

July 2008. Butterflies galore, Lithuania, Poland and Britain.

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July means butterflies, the peak of the action. As the month began, Lepidoptera did indeed steal the limelight, a couple of Reverdin's Blues leading the march. Not to be outdone, however, birding was also good, with breeding Rollers in Labanoras and, all in Poland, a fine assortment including Bee-eaters, Ortolans, Collared Flycatchers and more, plus Elk and Pine Martin. By the second week, the butterfly action had really moved up a gear - 38 species recorded over a single weekend, including Moorland Clouded Yellows and Cranberry Blue, both new species for me. A week later, things went through the roof - five more new species, including Large Blue, Spotted Fritillary and Rock Grayling! And as a finale to the month, a super weekend of butterflies in Britain - the tops being Lulworth and Silver-spotted Skippers.

1-4 July. Butterfly days.

Early signs hinted at an excellent month ahead - in addition to plenty of Heath Fritillaries, the first flights of Dark Green Fritillaries were already on the wing, plus an assortment including a stunning Large Copper, no less than four species of hesperiidae (Large Chequered, Chequered, Essex and Large Skippers), a few Black-veined Whites, both Chestnut and Pearly Heaths and the more usual Meadow Browns and Small Tortoiseshell. However, butterfly of the month so far, first seen in the last days of June, has been a little stunner - a new species for me, Reverdin's Blue, a species very similar to Silver-studded Blue. Occupying rough meadow adjacent to woodland, at least three have been present, very nice indeed.

Away from the butterflies, the only birds of note in the first days of the month were all whilst I should have been working! There is one house I must visit two or three times a week and, even at the best of times, the windows are somewhat a distraction due to the presence of Hawfinches outside. This week, however, we decided to work outside, on the patio table - bad move!!! Never expect a birder to work outside! With Hawfinches in and out of the feeders (that I had persuaded them to put up) and Crested Tits visiting too, I spent more time gazing up than doing my work, even more so when a noisy party of Crossbills appeared in the garden, followed shortly after by a singing Icterine Warbler and a Great Spotted Woodpecker to the feeder!

5-6 July. Polish forays.

At the very north of their range, in colonies few and far between, the lure of Bee-eaters is ample reason to encourage birders in this north-east corner of Europe to make cross-border sorties, a rare flash of colour to liven the weekend.

Day One.

Three of us made the trip and so it was, I awoke to the patter of rain upon my tent in the marshes of the far south Biebrza Valley, a legendary birding site in itself, but for us a mere overnight stop. As I peeked out of the tent, Cranes yodelling off yonder, the skies showed promise, clouds retreating and, with a certain amount of imagination, you could almost glimpse hints of blue. Twenty minutes later, with Aquatic Warblers churring left, right and centre, and one sitting up and singing most co-operatively, the birding had begun! An Elk stood in the marsh, a Savi's Warbler hopped along a path for a moment, only to be displaced by a Grasshopper Warbler which then flitted up and off. Beyond the Aquatic Warblers, the first raptors of the day were in action - a pair of Montagu's Harriers, presumably nesting, seeing off an intruding Marsh Harrier. Not a bad little collection for what was essentially just our camping site! Just to add a little icing, singing nearby, a River Warbler completed the Locustella triple crown!

Flirting with the south of the Biebrza, with White Storks adorning post after post, our next destination was a little to the west - a bumpy little track that sports a number of fine poplar and lime trees, stately affairs that boast one very nice breeding bird. Now in sunshine, with Yellow Wagtails and Red-backed Shrikes here and there, and a Golden Oriole in song, we stopped a couple of times to look for our little fellow. The bird in question was Ortolan Bunting and it was not very long before the distinctive song of one could be heard from the depths of the canopy of a particularly big tree - not a chance of seeing up there! And just to make sure we didn't get to see more than a fleeting glimpse, it then flew out and proceeded to vanish into the distance! Hmm, well the local Yellowhammers were more co-operative, but we would have

to seek another Ortolan. A kilometre further, a small side track looked just perfect - we parked and walked. And there he was, a right stunning Ortolan Bunting just for us - a male feeding quietly at the edge of the road. After a good grilling, he flitted up, began to sing a little, then some minutes later dropped back into view ...except it wasn't him anymore, it was now the female carrying food! We had stumbled into a pair, very nice indeed.

With Ortolans seen, we then travelled about 35 km east for our stab at the main goal of the weekend. By now a tad windy, we arrived at the destination, a sand quarry just south of the Narew River. Sand Martins filled the air, hundreds of them. A quick scan revealed their colonies, lines and lines of holes on the steeper banks throughout the quarry. Somewhere in there would be a few holes belonging to a larger, rather more colourful bird! In the distance, a Turtle Dove sat upon a wire, off to the right a Lesser Spotted Eagle circled. And then, almost hanging on the wind, I picked up the bird of our desires, a Bee-eater. Very nice birds, this first individual hawked the top of a ridge, dropping down to perch on exposed snags in the lee of the slope. Soon, more were seen, their fluty calls adding quality to the skies and the colours livening the Polish countryside. Noticing that four favoured wires a short distance off, I took a stroll. Quail called in the corn meadows, two more Turtle Doves hurtled by, as did a Hobby, but soon my eyes were for the Bee-eaters, one swooping in, landing nearby and even allowing a couple of photographs, a rare treat in the Baltic region.

Satisfied, coffee downed and birding now deemed a total success, off we tootled to yet another site in the rich tapestry of Polish birding localities. The place was the Dojlidy fishponds, a relatively unassuming series of pools on the outskirts of Bialystok city. Urban periphery maybe, but a super site nonetheless, not least for its claim to fame as the grebe capital of the region, with all five of Europe's species frequently recorded as breeders.

Wanders in Dojlidy started with soggy shoes and trousers! A sudden downpour left the rank grass dripping and most of those drips I am sure ended bathing my feet! That aside, Dojlidy certainly lived up to expectations - ten minutes in and we were watching the first grebes, three stunning Black-necked Grebes in their finest summer plumage, always a treat. What came next though was more of a surprise - pushing through the long wet grass, we flushed a splendid male Little Bittern, not a species I had expected this weekened and almost enough to forget the wet legs for a moment! A little further up, I took a left over a bridge, the other two didn't. Oops, my path took me straight to the best pool in the whole complex! With a Penduline Tit zooming over and Great Reed Warblers singing in the reeds, I settled down to ogle the assembled ranks of birds. Red-necked Grebes by the bucketload, at least 25 on the single pool, all in their full colours and some just metres away. Also several Great-crested Grebes, a couple of Red-crested Pochards and, flushing dabbling ducks, two Marsh Harriers. The next pool, though quieter, did add a Little Grebe to the collection, as well as a singing River Warber and, flying over, a male Golden Oriole. Back at the car, my fellow travellers had not seen Red-necked Grebes or Red-crested Pochards ...the morale of the story is always take the left!

Day one was now drawing to a close, looking likely to be hastened by the imminent arrival of rain. We had now reached the Bielowieza Forest, tucked up against the Belarus border and famous across the continent as the last remnant of original primeval lowland forest. Looked pretty primeval in the gloom of a heavily overcast sky! Anyhow, with a couple of hours or so to spare, and a hope that the rain might hold off, we ventured in to the depths of the forest, following a trail well-known for its woodpeckers. Bar a few Great Spots, we didn't see any! Plenty of Hawfinches, assorted warblers, even a calling Golden Oriole, but the dark brooding skies were clearly not aiding our search. And then two things happened - first, several Blackbirds started alarming at something, a mystery beast that made strange gruff hissing noises, and second the rains commenced! Faced with a soaking, my curiosity nevertheless took me forward and as I edged through the undergrowth, I soon saw the reason for disquiet amongst the thrushes - two Pine Martins were creeping about in the canopy! Splendid animals and a photograph would be most nice ...so there, in the gloom of the forest, with rain coming down and evening fast approaching, I upped the camera to ISO 1600, hoped for the best with shutter speeds of just 1/60th of a second, handholding a 400 mm lens and rallied off a few shots. Much to my amazement, the results, for the conditions, were rather pleasing.

So ended day one, wet but content.

Day Two.

Up at dawn would be a slight exaggeration, but it was before my co-travellers, so off I wandered down the streets of Bielowieza town - Black Redstarts adorning every other house, lots of recent fledgled birds amongst them, a Wryneck in an overgrown garden and Serins singing here and there. Increasing the pace, soon I reached the Palace Park, a stately garden that drips good birds. Two minutes into the park and I was watching a male Collared Flycatcher, his spick and span summer finery now a tad crinkled, but still an elegant specimen of a bird! And then there were three! Across he flitted and out emerged two gawky fledglings, little stumpy-tailed things begging for food, though even at that stage of life showing hints of a collar. Serins fed nearby and Hawfinches chipped their way overhead. A good start to the morning.

Then my two fellow travellers arrived, Collared Flycatcher high on their list of desired birds. Erm, yes, I had seen one, but

we would soon find another, so I promised. Of course, we didn't! Having all fledged the nestboxes, the little blighters were nowhere to be seen and the ones I had found earlier had also done a vanishing act! Ah well, a young Brown Hare almost compensated (for me at least) and, in a couple of hours of searching, we had fine views of Spotted and Pied Flycatchers, plus a Great Grey Shrike and a circling Lesser Spotted Eagle. The sun climbed high, a Middle Spotted Woodpecker flew over, a few Crossbills too, but no fellows with the collar, so we gave up and drifted off to pastures new!

Not pastures to be exact, but the massive Siemianowka reservoir a few kilometres to the north, punctuated by a railway straight across the middle and home to, amongst other things, an impressive number of marsh terns. Hot and sunny when we arrived, the best option was definitely to sit and do nothing, merely scan and wait for the goodies to arrive. First up, one Great White Egret, next an adult White-tailed Eagle, then a procession of Whiskered Terns and two or three Little Terns too ...easy birding, barely even needed to lift your head! A couple of hours of this, heaps more Whiskered Terns, a handful of Great White Egrets, an Osprey and three overhead Whimbrel and then it was off to the other side of the reservoir. Amazing place for marsh terns - at least 60 Whiskered Terns, plus 25 or so Black Terns, but otherwise the highlights were a Hobby scooting through, a Bearded Tit in an extensive reedbed and three Garganey.

With that, we turned and headed for home. Safely back over the border, a quick stop at Lake Metelys in Lithuania revealed a female Red-crested Pochard. Trip over.

7 July. Labanoras surprises.

Back home in Lithuania, this was to be the day to re-establish my forest feeders at Labanoras after their summer break. On arrival though, I did pause as usual at the raptor viewpoint to scan the skies. One Hobby, one Osprey, one Lesser Spotted Eagle and two Marsh Harriers, not bad fare. The bird of interest, however, was not a raptor, but a distant blob that alighted upon the crown of a tree at the very far side of my land, well over a kilometre away. I peered at the shape, slightly hidden by foliage ...it just had to be a Roller! And, as it took to the air, flashing vivid blue, that is exactly what it was!

After my old faithful Roller, identified by his crooked-bill, had failed to turn up in the spring, I had feared the worse, that my pair had joined the ranks of those to disappear from the country. The female did arrive, but after a few days she became erratic and then vanished, gloom the days of my stars were over. However, when I wandered over to the tree, I was in for a surprise - the sneaky little sods hadn't departed at all!!! How such big bright birds can maintain such a low profile is beyond me, but there they were, carrying food to a hole in a tree, breeding again! Views were insufficient to see if it really was the same male, but the birds were feeding noisy youngsters in the nest, so I was happy! Long live my Rollers, the Lithuanian population is less than a few score strong, but this territory survives. A week later I was to confirm it was indeed the same Roller, back for yet another season.

12-14 July. Butterfly heaven.

Temperatures high, weather sunny. Second week of July, bordering on the third. Conditions were perfect, I had high hopes of a 'big butterfly day'.

Ropejos Miskas was my destination, my favoured patch for butterflies. Each time, I walk and drive a standard route, a broad sunny track running some eight kilometres through alternating pine forest, occasional clearings and punctuated by a couple of flower-rich traditional meadows. In past years, I have managed as many as 29 species along this track in mid-July, the variety and numbers always very impressive.

And so I arrived. At the very beginning of the trail, a few High Brown Fritillaries fresh on the wing, plus heaps of Heath Fritillaries, a couple of Ringlets ...all pretty par for the course. That was about to change! The track usually takes me two to three hours at my 'butterfly pace', this day it took seven hours! It was outstanding, hundreds upon hundreds of butterflies, no less than seven species of fritillary, five species of blue, four coppers and an assortment that included Purple Emperors, White Admirals and a Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell. But on top of that, amongst the last butterflies of the day, I found two species I have never seen before, both very restricted in range in Lithuania and neither I had expected to encounter - two Moorland Clouded Yellows, a species near restricted to raised bogs in the country, and a super little Cranberry Blue.

By the day's end, I came home with no less than 35 species under the belt, my highest ever day total in this country.

Full list:

Large White - 1

Small White - c.25
Green-veined White - dozens
Moorland Clouded Yellow - 2
Brimstone - 30+

Scarce Copper - 50+
Purple-shot Copper - 30+
Sooty Copper - 1
Large Copper - 2

Cranberry Blue - 1
Holly Blue - 5
Silver-studded Blue - 2
Common Blue - 1
Amanda's Blue - 1

Purple Emperor - 4
White Admiral - 2
Small Tortoiseshell - c.30
Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell - 1
Map Butterfly - 4
Comma - c.20

Dark Green Fritillary - c.15
High Brown Fritillary - c.80
Silver-washed Fritillary - c.10
Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary - hundreds
Heath Fritillary - hundreds
Weaver's Fritillary - c.12
Queen of Spain Fritillary - 1

Large Wall Brown - c.10
Ringlet - many dozens
Meadow Brown - hundreds
Peary Heath - many dozens
Chestnut Heath - 40+

Large Skipper - 10+
Essex Skipper - dozens
Small Skipper - dozens

Weatherwise, next day was less perfect - humid, thundery and spells of rain! Nevertheless, still the action continued. For a change of scene, I spent this day on my land at Labanoras. In between the showers, I searched the meadows and forest edge for more butterflies. Plenty of Ringlets, a few Map Butterflies and the expected Heath and Silver-washed Fritillaries. Several Essex and Little Skippers too, but the highlights were three species I had missed the day before - several Wood Whites and, better still, the first two Mazarine Blues of the season and the first Short-tailed Blue, the latter a truly exquisite little butterfly.

On the bird front, a few birds did shout out - in the case of a Nutcracker literally so, screeching down at me as I had my nose pinned to the ground photographing a butterfly! Otherwise, it was a question of odd birds here and there, Montagu's Harriers in the Lukna Meadows (a male on the 12th and a pair on the 14th), Honey Buzzards over Ropejos Forest on the 12th and 14th and a stonking great flock of 116 White Storks on the 12th, presumably non-breeders thinking about early migration, a gloomy hint that autumn is creeping this way! Added extras included a very nice Black Stork on the 14th and a notable influx of Turtle Doves at Baltoji Voke, four pairs arriving from nowhere!

However, the undoubted star was 'Old-crooked Bill', now confirmed as the male in residence on the Roller territory at Labanoras. Having feared him dead, this loyal male (and his deformed bill) has returned every summer since I bought the land, almost an old friend now! As mid-July approaches, he is now a busy fellow, hungry youngsters in the nest to keep happy! Rather more abundant, Red-backed Shrikes are having a good season, pairs everywhere, many fledged young just beginning to appear.

19-20 July. Butterflies all the way.

Another stunning weekend, butterflies trumpeting throughout. In a year where I have managed just a single new species of bird in the whole of Europe (despite trips to Finland twice, Norway, France, Poland, Latvia, Belarus and Britain!), butterflies are the real saving grace - a staggering five new species this weekend, including real gems such as Large Blue and Spotted Fritillary.

Day One.

With hopes high for new species, this day took me way beyond my usual haunts, a foray into the butterflies of southern Lithuania. A hundred kilometres south of the capital, nestled up against the Belarus border, my destination was Cepkelai, the largest raised bog in the country (about 12 km by 8 km).

There was, however, a minor snag - the morning was overcast, light rain fell and the odds of it changing didn't seem high, hardly conducive to a day with butterflies! Forever an optimist, off I headed anyhow and an hour later, having not seen a single butterfly on route (hardly surprising), I arrived to a predictable gloomy atmosphere, light drizzle and conditions that suggested I had wasted my time. A few hours of trudging the bog and all I could boast about was two Heath Fritillaries, hmmm! Birds tired to compensate - a little strange for the season, a Merlin shot across, whilst more usual fare included dozens of Crested Tits and a couple of Cranes. By early afternoon, just as I was beginning to ponder a return to Vilnius, a brief suggestion of brighter skies enticed out a few butterflies - two Holly Blues, a Green-veined White and then the first star of the day, a stunning little Cranberry Blue, my second of the month and the second in my life!

Half an hour later, just as I had taken a walk to a heathy bit of forest, conditions took a turn for the better - a hint of sun broke through and, for lurking butterflies, the results were immediate! Eleven species in about twenty minutes, and better than that three of them were new species for me! Alongside Ringlets and Meadow Browns, the first new species was a Grayling, a species that somehow had managed to elude me for a number of years. Whilst waiting for that flighty little creature to settle however, a blue went fluttering by, hammering off across the slope at a great rate of knots, within a moment persued by me! The blue had looked slightly different! And when it landed, so it was - I was looking at my first ever Large Blue! A much desired species, I was chuffed, but no sooner had it stopped and it took off again, disappearing into the distance. Returning to the Grayling, which by now had settled on a pine, I then spotted a bright orange spotty fritillary. I needed to check my guide book! And that turned out to be my third new species - a Spotted Fritillary. As icing on the cake, another Large Blue appeared, a rather more co-operative individual. Wonderful stuff, barely an hour of suitable conditions and three new species, couldn't get better than that!

Then it began to rain, in went the butterflies and home I went!

Day Two.

The forecast had said a repeat of previous day, the skies said something different - woke to a cloudless expanse of blue! And today I had intentions to stomp Rudnikai, basically Lithuania's only heathland, a large area of dunes and heather just beyond my usual local patch. I know it well for birds - Nightjars abound, Black Grouse throughout the year, Tawny Pipits breed. But the habitat is fantastic, it just had to have butterflies.

So I arrived to absolutely perfect conditions, warm sunshine and clouds of butterflies ...one minute out of the car and one new species! Fluttering past was a Rock Grayling, then another and another! Quickly got the photographs, then headed off into the dunes - a Swallowtail cruised past, then I noticed that two butterflies were absolutely everywhere - hundreds of both Greylings and Rock Graylings (prior to the weekend, I had never encountered either of them). Ditched my shoes and spent the next three hours strolling over the heaths, one eye open for Adders, the other for butterflies. Three Tawny Pipits flitted up, two Black Grouse somewhere else, but the butterflies outshone them all - remembering I had only seen my first

the day before, it was a shock to see quite so many Spotted Fritillaries, at least 40 sunning themselves on the warm slopes. Silver-studded Blues too, plus a Moorland Clouded Yellow and a Small Copper and, yet another new species for me, quite a few Dusky Meadow Browns, smaller and a tad more quaint than their more usual cousins. Chuck in the Brimstones, Holly Blues, a Wood White, a few Small Skippers and a Comma, and I was certainly impressed by these dunes, I'd be back up there fairly soon!

My species total for the month now stood at 55, three higher than my previous best total for an entire year in the Baltics!

One Black Kite on the way home.

One more shot from the weekend, a new species for me, the stunning Green Club-tailed Dragonfly. Photographed at Rudinkai, other species present included Brown Hawker, Common Darter and several large unidentified aeshna types, as usual hurtling over with no intention of stopping!

Leaving butterflies a second, the last days of July also saw the draining of the first fish pool at Baltoji Voke, an annual occurrence that signals the beginning of some excellent birding, as migrant waders flock down to the exposed mud banks. On a morning visit on the 25th, the pool did not fail to impress - at least 130 Wood Sandpipers and 50 or so Ruff, plus an assortment of other waders, including two Knots, several Spotted Redshanks and a Little Stint, all to the impressive backdrop of about 180 Great White Egrets! My visit however was brief, I had a plane to catch!

26-28 July. Best of Britain, a butterfly safari.

Stretching the borders of Eastern Europe yet again, all the way to the English south coast, it might seem somewhat perverse to abandon my butterfly-rich local patch, a mega spot boasting up to 35 species a day, to fly all the way to the UK to look for butterflies, especially in the face of reports of dwindling numbers and gloom on the British shores.

But coinciding the trip with the three hottest days of the year, it was absolutely glorious - top class butterflies in abundance to a backdrop of landscapes that make me wonder why I ever left the UK in the first place.

Day One

Target one, Lulworth Skipper.

A speciality of the Devon and Dorset coastlines, the suggestion had been made 'The only logical place to see this is Lulworth Cove'. Yep, that idea whetted my appetite, so 9.00 a.m. Saturday morning there I was, sitting on the low cliffs of the headland admiring the chalk slopes and thinking 'wow, what a wonderful place!' And more wonderful, butterflies everywhere! Marbled Whites by the dozen, Common Blues and Gatekeepers abundant. Darting about the clifftop, I had visions of tumbling over to a bumpy landing on the shingle below, not something I have to think about when chasing butterflies in pancake-land Lithuania! But I was in my element, more so when I spotted my first Lulworth Skipper, then my next, then my next! They were beginning to fly, first the males appeared, then shortly after the females. By mid-morning, there were a good 20 or so on the wing, my bum was high in the sky as I sneaked in to photograph the more

approachable of them. Also a Small Copper, a Dark Green Fritillary, a Red Admiral and some Peacocks, all very nice indeed, my weekend butterfly safari was starting well!

Hmm, where next I was thinking, I had allowed the whole day to find my Lulworth Skippers, thinking I might need to look at Corfe and the nearby Durlston too, so with time to spare, I decided to zip across to the vast heathlands at Arne and around. Temperatures in the high 20s, unbroken sunshine and a pleasant few hours on the heaths - one Silver-studded Blue was a nice addition, plus plenty of Gatekeepers again, a few Small Heaths and, rather difficult to wander without a few pesky birds intruding, Dartford Warblers popped up in the gorse, Green Woodpeckers flopped across here and there, and Little Egrets parked themselves down in the bay.

13 species of butterfly, one good suntan, off I went northbound. Plans for the next day were drawn up.

Day Two

Target two, Chalkhill Blue.

Flushed with success with the Lulworth Skippers, I thought what better than to hit the chalk downlands and hopefully find a few more of the Britain's top butterflies. Perusing maps and my little butterfly book, a day on the Southern Downs seemed a pretty good move and, knowing the site from past birding days, I couldn't think of a better destination than Martin Down, Hampshire.

Another early start and a fair drive and then, for the second morning in a row, I was stood in fabulous sunshine in stunning scenery, yet again wondering why I had given up on the UK as my place of abode! Though still early, already scores of butterflies floated across the flower meadows, a good variety of species from numerous Little Skippers right up through to abundant Dark Green Fritillaries, plus regular Marbled Whites already on the wing and a right buzz of Meadow Browns and Gatekeepers. With hopes of blues, perhaps Little and even an early Adonis, I clambered up the slopes to the short rabbit-grazed tops. Turtle Doves purred, a Green Woodpecker hopped across the turf, a Woodlark too and the views were simply stupendous, but, still not 10 a.m., few blues had yet to take to the wing (despite the amazing heat already building). A retreat to the car for coffee, then another saunter through the grasslands - Brimstones galore, a few Essex Skippers amongst the more numerous Little Skippers and then the first blue - a male Common Blue. Small Heaths appeared, then finally the first of my desired one - a super Chalkhill Blue, a very nice butterfly that even paused long enough for a good few photographs. With that, I then climbed back to the top of the down for the real treat of the day - awaiting me in the cutting of an old right of way, loads of excellent butterflies were busying themselves, sunning on the short grass, feeding on flowers, flitting about. At least 15 Chalkhill Blues, a single Holly Blue, a few Common Blues and, just as I sat and admired them, I spotted two Brown Argus in the grass to my side - another new species for me! With various whites, Red Admirals, Painted Ladies and Peacocks on show too, I finally left this fantastic area late afternoon with 19 species under the belt, not bad for a single morning in the UK. The temperature was now touching 30 C.

With time to spare, I then decided to head up to the Bath area, spotting at the small, but very nice, West Yatton reserve. I didn't really have any target here, but again stood a chance of an early Adonis Blue - it wasn't to be, but still a very fine collection. More Marbled Whites, more Chalkhill Blues, both Large and Small Skippers, plus one Dingy Skipper, the latter unexpected. Added a Ringlet and a Speckled Wood, also firsts for the weekend. Amazing thistles here too, big globe thistle type things.

The weekend roll continued, day two was drawing to a close and a total of 25 species had now been seen, far more than I had hoped. My suntan was ever better.

Day Three

Target three, Silver-spotted Skipper.

T'was the day of my return to exile, a flight back to the sunny lands of Eastern Europe. However, my flight was only in the afternoon and thus there was plenty of time for me to squeeze in another goody.

Down at Martin Down the previous day, I had hoped to find a Silver-spotted Skipper, a right smart wee thing. So, having not had the pleasure the day before, I was rather pleased to find I had another chance if I just made a minor detour to incorporate Aston Rowant, a National Nature Reserve just inside Oxfordshire.

Bar the rather minor distraction of the thundering traffic on the adjacent M40, this little reserve is a gem - a chalk

escarpment full of flowers and a mini buzz of butterflies to boot. Chalkhill Blues again, almost getting blasé at them now! Marbled Whites again, plus quite a few Brimstones, but a light wind was keeping things down, despite the stonking good temperatures for the third day on the trot.

With skippers again the target of the day, everyone seen flitting past sent me scurrying across the meadow ...invariably the little blighters would go straight up the 45 degree slopes, assisted by the wind! And each time, when they landed they were Small Skippers! Two hours of this, a good collection of other butterflies seen too, and I was resigned to having to leave without my desired butterfly. I'd checked each end of the meadow, sort out all the bare patches they are reported to enjoy sunbathing upon and not a sausage. Ah well, Red Kites cavorted overhead, never a bird to leave a day a disappointment. So back I began to walk ...and then it was, one of the little superstars just sitting there, a super little Silver-studded Skipper! Slunk up on him, got a single photograph and then up he went, the wind caught his bum and he vanished quicker than I could spin on the spot!

Three days in the UK, most enjoyable.