

SPATIA WILDLIFE

Early Butterflies

Bulgaria and Greece

Saturday 03rd - Thursday 15th May 2014

Trip report by Dr. Mario Langourov

Tour leader: Dr. Mario Langourov¹

Tour participants: Mrs. Julia Powell
Mr. Wilf Powell
Mr. Tommi Chiu
Mr. James Joung
Mr. John Pitts
Mr. Ken Bailey
Mr. Paul Huckle
Mr. John Maddoks

Bulgaria, 03rd May and 13th - 15th May 2014

Greece, 03rd - 12th May

Day 1 Saturday 03rd May

Bulgaria ó Outbound from Sofia; en route to Kerkini Lake via Struma Valley.

Weather: cloudy & windy (19°C).

After the main group arrived together, we headed to the hotel, from where we picked up Tommi and James (they've arrived the day before) who were impatiently waiting for us and we continue our journey south along the valley of Struma River. Despite the unfavorable conditions we stopped in Kresna Gorge, at least to stretch our legs. Nothing was flying, but the trees and bushes around were thickly dotted with caterpillars of Nettle-Tree Butterfly preparing to pupate - they descended with their spider threads, attached to a leaf and faded immobile. After finishing our walk we headed to the hotel picturesque situated on the shores of Lake Kerkini. After we enjoyed the home-cooked meal we retired to rest.

Day 2 Sunday 04th May

Greece ó Kerkini Lake & surroundings.

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

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

It seemed like yesterday's forecast was correct - starting with distant thunders, the storm was approaching us with powerful lightning in the nearby area. We started with the western shore of the lake, where can be found plenty of the plant which is food for the Festoons, but by themselves there was no trace ... We found some comfort in seeing Oriental Marbled Skipper and some common species. We spent some time exploring the bird richness of Kerkini - pelicans, Great egrets, Great Dancing grebes, cormorants and many other waders. We had brief stop at the colony of bee-eaters, but they, unfortunately, flew over us, but didn't land nearby. However, Levant Sparrowhawk caught our attention, followed by the Black Kite. The weather drastically deteriorated during our next stop and just single butterflies were active, even the first drops of rain started to fall. Even before we sat down for lunch in the shade of century-old plane trees at the foot of Belitsa Mountain, our attention was attracted by the Nettle Tree butterflies (Pic. 2) and more numerous Green hairstreaks, competing for a place on the flowering Euphorbia-plants. At the end of the day we visited the shores of the lake for Large Copper (Pic. 3) - quite cooperative fresh specimens of both genders gave pleasure for our eyes and "food" for our cameras. We finished the day with two yellow-eared water snakes, two Common toads and several Marsh frogs, fallen into the shaft behind the hotel and made themselves their own mini-food chain, and for great displeasure of the snakes we took out all of them. Another species worth mentioning are Eastern Bath White, Provencal Short-tailed Blue (Pic. 4) and Scarce Swallowtail. Oh, we should not miss to mention the birthday of Julia, celebrated with a wonderful chocolate cake.

Day 3 Monday 05th May

Kerkini Lake; Mount Skopos; Siatista.

Weather: sunny but windy; warm (19°C).

After breakfast again we spent some time on the Kerkini Lake to look at the foot of Belitsa Mountain hoping to glimpse Southern Comma, but alas - only its caterpillar on a food plant suggested its presence here. Tommi still managed to capture the cherished bee-eaters and we took to the next base - Siatista. Close to the lake we arose huge flock of cormorants, pelicans and herons few and that caused cheering and when later we came to a new cluster of birds we decided to stop and have a look. After they flew away our attention was transferred to the slope near the shore, where it grows the food plant for Iolas Blue - Bladder Senna (*Colutea arborescens*) and the result was not late ó everyone managed to see some very fresh specimens (Pic. 5). In the early afternoon we stopped to look at the foot of Skopos Mountain. Here was a cool and strong wind was blowing, but it was sunny and we found our first Green-underside Blue (Pic. 6), Adonis Blue, Glanville and Lesser Spotted Fritillary and fresh Chequered Blue (Pic. 7). James was moved, and he said this is the best place for butterflies on the planet, but he still hadn't seen everything ó they were still a lot more to come. After checking in in our hotel we made quick view of the surroundings, but the day was coming to an end, so we were satisfied with more trivial species.

Day 4 Tuesday 06th May

Mount Askio.

Weather: cloudy, windy; cool (10°C-16°C).

Today we first turned our attention to sheltered valley where the wind was not so strong. Because it was cloudy and cool butterflies were not very active, but once found on vegetation they posed great. We found Bavius Blue (Pic. 8) - extremely local species found in Europe only in the Balkans, and along with it - Dalmatian Ringlet (Pic. 9), Osiris and Eastern Baton Blue. It was thanks to the weather conditions that we managed to make good pictures at some very tricky species such as Inky Skipper (Pic. 10). After our picnic lunch under the shade of a single tree we headed to our next target - another little valley and among others here we can highlight Blue Argus, Olive Skipper. Unfortunately we were not the only ones interested in butterflies here - appear two poachers collectors from France and Belgium. The late afternoon we spent on flowering meadows among Greek junipers (*Juniperus excelsa*), hoping to find the smallest European butterfly

- Grass Jewel, which unfortunately did not happen, but we found Eastern Knapweed Fritillary (Pic. 11), Amanda's Blue, Hungarian / Orbed Red Underwing Skipper.

Day 5 Wednesday 07th May

Mount Askio.

Weather: sunny and still; warm (24°C).

Today a great day was expecting us, which was demonstrated with the first rays of the sun - serene sky and completely calm. First we visited one of the locations of Grass Jewel, but fate again was not kind to us. But in contrast, we found Lesser Fiery Copper (Pic. 12), Chapman's Blue (Pic. 13), Green Hairstreak, Eastern Dappled White. We enjoyed a picnic lunch under the shade of a huge plane tree, surrounded by mud-puddling blues. The afternoon we spent again in one of yesterday's valleys where we added to the preceding species Marbled Skipper, Gruner's Orange Tip (Fig. 14), Mountain Small White, Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper, Mazarine Blue, oviposition Inky Skipper.

Day 6 Thursday 08th May

Siatista; Mount Grammos; Monodendri.

Weather: sunny till midafternoon, than heavy rain with T-storms, very hot to cool (30°C-10°C).

After breakfast we decided to take another look around Siatista, with the hope of seeing the eluding until that moment Eastern Greenish Black-tip (Fig. 15). Ultimately echoed the cry of Wilf - finally found! Also we observed around Blue Argus (Fig. 16), Lesser Spotted Fritillary. Now we could safely move to the next base in North Pindos. We were among virgin nature on brand new and wide asphalt road in the mountains and after about an hour we stopped in the folds of Grammos Mountain, where our short walk confronted us with more common species - Speckled Wood, Glanville Fritillary, Scarce Swallowtail and the joy of James - Peacock. We admired the grandeur of Aaos Gorge near Konitsa, together with typical arched bridges and snow-capped peaks and headed to Voidomatis Gorge. There were 3 types of orchids, but while we enjoyed them black clouds came over us and not long after that we heard the sound of the first thunders, foreshadowing for the ensuing heavy rain. Under torrential rain and hail, we headed to the hotel, located in Monodendri.

Day 7 Friday 09th May

Mount Nemertsika.

Weather: sunny till late afternoon, cloudy with some shower, wet & humid; hot (25°C-26°C).

Here amongst the fresh vegetation of a beautiful mountain valley we managed to see and shoot over 30 species, including Grecian Copper (Pic. 17), Mountain Small White, Swallowtail, Marsh Fritillary (Pic. 18), Powdered Brimstone, Zephyr Blue (Pic. 19), Green-underside Blue. Ken chatted in German with one of the locals, whom he met coming here 20 years ago. And we did a group photo for memory (Fig. 1). After a leisurely lunch we made short stop at the very Greek-Albanian border, where on the walls of the monastery we found the Balkan endemic Blue-throated Keeled Lizard or Dalmatian Algyroides. In the late afternoon we visited the banks of the Aaos River, where the walk brought us Persian Skipper, Southern White Admiral, Speckled Wood.

Day 8 Saturday 10th May

Mount Timfy.

Weather: sunny and warm, still (~ 23°C).

Our day is dedicated to the recorded in Guinness Book of Records as the deepest gorge in the world Vikos Gorge and its surroundings. The exceptional natural creation grabs with its 12 km length, 1100 m wide and 900 m depth (Pic. 20). Among the majestic cliffs appeared that the vertiginous trail is under construction, but after seeing our sad eyes the workers had compassion for us and let us on it, but not to the end of it ... Most of the interesting species remained unattainable beyond the gaping abyss. Alas, Southern Swallowtail also did not appear and we decided to retire. We were just leaving the yard when we noticed couple of Orange Tip, which most of the participants managed to photograph. The plateau was strangely deserted - perhaps the season was late, perhaps because of the daily rainfall (so unusual for May in Greece) ... However, we spent time with the breathtaking views of the canyon. Here came true the dream of many of the participants in the tour for Southern Festoon (Pic. 21), single Gruner's Orange tips also were interesting, in a little stream we found Grecian Smooth Newt couple (*Lissotriton vulgaris graecus*) absorbed in marriage games. After getting back to the hotel a light shower started and we enjoyed the view of double rainbow, wondering if we'll find a pot of gold at the end of it or if we will change our gender if we go below it. After we transferred the pictures from the camera to the PC, it turned out that the "couple" Orange Tip is from one male from this species, but the female is Eastern Orange Tip (Pic. 22) - what a pleasant surprise!

Day 9 Sunday 11th May

Mount Mitsikeli; Tempi Valley; Litochoro.

Weather: sunny and very hot, still (28°C-32°C).

We headed to the home of the ancient Greek gods, and while we were descending to the valley of Ioannina we found all the valley lost in mystical fog! The way which we had to take turned out to be under construction and we lost some time wandering in the conundrum of wrongly placed road signs, but we still found our way out of the maze, even without the help of Ariadne's thread. We gleaned almost nothing from Mitsikeli Mountain but wonderful views of the lake. In the canyon of Tempi by the colors we found Sloe Blue-spot Hairstreaks, Eastern Baton Blue, Powdered Brimstone. After some inquiry, stalking and chasing we were able to capture the "pearl" of the day - Southern Swallowtail (Pic. 23), which is relatively common and occurred together with his two brothers - Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail. We checked in in a lovely hotel for which Ken joked about: "Can I stay here until the end of the tour, come and pick me up when it's finished?". After that followed a wonderful dinner at a restaurant on the main square, immersed in the atmosphere of the Greek towns.

Day 10 Monday 12th May

Mount Olympos.

Weather: sunny and very hot, still (up to 35°C).

We spent almost the entire day at the foot of Mount Olympus, starting with a walk in the valley of Enipeas Gorge, where we found Chequered, Zephyr and Adonis Blue, Mallow Skipper. In a beautiful area not far from there we encountered Southern Small White, and also - Sooty Copper, Large Wall Brown. We stopped on a pastoral meadow with blooming Thyme, Mint and Wild Marjoram with Eastern Baton Blue (Pic. 24) and several species of Skippers. In the late afternoon we headed to Bulgaria, but at the border it appeared that because of some Customs campaign the trucks were passing five times faster than the cars and we had to stay there for over an hour. Ultimately we reached safely the hotel, located near the Struma River.

Day 11 Tuesday 13th May

Bulgaria ó Kresna Gorge.

Weather: sunny and hot, still (~ 29°C)

After breakfast we went to the surroundings, where logically the most interest were the numerous Eastern

Festoon (Pic. 25), and Yellow-banded Skipper. Besides these we found also Zephyr Blue, Southern White Admiral (Pic. 26), Knapweed Fritillary, Comma. Not far from there, near the river, we managed to find a plenty of Skippers - Hungarian, Marbled, Oriental Marbled; the first one for tour Little Tiger Blue, oviposition Large Copper and many others. We headed to the Kresna Gorge, where we had lunch under the thick shadows of old riverside sycamore trees. After we refreshed ourselves a walk brought us another Cardinal, Green Hairstreak, Chequered Blue. We managed to get back in the hotel just before the rain.

Day 12 Wednesday 14th May

Rupite & Kozhouh Hill.

Weather: mostly cloudy, PM heavy rain; warm (21°C-25°C)

Despite the forecast for a rainy day we climbed on the volcanic hill Kozhuh, where we managed to find resting in the grass and very photogenic Little Tiger (Pic. 27) and Iolas Blue, Green-veined and Black-veined White and caterpillars of the Large Tortoiseshell. Here, among other animals it worths to mention Mediterranean Caspian Turtle or Striped-neck Terrapin (*Mauremys caspica*) (Pic. 28). We transfer in Rupite area and after picnic lunch Paul saw Lattice Brown, but it got scared and flew among the branches of a nearby tree. On a nearby meadow we found Eastern Dappled White (Pic. 29), and the last new kind for the tour - Ilex Hairstreak. Immediately after lunch, with the first drops of rain we were able to get to the bus and upon arrival at the hotel five of us managed to get out, but it burst forth incredible downpour, coupled with violent gust of hurricane wind which forced three of us to wait in the vehicle until it stopped. At 5:00 p.m. the sun shined brightly and some of us went for a last short walk during the tour.

Day 13 Thursday 15th May

Sofia Airport.

After breakfast we headed to Sofia, but because the flight was relatively early, unfortunately we had no time for one last stop before the airport where we said goodbye and wished "Until we meet again."

The bottom line is 88 species in total and two more - found only as larvae.



Pic.1. The group at Mount Nemertsika. Left to right: standing Tommi Chiu, Wilf Powell, Julia Powell, John Pitts, Ken Bailey, local guy, John Maddoks, Paul Huckle, James Joung; down Mario Langourov



Pic.2. Nettle Tree Butterfly (*Libythea celtis*)



Pic.3. Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*)



Pic.4. Provencal Short-tailed Blue (*Everes alcetas*)



Pic.5. Iolas Blue (*Iolana iolas*)



Pic.6. Green-underside Blue (*Glaucopsyche alexis*)



Pic.7. Chequered Blue (*Scolitantides orion*)



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



Pic.9. Dalmatian Ringlet (*Proterebia afra*)



Pic.10. Inky Skipper (*Erynnis marloyi*)



Pic.11. Eastern Knapweed Fritillary (*Melitaea ornata*)



Pic.12. Lesser Fiery Copper (*Lycaena thersamon*)



Pic.13. Chapman's Blue (*Polyommatus thersites*)



Pic.14. Gruner's Orange Tip (*Anthocharis gruneri*)



Pic.15. Eastern Greenish Black-tip (*Euchloe penia*)



Pic.16. Blue Argus (*Aricia anteros*)



Pic.17. Grecian Copper (*Lycaena ottomana*)



Pic.18. Marsh Fritillary (*Euphydryas aurinia*)



Pic.19. Zephyr Blue (*Plebejus sephirus*)



Pic.20. Vikos Gorge



Pic.21. Southern Festoon (*Zerynthia polyxena*)



Pic.22. Eastern Orange Tip (*Anthocharis damone*)



Pic.23. Southern Swallowtail (*Papilio alexanor*)



Pic.24. Eastern Baton Blue (*Scolitantides vicrama*)



Pic.25. Eastern Festoon (*Zerynthia cerisyi*)



Pic.26. Southern White Admiral (*Limenitis reducta*)



Pic.27. Little Tiger Blue (*Tarucus balkanicus*)



Pic.28. Caspian Turtle (*Mauremys caspica*)



Pic.29. Eastern Dappled White (*Euchloe ausonia*)