

Butterflies of the West Balkan - Bulgaria and Serbia

Sunday 19th - Thursday 30th June 2016

Trip report by Dr. Mario Langourov

Tour leader: Dr. Mario Langourov¹

Tour participants: Mrs. Maire Hietaharju
Mrs. Eileen Gould
Mr. Keith Gould
Mr. Mike Bailey

Bulgaria, 19th – 25th June

Serbia, 25th – 29th June

Day 1 Sunday 19th June

Bulgaria – Outbound from Sofia; en route to Dragoman.

Weather: cloudy and hot, still (~28°C-30°C).

Around noon I welcomed the participants of the group and we headed to our first hotel, situated northwest of Sofia near town of Dragoman. But first we decided to stop in the valley of Iskar river, where among the lush greenery we got some idea of the successful tour ahead us with the first Chequered Blue (Pic. 2), Idas Blue, White Admiral, Map Butterfly, Lesser Marbled Fritillary, Pearly Heath, Speckled Wood. But the time was progressing imperceptibly and we set off to the hotel.

Day 2 Monday 20th June

Ponor Mt.

Weather: sunny and hot, still (30°C-33°C).

Our goal for the day were secluded limestone hills, cut by small streams – a place, where the extremely rare and local in Europe Spinose Skipper is in abundance. Near one of the many karst springs we enjoyed Reverdin's Blue, Twin-spot Fritillary, Chestnut Heath and many of Blues, including Adonis Blue and Amanda's Blue. Going further we managed to disturb a Poplar Admiral near a small and not far from there near murmurous flow we found Large Copper, Green-underside Blue, Chapman's Blue, Tufted Marbled Skipper, Large Tortoiseshell, Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Among the many Blue Argus (Pic. 3) we encounter several copulating couples and we had the wonderful opportunity to compare the similar species Osiris Blue and Small Blue. The hottest part of the day we spent in the cool of a small restaurant, enjoying a light lunch and with new powers we took to a beautiful river valley, where numbers of different types of Skippers sucked salts from the damp ground. Among them were Spinose Skipper (Pic. 4), Orbed Red-underwing Skipper and numerous of Safflower Skipper. Along the river we saw Poplar Admiral (Pic. 5)! It sucked salts and periodically described wide circles around us, returning back to the starting position and allowing to everyone to shoot him from different angles. After quarter of an hour we managed to go and move to the blossom meadows to discover more Dark Green Fritillary, Niobe Fritillary, High Brown Fritillary, Yellow-banded Skipper, Woodland Ringlet, Eastern Wood White and on the branches around us landed and posed Southern White Admiral. In humid places there were large gatherings and various Blues, among them it is

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

worth to note Zephyr Blue, Eros Blue, Geranium Argus and Mountain Argus. It was about time to retire to the comfort of the hotel and enjoy the dinner.

Day 3 Tuesday 21st June

Mala Mt; Ponor Mt.

Weather: sunny and breezy; warm to very hot (26°C÷35°C).

First we visited the slopes of limestone hills, where we met Lattice Brown, hiding among the branches of a nearby bush and provided an excellent opportunity for photographers. On the flower of fragrant thyme landed Baton Blue, Blue-spot Hairstreak, Russian Heath and discovered more Southern Small White, Mountain Small White, Berger's Clouded Yellow. In wooded glen we came upon the first Delattin's Grayling, Nickerl's Fritillary and only for tour Large Wall Brown. On the blooms of brambles and thistles stopped for short rest and "refueling" Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail, but our attention was focused on the next landed Cardinal. We just went back, when in the tall grasses we saw couple of Lesser Lattice Brown. The female was quite shy and fled, but all managed to photograph the male (Pic. 6), and right after that we also saw also Great Sooty Satyr. After lunch we visited the shores of bird paradise - the Dragoman marsh. On the rare bushes we saw Ilex Hairstreak and Sloe Hairstreak, low over the ground flew Weaver's Fritillary, and several Southern Festoon-larvae were looking for a suitable place for pupation. The heat became unbearable and we headed in the shadow of the nearby river valley, where we enjoyed the coolness of the towering trees above us. Undoubtedly the biggest attraction here were Lesser Purple Emperor. We spent some time to enjoy the patrolling species on the branches of a maple, which flying again and again were coming back to the same place. It was time to take the deserved rest after a successful day, total for the first two days we saw the impressive 93 species of butterflies!

Day 4 Wednesday 22nd June

Yazova Mt.

Weather: sunny and very hot, still (~30°C÷38°C).

We took to the next base – Chiprovtsi, but before that we stopped near the shore of clear river. Instantly our attention was attracted by exclusively local in Europe and too common in these parts of the peninsula Freyer's Fritillary (Pic. 7). They were everywhere - congregated along the moist soil, landed on the flowers of the blackberry bushes, patrolled ... Not long after among many Purple-shot Copper we found Lesser Fiery Copper (Pic. 8) in cooperative mood and roadside patrolled Mallow Skipper. And among the many Map Butterfly we found an exemplar with the coloration of spring generation. Near the fountain with clear and cold mountain water we had picnic lunch and with new powers we headed to highland of Yazova Mt. Among the folds of the hills and near the small mountain streams we saw Provençal Short-tailed Blue and Eros Blue, over us among the lower branches flew White Admiral. The surrounding meadows provided excellent opportunities for different types of Skippers, including the impressive Lulworth Skipper. On the way to the town we added to the list Large Copper and Dingy Skipper. Under the thick vine of the hotel we enjoyed the delicious traditional dinner and watched the football game of UEFA European Championship.

Day 5 Thursday 23rd June

Chiprovtsi Mt.

Weather: sunny and warm (26°C).

With the Russian military machine, skillfully managed through rough terrain from the local baker, we reached 1800 m. – the zone of recently discovered in Bulgaria Violet Copper. Just get off and we encountered the first of them, and when we moved down for about fifty meters near a small stream, counted

twenty of Violet Copper (Pic. 9) and all managed to make beautiful photographs of butterflies of both sexes. Besides them here in a significant amount we saw Chequered Skipper. The surrounding mountain meadows are full of life among others here we can pick out a typical mountain Bulgarian Ringlet (Pic. 10), Eastern Large Heath, Geranium Argus (Pic. 11), Mazarine Blue and Northern Wall Brown. Here, away from human hoopla, among the quiet of the mountain, pure air and beautiful views of the valley and surrounding peaks we had picnic lunch. It was time to take the road back to the town, stopping at several places on the way down. On wet glade we found Bright-eyed Ringlet and Woodland Ringlet, and not far from them patrolled Balkan Copper (Pic. 12), just like rubies in color string. During dinner we dipped in an atmosphere of old times with the explanation and demonstration of our hostess for traditional Chiprovski kilim rugs, brought fame to the town and far beyond the borders of the country.

Day 6 Friday 24th June

St Nikola Mt.

Weather: sunny with cloudy periods, hot (30°C).

The day was dedicated to exploring the surroundings and visiting different areas in the mountain. The weather is wonderful and roadside was crawling with butterflies – among them Berger's Clouded Yellow, Scarce Copper, Purple-shot Copper, Ilex Hairstreak, Sloe Hairstreak. We spent considerable time on a wonderful posing Large Grizzled Skipper and to photograph it from different angles we demonstrated impressive climbing skills. It is worth to note and Zephyr Blue (Pic. 13) and Mountain Argus, but it seems that the greatest interest got the magnificent glows of a few Purple Emperors. A noisy area with gazebo provided us a great opportunity for picnic lunch. Beside us there were plenty of butterflies - including all types of Golden Skippers and more than ten species of Fritillaries. In the semi dry river valley we found Great Banded Grayling, Spotted Fritillary, Lesser Spotted Fritillary. It was time to shift our attention to our main target and soon around us flew Freyer's Purple Emperor (Pic. 14), it described several rounds and even landed on the hand of Keith. After that we were on a pleasant walk along the banks of clear mountain river, where sucked salts Green-underside Blue, Short-tailed Blue, Amanda's Blue. On the branches of the surrounding trees we saw Hungarian Glider and Common Glider, they periodically went down to the river banks. Among the branches of a bush we found Lattice Brown. It was time for returning to the hotel and after dinner we took the deserved rest.

Day 7 Saturday 25th June

Bulgaria – St Nikola Mt, Belogradchik Rocks; **Serbia** – Babin Zub.

Weather: sunny with cloudy periods, hot (28°C÷32°C).

Before we take over the folds of the Balkan Mountains to the western edges (occupied by Serbia) we decided to take a look at the several river valleys. In the lower parts on the flowers flew large number of butterflies as Swallowtail, Cardinal, Silver-washed Fritillary, High Brown Fritillary. Around the meadows Weaver's Knapweed Fritillaries chased each other and on the way landed Purple Emperors (Pic. 15). Climbing higher we found a number of species, among them it is worth to note Twin-spot Fritillary, False Heath Fritillary (Pic. 16), Great Sooty Satyr, the surprise came from relatively early metamorphosed to imago Scotch Argus. We went for a short walk to the majestic forms of Belogradchik Rocks, where nature has created thousands of shapes, associated from locals with fairy tale characters, horsemen, mushrooms and various animals. Despite the heat we encountered Scarce Swallowtail, Sooty Copper and relatively numerous Chequered Blue were great material for the photographers. Next was transition on the winding road and through isolated villages, crossing the border seamlessly and more winding road and eventually we reached the region of Babin Zyb. We accommodated at the hotel, located in the alpine zone and offered comfortable stay and beautiful view to Western Balkan.

Day 8 Sunday 26th June

Serbia – Babin Zub.

Weather: sunny with cloudy periods, warm (22°C).

We started from the highest part of the mountain (about 2000 meters) to take advantage of the good weather. In this area, the meadows are covered with a variety of flowering plants and are home to a number of interesting species. Large number of Balkan Copper, Eastern Large Heath and a few Ringlets - Bulgarian Ringlet, Almond-eyed Ringlet (Pic. 17), Bright-eyed Ringlet met us. Not long after we found the first of many Bog Fritillary (Pic. 18) pay its appropriate attention. Exemplars of both sexes posed on the flowers of Bistort, offering a wealth of material for photographers. Imperceptibly time progressed and we sat on a thick layer of moss to enjoy the picnic lunch among the fresh mountain air and the panoramic view. We spent the afternoon in the company of the above, but also Russian Heath, Eros Blue, Nothern Wall Brown and even Yellow-banded Skipper (Pic. 19). In the late afternoon slightly tired but extremely satisfied we took a beer in a cozy mountain hut. After dinner we got back there and in the company of the hut's owner we tracked two of the second round of Euro 2016.

Day 9 Monday 27th June

Serbia – Golema Reka & Konjarnik.

Weather: cloudy, light rain with thunders, becoming sunny and warm (17°C÷26°C).

The day started with dense fog and very low temperatures. We had no choice but to descend into the lower areas of the mountain. Here the conditions were not very promising too – it was cool, drizzling and blowing... After all on the surrounding vegetation we found roosting butterflies - among them the most numerous were Freyer's Fritillary. In a while the rain stopped and the sun tried to break the thick clouds. The result was not late – in a sheltered glade we found several False Heath Fritillaries, followed by Tufted Marbled Skipper. At midday the sun smiled and butterflies were activated - Southern Small White, Amanda's Blue, Glanville Fritillary. Above our heads flew both Gliders - Common Glider (Pic. 20) and Hungarian Glider (Pic. 21), together with White Admiral and on the flowers were a number of large Fritillaries. Again we enjoyed the spectacular glow of wings of Purple Emperor, which was extremely photogenic. On humid places roadside perched Great Sooty Satyr, Twin-spot Fritillary, Woodland Ringlet. At the end of the day in a small side valley we found a number of caterpillars of Camberwell Beauty (Pic. 22), centred on the branches of Willow. The time was passing by fast and we have had no choice, but starting to the hotel. After dinner we went again to the mountain hut for a beer and a new portion of Euro 2016. Shortly after the start of the game England-Iceland erupted a great thunderstorm, which at 1: 1 cut the electricity and when after three-quarters of an hour it was recovered, we were surprised to find, that the result was a complete turnaround... We had no choice but to drown the grief with one more beer.

Day 10 Tuesday 28th June

Serbia – Bigar Waterfall & Rudina Mt.

Weather: completely cloudy, rainy with cool breeze; PM brief periods sunshine (16°C÷22°C).

We moved down the slopes and soon we were at the foot of the mountain, but the weather was not favorably again, therefore the activity of the butterflies was extremely low. In the vicinity of Bigar Waterfall near the rocks we saw only Twin-spot Fritillary, Marbled White and Meadow Brown. After lunch we headed to the lowest limestone slopes of the mountain and here we really had more luck - Delattin's Grayling (Pic. 23), Russian Heath (Pic. 24), Pearly Heath met us and the joint meeting with Nickerl's Fritillary and Heath Fritillary was a great opportunity for comparison. The walk for exploring the surrounding area brought more Chapman's Blue and Reverdin's Blue. On blooming thyme particularly active were Blue-spot Hairstreak, and

on the leaves of Cross Gentian were eggs of Alcon Blue. We finished the day in the company of Alcon Blue (Pic. 25) and many orchids.

Day 11 Wednesday 29th June

Serbia – Chiprovtsi Mt: Zavoj.

Weather: sunny with cloudy periods, warm (18°C÷24°C).

The weather was very favorable - sunny and warm, which is why the activity of butterflies was high. The flowers of the surrounding plants were covered with butterflies and the first we met were numerous of Apollo (Pic. 26), landing two or three together on the same inflorescence. We scattered ourselves across the meadow, each searched the desired shot and when we were satisfied, moved on. There we saw reddish-copper glare of Coppers - Large Copper, Scarce Copper and Purple-shot Copper, and when we headed off we found Chequered Blue. Before we enjoy a picnic lunch under the murmur of the river, we paid due attention to Woodland Grayling, seeking the shadows of the trees. In the early afternoon we encountered Eastern Festoon (Pic. 27) and many of Meleager's Blue (Pic. 28), which escaped us so far. By the end of the day it is worth to note several Blues, includes Idas Blue, Reverdin's Blue, and Orbed Red-underwing Skipper, Lulworth Skipper, Yellow-banded Skipper. Shortly before retiring to the hotel for the farewell dinner we saw patrolled Blue Argus and several Large Blue (Pic. 29) - great finish for this saturated day, and for the whole tour.

Day 12 Thursday 30th June

Transfer to Sofia Airport.

We took the road to Sofia, but unfortunately we had no time to stop again, so we headed to the airport to meet again in the coming years.

The tour total came to the impressive 125 butterfly species (and 2 larva species)!



Pic.1. The group at Belogradchik Rocks. Left to right: Mario, Mike, Keith, Eileen, Maire



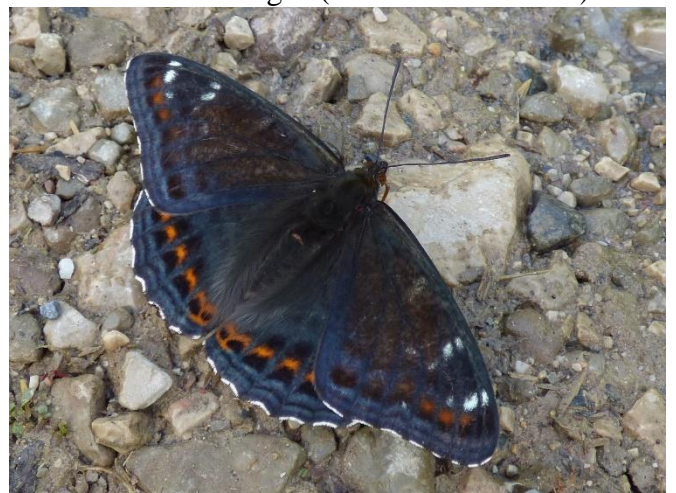
Pic.2. Chequered Blue (*Scolitantides orion*)



Pic.3. Blue Argus (*Ultraaricia anteros*)



Pic.4. Hungarian, Spiny and Safflower Skippers (*Spialia orbifer*, *Muschampia cribrellum*, *Pyrgus carthami*)



Pic.5. Poplar Admiral (*Limenitis populi*)



Pic.6. Lesser Lattice Brown (*Kirinia climene*)



Pic.7. Freyer's Fritillary (*Melitaea arduinna*)



Pic.8. Lesser Fiery Copper (*Lycaena thersamon*)



Pic.9. Violet Copper (*Lycaena helle*)



Pic.10. Bulgarian Ringlet (*Erebia orientalis*)



Pic.11. Geranium Argus (*Plebejus eumedon*)



Pic.12. Balkan Copper (*Lycaena candens*)



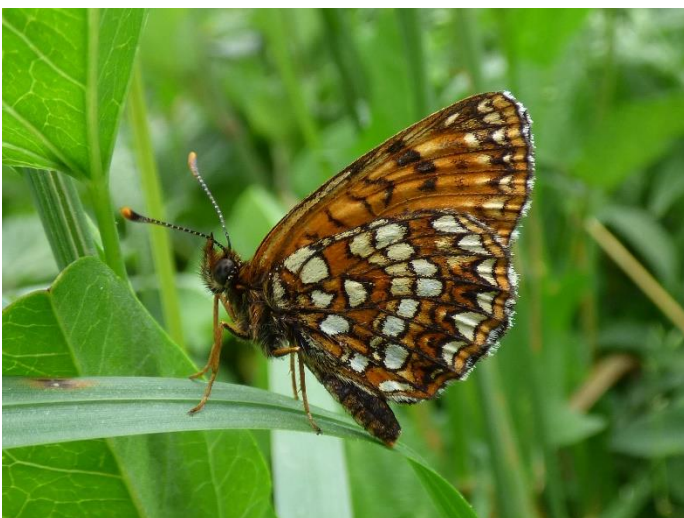
Pic.13. Zephyr Blue (*Plebejus sephirus*)



Pic.14. Freyer's Purple Emperor (*Apatura metis*)



Фиг.15. Purple Emperor (*Apatura iris*)



Pic.16. False Heath Fritillary (*Melitaea diamina*)



Pic.17. Almond-eyed Ringlet (*Erebia alberganus*)



Pic.18. Bog Fritillary (*Clossiana eunomia*)



Pic.19. Yellow-banded Skipper (*Pyrgus sidae*)



Pic.20. Common Glider (*Neptis sappho*)



Pic.21. Hungarian Glider (*Neptis rivularis*)



Pic.22. Camberwell Beauty caterpillars (*Nymphalis antiopa*)



Pic.22. Delattin's Grayling (*Hipparchia volgensis*)



Pic.24. Russian Heath (*Coenonympha leander*)



Pic.25. Alcon Blue (*Maculinea alcon*)



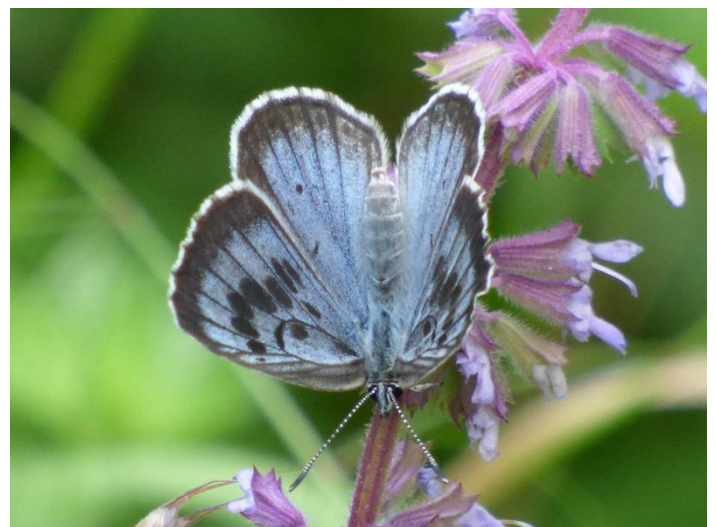
Pic.26. Apollo (*Parnassius apollo*)



Pic.27. Eastern Festoon (*Zerynthia cerisy*)



Pic.28. Meleager's Blue (*Meleageria daphnis*)



Pic.29. Large Blue (*Maculinea arion*)