

SPATIA WILDLIFE

Scarce Butterflies

Wednesday 13th - Sunday 24th June 2012

Trip report by Dr. Mario Langourov

Tour leader: Dr. Mario Langourov¹

Tour participants: Miss Linda Jones
Mr. Keith and Ms Aileen Gould
Mr. and Mrs. Bob & Sandra Snellgrove
Mr. Bruce Graham
Mr. Derek Longhurst

Bulgaria, 13th – 24th June 2012

Tuesday 12th June

Outbound from Sofia via Danube Plain.

Weather: sunny and hot, dry, still (~ 36°C).

After I met Linda (which I knew from our Butterflies of the Balkans 2011 and Early Butterflies 2012 tours) at Sofia airport we set off to Kamentsi village and our first base for the holiday – hotel Choban Mahala (Shepherd's hamlet). But before we arrived we had time for one stop to refresh ourselves, to rest a bit and to take a look at the butterflies, which were landing on the blossoms of the blackberry bushes. Here there were mostly Dark Green, Twin-spot and Pearl Bordered fritillaries, but also Map Butterfly.

Day 1 Wednesday 13th June

Suha Reka Valley; Varna Airport – Kamentsi.

Weather: sunny and very hot, dry, still (~ 39°C).

Together with Linda we decided to spend the day in Suha reka river valley and later in the afternoon to pick

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

up the other participants in the tour from Varna airport. When we arrived in Suha reka the first butterfly that we saw on the blossoms was our main goal - Scarce Fritillary (Pic. 2)! That's a good sign – if it went that far away from its usual habitat, that shows that this year is extremely conducive for the species and we will be able to observe it in significant number. Then we went for a short walk in the valley along the river. Among the swarms of butterflies the most noticeable were nine kinds of Fritillaries, Scarce at first but also Lesser Spotted, Marbled, Glanville, Weaver's; also Chestnut Heath (Pic. 3), Black Hairstreak, Sloe Hairstreak. After we picked up the others at the airport (Pic. 1) we ate ice cream and we headed to the hotel. The hotel is made up by individual houses scattered among the sea of lawn and flowers - all cleverly woven into the surrounding karst landscape. While having a dinner at the wide veranda of the restaurant, surrounded by a few vines, we were able to take a look at two attractive beetles – European rhinoceros beetle и Stag beetle.

Day 2 Thursday 14th June

Suha Reka Valley.

Weather: sunny with some clouds, breezy and hot (32°C).

Our main goal for the day was again the valley of Suha reka, and we first headed to the Scarce Fritillaries site. Here they were everywhere – nectaring on the blossoms of the elder, patrolling males on the leaves of the surrounding trees and mating pairs. After we enjoyed a picnic lunch under the shadows of some big trees we started to explore the surrounding slopes where besides the species from yesterday we also found Large Tortoiseshell, Large Copper, Reverdin's Blue, Short Tailed Blue and Mallow Skipper. Next to a little stream and some small puddles we noted the first dragonflies for the tour - Southern Skimmer, Broad-bodied Chaser, Small Bluetail and Azure Damselfly. Before we went back to the hotel we had time to admire at few couples of Bee-eaters, nesting in the sandy slope, right at the entrance of the village.

Day 3 Friday 15th June

Voyново Reservoir; Karakuz Forest; Sveshtari Thracian Tombs.

Weather: overcast with sunny spells; breezy and warm (28-30°C).

After breakfast we set off to our next base – hotel complex Ostrovche. Not long after we stopped to take a look at the coasts of the small dam of Voyново village (we have participant keen on dragonflies - Mr. Bruce Graham). Here besides White-tailed Skimmer, Blue-tailed and Azure Damselfly most numerous are the Silver-studded blues. Then we had short stop around one of the last preserved forests of the Ludogorie – Karakuz, where we saw our first Green-Veined White, Pearly Heath and Ilex Hairstreak. We enjoyed a nice lunch in Ispirih town combining business with pleasure – some of the group used the wi-fi internet connection in the restaurant. Shortly after that we stopped at the cultural attraction scheduled for the day - the unique Thracian tomb in Sveshtari village! We examined it, we listened to the fascinating talk which turned as back thousands of years ago to the heyday of the Thracian culture. After it we spent some time at its surroundings and amongst the usual swarms of butterflies we have to mention Sloe Hairstreak, Heath Fritillary, Spotted and Lesser Spotted Fritillaries, Eastern Wood White, Eastern Baton Blue (Pic. 4). In the evening we arrived in hotel complex Ostrovche, nicely nestled among the oak trees of an old forest, away from the noise of the civilization.

Day 4 Saturday 16th June

North of Razgrad; Sboryanovo.

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

Today's program includes exploring the area around Razgrad town, where more than a century ago was found

Woodland Brown was recorded in Bulgaria. We stopped close to a small river which had made its way through engraving in the limestone rocks. The blossoms of different plants are offering abundant food for many butterflies Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail, Eastern Bath White, Berger's Clouded Yellow, Brimstone, Sooty Copper (Pic 5)! An Eastern Festoon flew around and our attention was drawn to it, until it arose and passed the edge of the overhanging rocks ... It was time to go back again at the area of Sboryanovo where we hoped to find Freyer's Fritillary. While we were listening the chorus of few Fire-bellied Toads and were trying to convince Bruce that the bees gathered near a small puddle are harmless, I decided to search around a small pond for dragonflies. Almost immediately my attention was drawn by a Scarce Fritillary, perched on overhanging tree branches above the water. At the near meadow we found dozens more of it and also Pearly Heath and Chestnut Heath. Common Glider flew and landed in the branches of a tree, but it was too high and nobody managed to photograph it well. Things fell into place when another landed on the ground and allowed a brief photo session. Before dinner some of us even had time to relax swimming in the hotel's pool.

Day 5 Sunday 17th June

Ostrovche Wood; N of Kotel.

Weather: sunny and warm/ hot, dry, still (28°C).

Before we set off south to Kotel we decided to pay attention to the forest close to the hotel. It proved to be a good move – we were able to make comparisons between Nickerl's Fritillary and Heath Fritillary. Here we also saw the first of many Great Banded graylings and also Beautiful and Banded demoiselles, Blue Emperor and Keeled Skimmer. We continued our way and after Omurtag town our attention was attracted by flowering meadows in the northern foothills of Stara Planina mountain. Here on the blossoms we found different fritillaries, amongst which were Twin-spots (Pic. 6), Weaver's and Marbled and also the so much wanted Black-Veined whites. After the light lunch in the hotel picturesquely situated near a booming and splashing coolness waterfall, we decided to go to the feeding site for vultures situated just above the town. There is an aviary here, in which the birds are adapting for release into the wild, where they will join already an formed colony of about 20 Griffons.

Day 6 Monday 18th June

Near Zheravna Village; Kotel Pass.

Weather: sunny and hot, dry, breezy (~ 33°C).

After the breakfast we went to the picturesque village Zheravna, where we hoped to find Tessellated and Spinose Skippers. Unfortunately it didn't happen because the group scattered in the meadows near the village, and also some of the participants found the place where we had to go for too distant. Despite that there was still what to see around – Green and Sloe Hairstreak, Mazarine Blue, Eastern Baton Blue, Lesser Marbled Fritillary, Great Banded Grayling. The other wildlife was represented by extremely photogenic Smooth Snake (Pic.7). A shady area gave us great conditions for picnic lunch, combined with our firsts Lattice Brown and Knapweed Fritillary. In the afternoon we walked around the cobblestone streets among the old wooden houses of the village, from where we headed to the Kotel Pass. After admiring a few sprigs of Lizard Orchid we found Large Blue, Blue-spot Hairstreak, White-letter Hairstreak, Orbed Red-underwing (Hungarian) Skipper (Pic. 8), and also Eastern Spectre (Pic. 9).

Day 7 Tuesday 19th June

Stara Planina Mt - Sinite Kamani Nature Park; Black Sea Coast - Poda Protected Area.

Weather: sunny and warm/ hot, still (22°C - 35°C).

Today we set off towards the south Black Sea coast. When we crossed Stara Planina mountain (the Balkan range) we stopped at the Sinite kamani (the Blue Stones) Nature Park to look for some mountain as well as southern species. Our expectations were justified as here we found Clouded Apollo, Southern Small White, Small Blue, Escher's Blue, Small Tortoiseshell, Lesser Marbled Fritillary, Woodland Ringlet, Russian Heath (Pic.10) and Yellow-banded Skipper. After a picnic lunch in a pavilion with panoramic view we continued our road southeast descent along the steep wooden slopes. While crossing the traffic of Burgas in the early afternoon we stopped at the protected area Poda – paradise for waterfowl birds, located only on a stone's throw from the big city. This has greatly increased our list of birds - pelicans, various herons, ibises, spoonbills, gulls and terns, but certainly the biggest interest was caused by the cormorants nesting at abandoned electric poles. Some of the group managed to photograph hunting gray heron, whose diet consists mainly of snakes. The flowering Elders had a colorful array of butterflies, including Camberwell Beauty (Pic.11), Grecian Copper, Large Copper, Oriental Marbled Skipper. We even rescued big and friendly hedgehog from a trench dug for laying cables. We reported strong growth in our list of dragonflies, which was the harbinger of what was expecting us over the next few days. We barely managed to break away from this beautiful nook and we passed fast on the scenic coastal road the 30 kilometers to Primorsko, where is situated our hotel. After a short break we enjoyed a spectacular dinner in a restaurant, which along with the Bulgarian was also offering Georgian cuisine!

Day 8 Wednesday 20th June

South Black Sea Coast; Veleka River; Ropotamo Reserve; Arkutino Lake.

Weather: sunny and very hot, still (~ 37°C).

The day started with two short stops near the sea, which produced Grecian and Sooty Coppers (Pic. 12), Great Banded Grayling, Lesser Spotted Fritillary, Spotted Fritillary and many others. When the heat became unbearable we went to Veleka River, where under the shadow of the riverside gazebo we had our picnic and set off to the river mouth. Our goals here were two – at one side at this place you can find Large Chequered Skipper, and on the other side we need to check for the reported Grass Jewel. On our way to there we found the only Speckled Wood for the tour and also few species of dragonflies: Scarce Chaser, Black-tailed Skimmer and Broad Scarlet. Before we arrive at the river mouth we found our target - Large Chequered Skipper (Pic.13). While the group was enjoying refreshing drinks and ice cream on the sea coast, I scanned the coastal line rocks for nurturing plants of Grass Jewel but that didn't show any results which is just another proof that it has been wrongly reported in this area of Bulgaria. We headed back to the hotel but we had time to visit Ropotamo Reserve and the nearby Arkutino Lake. We took pictures at some very large and photogenic Marsh Frogs and dragonflies - Small Red-eyed Damselfly, Green-eyed (Norfolk) Hawker.

Day 9 Thursday 21th June

Near Stomopolu Marsh; Strandzha Mt – Popovi Skali & Silkosia Reserve.

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

We set off towards Strandzha mountain and first decided to check the nearby swamp Stomopolu, placed right next to Primorsko. Our attention was attracted by some movement in the crown of one of the oaks and when we looked we found that this was a Purple Hairstreak. Pity it was too high to take good picture of it so we continued our way. We reached the inside of the mountain and in the area Popovi skali we stop for a longer walk which brought us a big set of fritillaries, in fact ten species, amongst which Cardinal and Niobe Fritillary, Green and White Letter Hairstreak and many others. Under the shadow of riparian poplars we sneaked and chased for a long time Lattice Browns (Pic. 14), until finally everyone got a picture of it. Not far away from here, a Large Tortoiseshell was taking minerals from a puddle, but the biggest attraction were few Freyer's Purple Emperors (Pic.15), flying between the roadside bushes. During the picnic lunch some of us even managed to cool their feet in a nearby river. Then we moved to our next site – Silkosia reserve. Here we should mention Large Chequered Skipper and

many dragonflies with very limited distribution – Turkish Goldenring, Balkan Emerald (Pic.16) and Common Clubtail.

Day 10 Friday 22nd June

Strandzha Mt – Bosna, Mladezhka & Veleka Rivers.

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

The whole day was dedicated to the insides of Strandzha mountain. We decided to start with Bosna ridge and then to move south. In this part we found Large Chequered Skipper, Ilex Hairstreak, Sooty Copper, Large Blue, Weaver's Fritillary, Pearly Heath and others. Our next aim was the valley of Mladezhka river where we added to the list Brown and Sloe Hairstreaks, Twin-spot Fritillary and the extremely local Assmann's Fritillary. After a picnic lunch under the thick shade of the forest we headed to the largest river in Strandzha - Veleka. The heat was pressing the ground and only single butterflies were seen but amongst them it was the only one Blue Argus for the tour, so we pointed our attention to the orchids and the dragonflies - Odalisque (Pic.17), Small Spreadwing, Blue-eyed Hawker and Small Pincertail. The last stop for the day was next to a little fountain where Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail, Niobe Fritillary, Yellow-banded and Mallow Skippers were crowding around on the flowering plants. We went back to the hotel, situated in the insides of the mountain and we had dinner and a rest before the long transfer on the next day.

Day 11 Saturday 23rd June

Black Sea Coast - Poda Protected Area; Besaparian Hills.

Weather: sunny and very hot, still (~ 37°C).

Before leaving the Black sea coast we stopped for one last look at the protected area Poda and its rich birdlife. We headed west to our last base before the end of the tour –the small town of Bratsigovo, Western Rhodope mountain. We stopped at a roadside restaurant for our lunch and in the early afternoon we reached Besaparian limestone hills. Here we had time to thoroughly look almost the bare ground, whose monotony is broken only by rare raspers and flowering plants around them. On the blossoms and on the surrounding stones we found set of colorful butterflies - Eastern Bath White, Reverdin's Blue, Mazarine Blue, Anomalous Blue (Pic.18), Chalk-hill Blue, Wall Brown, Dingy Skipper. Unfortunately there was no sign of the so much desired Little Tiger Blue. After we checked in at the hotel we had time for refreshing drinks before the farewell dinner.

Day 12 Sunday 24th June

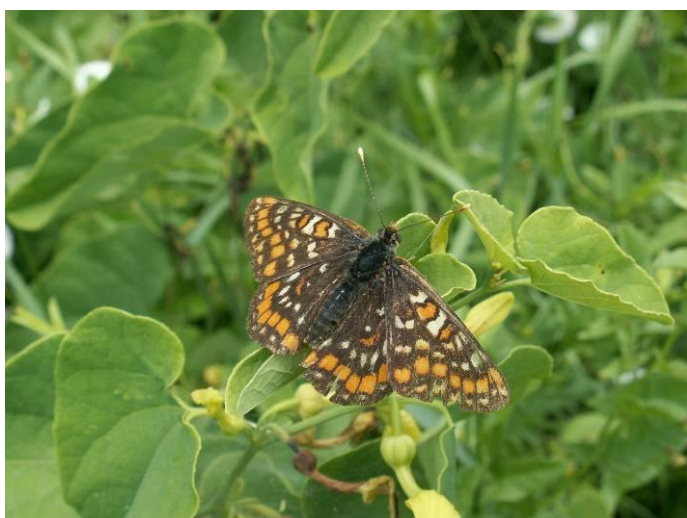
Iskar Valley - Vedená.

Weather: sunny and warm, still; a morning shower (~ 30°C)

We set off on the highway to Sofia and it was pouring heavy rain. It didn't look like we could make one last stop before we reach the airport... However when we approached Sofia, the rain has stopped, the clouds scattered and the summer sun was smiling again! We had our opportunity to visit the valley of Iskar river, not far away from the capital. The place rewarded us with Chequered Blue (Pic.19), Eastern Rock Grayling (Pic.20), Glanville Fritillary, Large Tortoiseshell, Marbled Skipper and Map Butterfly (surprisingly we found a specimen of the spring brood). Just right before we left, pressed by the time, like for saying a good bye, in front of us landed Lesser Purple Emperor (Pic.21) – what a nice end to our trip!



Pic.1. The group at Veleka river. Right to left: Linda, Bruce, Bob & Sandra, Keith & Aileen, Derek, Mario



Pic.2. Scarce Fritillary (*Euphydryas maturna*)



Pic.3. Chestnut Heath (*Coenonympha glycerion*)



Pic.4. Eastern Baton Blue (*Pseudophilotes vicrama*)



Pic.5. Sooty Copper (*Lycaena tityrus*)



Pic.6. Twin-spot Fritillary (*Brenthis hecate*)



Pic.7. Smooth Snake (*Coronella austriaca*)



Pic.8. Orbed Red-underwing (Hungarian) Skipper (*Spialia orbifer*)



Pic.9. Eastern Spectre (*Caliaeschna microstigma*)



Pic.10. Russian Heath (*Coenonympha leander*)



Pic.11. Camberwell Beauty (*Nymphalis antiopa*)



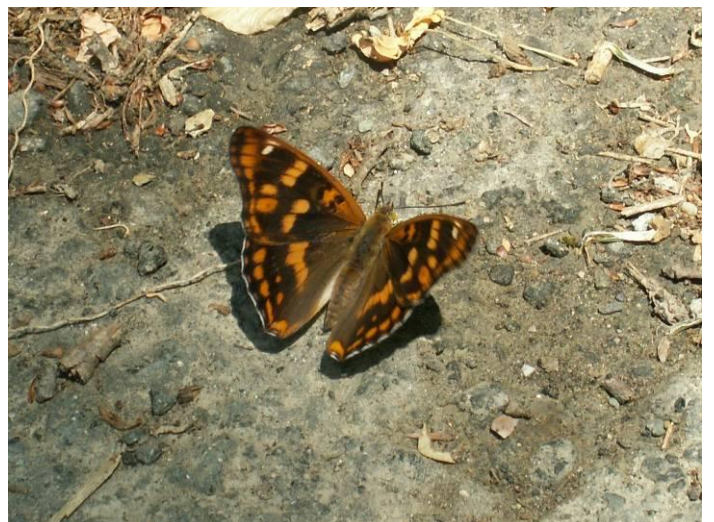
Pic.12. Grecian Copper (*Lycaena ottomana*)



Pic.13. Large Chequered Skipper (*Heteropterus morpheus*)



Pic.14. Lattice Brown (*Kirinia roxelana*)



Pic.15. Freyer's Purple Emperor (*Apatura metis*)



Pic.16. Balkan Emerald (*Somatochlora meridionalis*)



Pic.17. Odalisque (*Epallage fatime*)



Pic.18. Anomalous Blue (*Agrodiaetus admetus*)



Pic.19. Chequered Blue (*Scolitantides orion*)



Pic.20. Eastern Rock Grayling (*Hipparchia syriaca*)



Pic.21. Lesser Purple Emperor (*Apature ilia*)