

SPATIA WILDLIFE

Early Butterflies

Wednesday 25th April - Saturday 5th May 2012

Trip report by Dr. Mario Langourov

Tour leader: Dr. Mario Langourov¹

Tour participants: Ms. Linda Jones
Ms. Mery Palmer
Ms. Margaret Hairby
Mr. Brian Smith
Mr. Michael Skelton
Mr. Nick Freeman
Mr. Andrew Burns
Mr. Roy Hilton

Bulgaria, 25th April and 3rd – 5th May 2012

Greece, 25th April – 3rd May

Day 1 Wednesday 25th April

Outbound from Sofia, Bulgaria; en route to Kerkini Lake, Greece via Struma Valley

Weather: cloudy and rainy; warm (26°C)

After the group gathered together at the airport and boarded the comfortable bus, we set off for the first hotel, which was picturesquely situated on the coast of Kerkini lake (Pic. 1). Before we crossed the border we stopped for a short break at a gas station close to Levunovo, where in addition to the first butterflies for the tour we found some of the largest European night butterflies - Giant Peacock Moth (Pic. 2). When we arrived at the hotel, the rain had already stopped so we had the opportunity to take a walk in the surrounded area. Beside the usual species here we observed also Eastern Baton Blue and Green-underside Blue.

Day 2 Thursday 26th April

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

Greece – Kerkini Lake & surroundings

Weather: sunny, still and warm (25°C).

Our first site for the day was around the coast of the lake, where besides the first Scarce Swallowtail, we saw the only Large Copper for the tour, together with Eastern Bath White. And of course – the attraction of Kerkini – various species of wetland birds. Our next stop was in the foot of Belasitsa mountain. Here we found the caterpillars of Southern Comma (Pic. 3) and Lesser Spotted Fritillary. After light lunch under the shadows of century old plane trees we admired numerous Nettle Tree Butterflies (Pic. 4), and beside them a well showing longhorn beetle *Morimus funereus*, which is included in IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. We dedicated the afternoon to the lake's surroundings again and found the first fresh Knapweed Fritillaries, Green Veined White and Sooty Copper.

Day 3 Friday 27th April

Kerkini Lake; Mount Skopos; Siatista.

Weather: sunny, still and warm (26°C).

After breakfast we spend some more time at Kerkini lake again looking at colony of bee-eaters, not far away from it we found Southern Festoon (Pic. 5) and Eastern Dappled White. Afterwards we drove to our next base – Siatista. In the early afternoon we stopped to look at the foothills of Mount Skopos where we found the first Dalmatian Ringlets, as well as Chequered Blue, Gruner's Orange Tip (Pic. 6), Powdered Brimstone and Eastern Wood White. After we checked in at the hotel, the most impatient of us didn't miss the opportunity to take a look at the surroundings and they were prized with few Eastern Greenish Black Tip.

Day 4 Saturday 28th April

Mount Askio.

Weather: cloudy & breezy morning, rain in the afternoon; cool (16°C)

While having our breakfast the weather didn't look very promising - sky was frowned, it was pretty cool and windy. However, on our first stop of the day we enjoyed numerous Dalmatian Ringlets, dotted around the hillside above the town (Pic. 7). Among the handful butterflies there were fresh specimens Green Hairstreak and Green-underside Blue, and the weather made us turning our attention on other subjects - the sacred scarab of ancient Egypt (*Scarabaeus sacer*) and different kind of orchids and other plants. Around 1 p.m. started heavy rain, which forced us to go back to the rooms and everyone was sorting the pictures taken so far or having a rest.

Day 5 Sunday 29th April

Mount Askio.

Weather: sunny and warm, dry, breezy (25°C)

A wonderful day was expecting us today, which was shown even with the first rays of light – serene sky and very light breeze. The temperature was rising fast and it triggered high activity amongst the butterflies. First we turned towards the valley, where garden sage (*Salvia officinalis*) - the food plant of the Bavius Blue, grows in everywhere. After 15 minutes we spotted the first Bavius Blue (Pic. 8), extremely local species, in Europe it occurs only in Greece, Macedonia and Romania. Along with it flew also Dalmatian Ringlet, Southern Festoon, Gruner's Orange Tip, Mountain Small White, Osiris and Chapman's Blues and Oriental

Marbled Skipper. After picnic lunch under the shadows of the trees we headed to our next aim – flowering meadows among Greek Junipers (*Juniperus excelsa*) and among the other here we can highlight Lesser Fiery Copper. But the pearl here was the smallest European butterfly Grass Jewel (Pic. 9), unfortunately not everyone from the group have managed to see it. The late afternoon we spent in the hotel's surroundings where we manage to photograph Eastern Greenish Black Tip, Eastern Wood White and Large Wall Brown. Later on the owners of the hotel suggested that we shall visit the local natural history museum in the town, and for this reason one of its organizers came to take us there. After a certain waiting for the curator to arrive, which made some of us a bit nervous, she kindly showed us around the halls and on the way gave each one of us leaflet with the local endemic plants.

Day 6 Monday 30th April

Siatista; Mount Askio; Halkidiki Peninsula.

Weather: sunny and warm, dry, still (~ 28°C)

After breakfast we headed again towards the meadows, where the day before we've noticed Grass Jewel, so everyone could take the so much wanted photos. Not long after it was spotted and everyone managed to photograph it, along with it here were also presented Dalmatian Ringlet, Bavius Blue, matting Lesser Fiery Copper. One last stop on the slopes of the mountain gave us not only Powdered Brimstone, Berger's Clouded Yellow, Oriental Marbled Skipper, Eastern Greenish Black Tip (Pic. 10), Gruner's Orange Tip, Adonis and Chapman's Blues, but also excellent conditions for picnic lunch. In the afternoon we continued our travel to Halkidiki Peninsula, on the highway we crossed the busy traffic of Thessaloniki and we even had time for ice-cream stop. Once we checked in at the hotel, located near the Aegean coast and offering not only a comfortable stay, but also a lovely view on one of its bays, some of the group went for a walk in the area and found Lattice Brown.

Day 7 Tuesday 1st May

Halkidiki Peninsula – Sithonia.

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

Here in the maquis and olive forests we were able to shoot the first Lesser Spotted Fritillary, and also Scarce Swallowtail, Southern White Admiral, Black Veined White. After nice lunch, just above the waters of the Aegean Sea, we made few more stops and found not only the already mentioned above species, but also some commoner species, plus few different kind of orchids and relatives of the Giant Rafflesia – *Cytinus hypocistis* (Pic. 11), again parasitic plants. In the late afternoon some of us even found time to swim in the warm waters of the sea.

Day 8 Wednesday 2nd May

Halkidiki Peninsula – Sithonia.

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

The day started with exploring the north part of the peninsula, which brought us Eastern Dappled White, Eastern Bath White, Lesser Spotted Fritillary, Mallow Skipper and some others. Beautiful area, close to Nikiti gave us excellent conditions for picnic lunch, combined with exceptional sea view and marvelous curves of the coastline. After we ate we continue with our trip of the peninsula. Here our attention was taken by Cleopatra (Pic. 12) and Southern White Admiral and everyone managed to get to so much desired photos.

Day 9 Thursday 3rd May

Bulgaria – Rupite & Kozhouh Hill.

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

We drove back to Bulgaria today and straight after we crossed the border we found our targets of the day – Rupite area and the volcanic hill Kozhouh. Here the top species were Little Tiger Blue (Pic. 13), Cardinal and Sooty Copper which were extremely oblivious and allowed us plenty of photos. Among the other wildlife we should mention the extremely rare Mediterranean Jewel Beetle *Julodis ehrenbergi* and Greek Tortoise. In the tangle of bushes near one of the many channels among other species stood out Camberwell Beauty, Knapweed and Glanville Fritillaries. In the early afternoon we turned out attention to the rocky slopes of Kozhouh hill. Along with the other species here we found Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper, Green-underside and Eastern Baton Blues, but with no doubt most interesting for us was Iolas Blue (Pic. 14), which was mud puddling.

Day 10 Friday 4th May

Kresna Gorge.

Weather: sunny and warm, still; cloudy and a light shower late afternoon (~ 22°C)

After breakfast we headed to Kresna Gorge where I managed to catch the very large Aesculapian Snake crossing road. In that area we managed to found Sooty Copper, Scarce Swallowtail, Orange Tip, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Peacock, Painted Lady. Our next stop for the day was deserted quarry where around the blossoming flowers we added to our list Krueper's Small White (Pic. 15), Chequered Blue и Yellow Banded Skipper (Pic. 16). In the sky overheard thunder, followed by the first rain drops. We had nothing else to do except heading back to the hotel.

Day 11 Saturday 5th May

Kresna Gorge; Iskar Valley - Vedená.

Weather: sunny; still and warm (~ 26°C)

After breakfast we decided to take one last look at the Kresna Gorge, after that we took our way to Sofia. We had a small ice cream stop and after that we were in the valley of Iskar river, not far away from the city. Here we found ourselves in clouds of butterflies, which were taking minerals salts from the roadside puddles, nectaring from flowers or patrolling around the vegetation. New species for the tour here were Map Butterfly, Duke of Burgundy Fritillary, Lang's Short Tailed Blue (Pic. 17), Short Tailed Blue and the Comma. Just right before we left, rushed by the time, just like for taking a good bye we managed to spot also Common Glider (Pic. 18) – what a nice end to our trip!

The total for the trip came to 74 species and one found only as a larvae.



Pic.1. View from the hotel to Kerkini lake



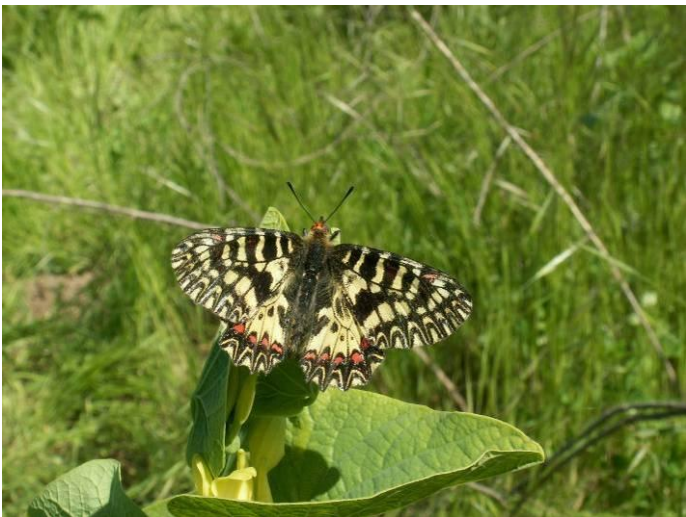
Pic.2. Giant Peacock Moth (*Saturnia pyri*)



Pic.3. Caterpillar of Southern Comma (*Polygonia egea*)



Pic.4. Nettle Tree Butterfly (*Libythea celtis*)



Pic.5. Southern Festoon (*Zerynthia polyxena*)



Pic.6. Gruner's Orange Tip (*Anthocharis gruneri*)



Pic.7. Dalmatian Ringlet (*Proterebia afra*)



Pic.8. Bavius Blue (*Pseudophilotes bavius*)



Pic.9. Grass Jewel (*Chilades trochylus*)



Pic.10. Eastern Greenish Black-tip (*Euchloe penia*)



Pic.11. Parasitic plant *Cytinus hypocistis*



Pic.12. Cleopatra (*Gonepteryx cleopatra*)



Pic.13. Little Tiger Blue (*Tarucus balkanicus*)



Pic.14. Iolas Blue (*Iolana iolas*)



Pic.15. Krueper's Small White (*Pieris krueperi*)



Pic.16. Yellow Banded Skipper (*Pyrgus sidae*)



Pic.17. Lang's Short Tailed Blue (*Leptotes pirithous*)



Pic.18. Common Glider (*Neptis sappho*)