

SPATIA WILDLIFE

Butterflies of the Balkans - Bulgaria, Macedonia and Greece

Sunday 3rd - Saturday 17th July 2011

Trip report by Dr. Mario Langourov

Tour leader: Dr. Mario Langourov¹

Tour participants: Mr. Keith and Mrs. Aileen Gould
Ms. Linda Jones

Tour organizer: Spatia Wildlife www.spatiawildlife.com

Bulgaria, 3rd - 5th and 13th - 16th July 2011

Macedonia, 5th - 9th July

Greece, 10th - 13th July

Day 1

Sunday 3rd July

Outbound from Sofia; en route to Rila Monastery via Struma Valley

Weather: heavy rain and cold (12°C)

Together with Dobromir (Spatia Wildlife's manager) we have picked up Linda from the hotel where she was accommodated last night by Dobromir as she has arrived the previous evening. After a quick lunch we drove to the airport where we met the other two tour participants - Mr. Keith and Mrs. Aileen Gould. Quick currency change in the city centre and after leaving Dobromir near to his flat we got on the newly build motorway 'Lulin' and under the heavy rain we took direction to our first base for the holiday. Upon our arrival it was still raining, so we have decided to visit the Rila Monastery, some 10 minutes driving from the hotel. The monastery is the most visited cultural landmark in Bulgaria, listed in UNESCO World

¹ All photos in this report were taken during the holiday by ©Mario Langourov

Heritage List. When the rain did stop we have had a quick check at the meadow near the hotel where we have seen our first, and the most likely, butterfly for the tour – a Common Blue!

Day 2

Monday 4th July

Rila & Iliiyna River Valley; Kirilova Polyana

Weather: partly cloudy, still and relatively warm (20°C)

Our first site for the day was the nearest river valley, only a 5 min drive from the hotel. It is a site where the highly attractive Purple Emperor and Poplar Admiral are nearly guaranteed, however not today. The weather wasn't favorable for these big butterflies requiring warm and sunny conditions so we have concentrated on the nearby flowering meadows. Here we have recorded the only specimens for the tour of Orange Tip, Balkan Copper, Zephyr Blue, Duke of Burgundy Fritillary, Yellow-banded and Chequered Skippers. After we took our lunch in the hotel's restaurant we moved to the meadows above the monastery where we have seen Small and Scarce coppers, Niobe and Weaver's fritillaries as well as other commoner species, few orchids and our first dragonfly – a Sombre Goldenring.

Day 3

Tuesday 5th July

Bulgaria – crossroad to Stob Village; **Macedonia** – near Kalimansko Ezero; near Raec Village; Pletvar Pass.

Weather: overcast with sunny spells and occasional light showers; still and relatively warm; windy at Pletvar

After breakfast we headed west towards Macedonia. Our first stop were the flowering meadows near the village of Stob – Sooty Copper, various blues - Short-tailed, Holly, Iolas, Reverdin's; Map Butterfly and Marbled Skipper. After crossing the border we have stopped near Kaliman Lake where we had Mountain Small White, Great Banded Grayling, Pearly Heath and Dinky Skipper. Our picnic was next to a river and as we loaded the van it started to rain. It ended once we had our next stop a couple of hours later at the rocky gorge near the village of Raec. The sun was shining here and the butterflies have started to fly around after the rain. Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail, Balkan Marbled White, Lesser Fiery Copper and Oriental Marbled Skipper, plus a few Small Pincetail. Last stop for the day was probably the most wanted one – the typical habitat - "locus typicus" of the Macedonian Grayling. However the faith has decided we are not going to see it today as the wind was quite strong. We still managed to find and photograph a couple interesting species – the hybrid form between Chalk-hill Blue and Adonis Blue *Lysandra x polonus* and Marbled White form *leucomelas*, as well as Southern Emerald Damselfly. Short transfer to Prilep town for accommodation and dinner.

Day 4

Wednesday 6th July

Macedonia – Pletvar Pass; above Shtavitsa Village; Mariovo – near Tsrna Reka River.

Weather: overcast with sunny spells, light shower early morning; still and warm (20-25°C)

While we had our breakfast the weather outside wasn't promising – persistent drizzle. As we loaded the van however the sun has appeared and ten minutes drive brought us to the yesterday's evening site. We have immediately spotted a grayling of some sort but too brief to be identified. We spread out to cover a bigger area and I saw small yellowish butterfly - "Eastern Greenish Black-tip" – I shouted. Following the butterfly my attention was distracted by a large Satyridae specimen, so I have lost the original one, but we managed an excellent view of a female Great Sooty Satyr. Ten minutes later we have discovered our prime target for the day – the extremely local Macedonian Grayling! It appeared to be very cooperative so we managed to get very good photos. After it we finally found the Eastern Greenish Black-tip. Other species here were Southern Small White, Cardinal, Balkan Marbled White and Spotted Fritillary. As we were ready here we drove towards the nearly untouched area of Mariovo where we had our lunch near the river. After it we have searched the area and among the Mediterranean vegetation we found Sandy Grizzled Skipper, Little Tiger Blue, Sooty Copper and various dragonflies and damselflies.

Day 5

Thursday 7th July

Macedonia – Pletvar Pass; N slopes of Pelister Mt; Galichitsa Mt.

Weather: sunny and warm/ hot, dry, still (25-30°C)

Before we started to Prespa Lake, we have decided to check again the site for the Macedonian Grayling. This time we had male Great Sooty Satyr, The Hermit and again few specimens of the Macedonian Grayling. On the way to our next base for the tour we stopped at the flowering meadows at the foothills of Pelister mountain where we had various fritillaries – Cardinal, Silver-washed, High Brown and Marbled; as well as hairstreaks – Sloe, Ilex and Green; also Eastern Baton Blue. We accommodated in the hotel for the next two days and had a lunch in the restaurant. After it we change the Mediterranean habitat with a mountain one as we drove to Galichitsa mountain – a prime butterfly habitat. The mountain meadows here were full of life and among many other we found Apollo, Silver-studded Blue, Turquoise Blue, False Eros Blue, Knapweed Fritillary, Nickerl's Fritillary, Esper's Marbled White. The panoramic view from the top of the mountain is really inspiring – from here you can see both Prespa and Ohrid lakes.

Day 6

Friday 8th July

Macedonia – Galichitsa Mt.

Weather: sunny and warm/ hot, dry, still (~ 30°C)

The whole day was devoted of exploring the mountain, having a picnic lunch at a wonderful spot. We have started the day with finding a wolf's excrements in a locality called Two maples which was attracting considerable number of butterfly species - Silver-studded Blue, Turquoise Blue, Green-underside Blue and the rare Freyer's Fritillary. The Dwarf Elders were in full flowers and were visited by many fritillaries – Cardinal, Silver-washed, Dark Green and Niobe. The afternoon provided Apollo, Clouded Apollo, Osiris Blue, Large Blue, Anomalous Blue, Escher's Blue, Southern White Admiral, Glanville Fritillary, Marsh Fritillary, Russian Heath, and many Esper's Marbled White. On the way back to the hotel we have spotted many graylings on the road. I have stopped to check them out and it proved they all are Woodland graylings. The last sunlight was excellent for photographing few Lizard Orchids growing along the road.

Day 7

Saturday 9th July

Macedonia – Galichitsa Mt, near Raec Village, Marena Village, Demir Kapia Gorge, Doyran Lake; **Greece** – Kerkini Lake.

Weather: sunny and very hot, still (~ 35°C)

Today we had a transfer to Greece and Kerkini Lake where we have accommodated for 2 nights. On the way we stopped again at the gorge near the village of Raec. This time we found Great Sooty Satyr, Lattice Brown, Southern White Admiral; Oriental Marbled, Dingy and Inky skippers. Other insects were Praying Mantis, Balkan Goldenring, as well as the largest European ant-lion – *Palpares libelluloides*. Next stop was in Marena village where we had ice-cream and enjoyed views of the local colony of Lesser Kestrels. At Demir Kapia gorge we found Swallowtail, Scarce Swallowtail, Southern White Admiral, The Hermit, and in the nearest riverside forests - Eastern Wood White and Lattice Brown. Just before we crossed the border we called at the Doiran Lake - Scarlet Darter, Common Clubtail, and several skimmers. We latter accommodate in the hotel, situated on the southern slopes of Belasitsa mountain with nice panoramic view to Lake Kerkini. It became clear that the chef is sick so for our dinner we went to the nearest village. Not only we had a delicious traditional mixed grill and the typical atmosphere of a small rural Greek village but the owner has also demonstrated a unique way of keeping away the mosquitoes. He fired a used coffee powder and its smoke proved to be a perfect repellent!

Day 8

Sunday 10th July

Greece – Kerkini Lake & Belasitsa (Kerkini) Mt.

Weather: sunny and very hot, still (~ 38°C)

The whole day was devoted on exploring Kerkini Lake. Butterflies we found here were Southern Small White, Green-veined White, Eastern Bath White, Berger's Clouded Yellow, Large Copper, Short-tailed Blue, an egg-laying Lang's Short-tailed Blue, Southern Comma and many more. Our lunch today was in a restaurant under a century old plane trees and here we had Nettle-Tree Butterfly, Large Tortoiseshell and Oriental Meadow Brown. In the afternoon we also had some birding recording Great White Egret, Purple, Squacco and Night herons, Spoonbill, Dalmatian and White pelicans, Hoopoes, Bea-eaters and many more; plus some damselflies and dragonflies Small Pincetail, Balkan Goldenring, Southern, White-tailed and Black-tailed skimmers and Red-veined Darter.

Day 9

Monday 11th July

Greece – above Sidirokastro; Menikio Mt; E from Granitis Village.

Weather: sunny and very hot, still; a shower late afternoon (~ 36°C)

On the road again and our first stop was the valley north of Sidirokastro, between the mountains of Alibotoush and Vrondots. Here the new find was the rare Freyer's Grayling. We had few of them, all perched on the tree-trunk of a plane tree. In the nearby bushes we have also found Anomalous Blue, Meleager's Blue (photo 32), Chapman's Blue and Holly Blue. Just before we reached our next base we had a stop near Granitis village which provided Adonis Blue, Southern Comma, Sandy Grizzled and Mediterranean skippers. Few lightnings and a rain made us drive to the hotel, situated in the village of Volakas. We were welcomed

with a great hospitality and delicious traditional food. The hotel is situated on the same place where the owner's father small farm used to be. In its interior are included various tools of the traditional agriculture practices and lifestyle.

Day 10

Tuesday 12th July

Greece – Bozdag (Falakro) Mt.

Weather: sunny and hot, still; cloudy and a shower late afternoon (~ 30°C)

Our host Kosta's hospitality resulted in offering to join us during the day, something we have all accepted. We decided to start from the top of the Phalakron mountain (above 2000 m. a.s.l.) to take advantage of the good weather. Here we found Clouded Apollo, Little Blue, Mountain Alcon Blue, Turquoise Blue, Macedonian Chalk-hill Blue (photo 33), False Eros Blue, Eastern Large Heath, as well as the local endemic Phalakron Blue. Meadows around are covered by the Balkan endemic *Sideritis scardica*, famous as a medicine plant and aphrodisiac. After having our picnic with great panoramic view to the valleys below us we have explored the surroundings which brought the second Eastern Greenish Black-tip of the trip, White Letter Hairstreak, Higgins's and Ripart's Anomalous blues and Great Sooty Satyr. Last stop was near a small church where we had Heath and Dark Green fritillaries as well as Safflower Skipper. Again, lightings and rain made us drive back to the hotel where we could proceed the pictures taken so far on the trip. Just before the dinner we were joined by Kosta's mother and she added to our local knowledge with various stories, moreover on excellent Bulgarian, so I had to translate them to the rest of the group.

Day 11

Wednesday 13th July

Greece – near Katafito Village; **Bulgaria** – South Pirin Mt; Papaztchair Pass.

Weather: misty morning; overcast with sunny spells; still and warm (~ 30°C)

Morning was quite misty and we had a quick check of the hills just south of the border where we had the first Gatekeepers as well as other common species. Crossing the border was very quick again and we found ourselves in the southern foothills of Pirin Mountain in Bulgaria, having an ice-cream stop on the way. Big numbers of butterflies were mud puddling at the puddles along the track –Scarce Swallowtail, Osiris Blue, Reverdin's Blue, Mazarine Blue, Anomalous Blue, Escher's Blue, Turquoise Blue and Meleager's Blue. Meadows around revealed Large Blue and Great Banded Grayling. However we have failed to find Dil's и Balkan graylings, despite being right on the spot. Few Eastern Rock graylings were partial reward. Finishing our picnic we were joined by the local border police staff to which I have offered to share our pudding. At that time we have noticed the only Eastern Festoon for the trip flying by. It was really good to see one of the most beautiful European butterflies so late in the summer. The dry river bed provided Berger's Clouded Yellow, 4 species of hairstreaks (Sloe, Ilex, Blue-spot and White Letter), Twin-spot, Marbled and Weaver's fritillaries, Large and Sandy Grizzled skippers. Up in Pirin in the afternoon we had Mountain Alcon Blue и Mountain Argus.

Day 12

Thursday 14th July

Pirin Mt – Vihren to Bunderitsa Hut; Izvorite meadows.

Weather: overcast with sunny spells, warm, dry (29°C-34°C)

Today we went again at above 2000 meters, around Vihren hut, which is a good place for different ringlets and we manage to find Arran Brown, Large Ringlet, Nicholl's Ringlet, Common and Ottoman Brassy Ringlet, as well as Clouded Apollo, Blue Argus, Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Small Pearl-bordered fritillaries. Birds were presented by a Nutcracker and a flock of Crossbills. The afternoon we spent at the wet meadows west of Bansko which provided Large and Scarce coppers, Large Blue, Knapweed and Heath fritillaries. But the biggest attraction was a female Mountain Alcon Blue, egg laying on the leaves of *Gentiana cruciata*.

Day 13

Friday 15th July

Rila Mt – Belmeken to Premkata; near Sestrimo.

Weather: sunny and very hot, still (30°C-36°C)

Despite being again at over a 2000 meters a.s.l, the day seems to be very hot. As we have started our walk near the Bemeken dam we have spotted one of the day's targets – a Balkan Fritillary. The track leads us higher and higher and we saw Common and Ottoman Brassy Ringlets, Nicholl's Ringlet and Eastern Large Heath. Reaching the elevation needed for the Bulgarian Ringlet we saw few of them flying as well as a mating couple.

For our picnic lunch we had a nice spot near a mountain creek. After it I have climbed further and reached elevation above 2400 meters a.s.l. hoping to locate the Cynthia's Fritillary, while the rest were exploring the area around the picnic site where they have found at least 4 species of orchids as well as the insect eating plant Balkan Butterwort (*Pinguicula balcanica*). I have found many Balkan and Shepherd's fritillaries – they were virtually everywhere, but no Cynthia's! Time to move on and soon we have found us on the northern slopes of Rila, near the Sestrimo village. Here there is a Buddlea bush, in full flowers, so a colorful palette of species were nectaring on its flowers – Swallowtail, Scarce Swallowtail, and many fritillaries. Nearby we spotted Common Glider, as well as Glanville and Knapweed fritillaries. Latter in the evening we reached our last base for the holiday – an excellent family run small hotel in the village of Govedartsi.

Day 14

Saturday 16th July

Rila Mt – Yastrebets; Iskar Valley - Vedena.

Weather: sunny and warm, still; a shower late afternoon

Short drive brought us to the cabin lift at Borovets where Dobry was already waiting for us. Another half an hour on the lift and from 1,300 meters above the sea level we have reached over 2,300 m! A wonderful opportunity to enjoy the magnificence of the highest mountain on the Balkans. Already there we have started walking towards the site for our main target today – the beautiful Cynthia's Fritillary. The beginning was promising – Dewy Ringlet, plus Eastern Large Heath, Painted Lady and Small Tortoiseshell. Dobry had a glimpse of a fast flying Poplar Admiral which is a quite extraordinary record at over 2,400 meters! Shortly after he also saw the Cynthia's, but unfortunately not everybody had a good look as it shot of into the thick *Juniperus siberice*. Next meadow however provided several males and few females and everybody managed to get very good photos. After a pleasant picnic we went down and an hour of driving brought us in Sofia. On the way we had a couple of stops along Iskar river.

First one provided Purple-shot and Large coppers; while the second one produced Chequered Blue, Lesser Purple Emperor, White Admiral, Map Butterfly. Just before the rain started we recorded the highly desired Camberwell Beauty – what a wonderful end the holiday. From here I drove Keith and Aileen to their hotel in Sofia as their flight was quite early next day, while Dobry brought Linda to the airport as her flight was late in the evening. They had another stop on the way spotting a Purple Emperor.

The tour total came to 145 species within two weeks holiday spent in some of the most interesting sites of the Balkans.

Photos of the tour:



Rila Monastery



Balkan Copper



Lesser Fiery Copper



Hybrid form between Chalk-hill Blue and Adonis Blue *Lysandra x polonus*



Macedonian Grayling



Eastern Greenish Black-tip



Esper's Marbled White



Russian Heath



Lattice Brown



The Hermit



Freyer's Grayling



Meleager's Blue



Macedonian Chalk-hill Blue



Nicholl's Ringlet



Cynthia's Fritillary



Chequered Blue