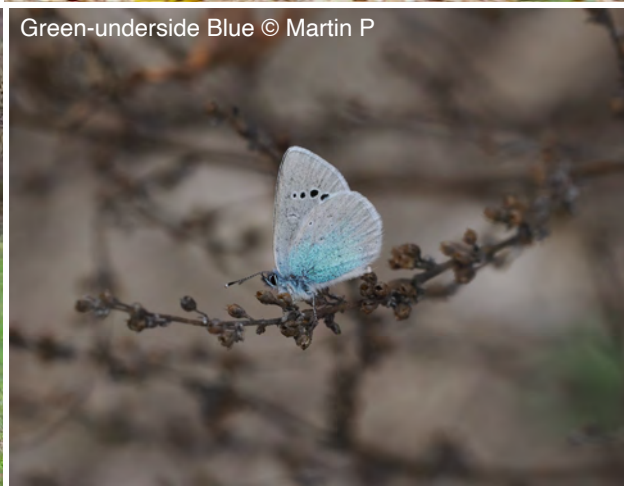
Mallow Skipper © Claire W



Large Tortoiseshell © Claire W



© Claire W



Green-underside Blue © Martin P



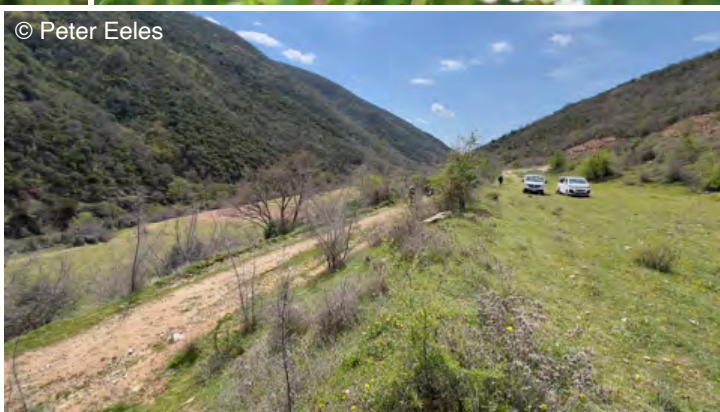
False Apollo © Martin P



Grecian Copper © Claire W



Balkan Green-veined White © Martin P



© Peter Eeles



© Peter Eeles



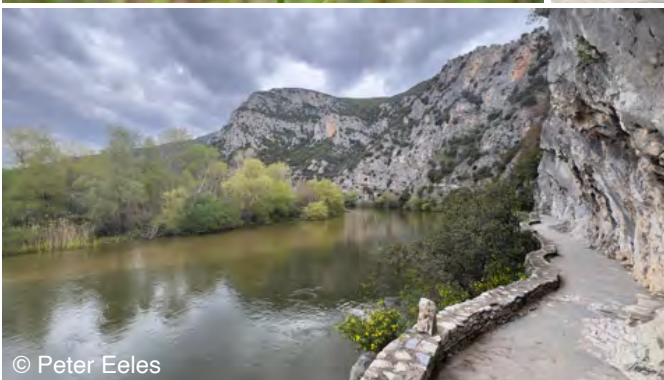
Gruner's Orange Tip © Claire W



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