

July 2010. A scorcher.

Contributed by Jos

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Top temperatures and the annual butterfly fest. Clouds of butterflies everywhere, July 2010 breaking all records. Highlights of the month, my first Geranium Argus and White-letter Hairstreaks in Lithuania, my first ever Ilex Hairstreak anywhere, my first Lesser Purple Emperors since 2006, plus my first Yellow-legged and Large Tortoiseshells for a couple of years. Add Camberwell Beauties, Swallowtails, Scarce Large Blues, Cranberry Blue, Knapweed Fritillaries and Niobe Fritillary, all species that are often elusive, and it really was a fantastic month! For all the highlights however, the peak was undeniably on the 17th - a remarkable 50 species of butterfly in a single day. Little time for watching birds, but the unexpected find of breeding Bee-eaters was most welcome.

1-5 July. Staggeringly Good! Sometimes things just go perfectly! An amazing run of days kicked off with a small butterfly fluttering along the front hedge in my Vilnius garden. Darted over to see just as it settled on small flowers - and wow, there it was, a splendid White-letter Hairstreak, not only the first I have ever seen in Lithuania, but also my first in over two decades anywhere!!! And that was just for starters, the first few days of July were just one spectacular butterfly after another, demoting birds such as Hoopoes, Grey-headed Woodpeckers, baby Black Woodpeckers and Nutcrackers to mere background fodder, not befitting of such charismatic species!

1 July. Hot and sunny, a few hours to kill. Hit the forests south of Vilnius, aiming for open heaths where they exist. On the byways, many butterflies already on the wing - Pearly and Chestnut Heaths abundant, so too Ringlets, Meadow Browns and Small Tortoiseshells. First port of call, a favoured track that usually notches up the rewards - Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries soon spotted, along with a Moorland Clouded Yellow and two Black-veined Whites. Sunning on the track, a Purple Emperor, then a couple of White Admirals. Scarce and Purple-shot Coppers both common on flowers adjacent, a few Commas also out and about, plus Silver-washed Fritillaries. A few kilometres further, my main destination, a site for the heathland specials - a little early in the season, but still a good scattering of butterflies. Quickly found my first Silver-studded Blues of the year and a good number of Spotted Fritillaries, then as a kilometre or two rolled past, bumped into a couple of Painted Ladies flying my way, then a whole bunch of fritillaries feeding - Heath Fritillaries as usual, along with Spotted Fritillaries and several High Brown Fritillaries. Always worth a closer gander, the High Browns very rarely conceal an identification challenge in their midst, a butterfly that I have only seen at a couple of very localised sites. A few blind goose chases later, I mildly surprised myself - not only did I find one of the butterflies I sought, but I also managed my first reasonable photographs of the species - one Niobe Fritillary. Grand total of 30 species of butterfly recorded during the day.

2 July. With only a couple of hours to spare and a thunderstorm threatening, I almost opted to go shopping! Fortunately I didn't! Within the city limits, I had stumbled across abandoned meadows with a good range of species just a day or two earlier, so I decided to return for second helpings. An amazing couple of hours - loads of common butterflies, plus almost immediately a Lesser Purple Emperor sunning on the track. A very good find for me, this species is most frequent in years with an abundance of Purple Emperors and my last sighting was in 2006. Next up was a Knapweed Fritillary, another very localised species, and then the cream on the cake, my second White-letter Hairstreak in as many days! Sure beat an hour or to in the shops.

3 July. Hot and sunny again, time to visit the meadows just to the west of my house, sometimes home to Little Blues and, usually later in the season, Turquoise Blues. Saw neither on this day and after a range of species including the first Small Skippers of the season and unexpectedly another Lesser Purple Emperor, I decided to explore wider, to try and find new habitats. Meandered generally westward, eventually finding signs to an old burial mound, so turned onto the gravel track - immediately coming to an abrupt stop for a butterfly on the track. In company with a Red Admiral and a few Map Butterflies, one splendid Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell, a species never guaranteed in a given year. At this stage, I would have gone home quite happy, but a little further, things were to turn even better! In fantastic old meadows, full of wild strawberries and surrounded by mixed woodland, an absolute feast of butterflies was awaiting - hundreds on the wing, including good numbers of Amanda's and Mazarine Blues, Purple-shot Coppers, along with several White Admirals and a single Purple-edged Copper, the latter never a common butterfly. However, highlight of the day (and month so far), came some half an hour after I arrived - along the woodland edge, a small hairstreak fluttered by, briefly pausing on a lower head. Oo, thought I, expecting my third White-letter Hairstreak in three days …but it wasn't one! Instead, as it settled again, pausing long enough for a photograph or two, it transpired that this was something even better, my first-ever Ilex Hairstreak, another addition to this most desirable of families. A lunchtime appointment in the city, so with that I departed, but with things on a roll, I decided to explore again in the afternoon, this time driving along the Neris valley north of Vilnius. Another pretty amazing afternoon followed, the culmination being a flower-rich embankment absolutely loaded with butterflies - several Lesser Marbled Fritillaries, then more hairstreaks - quite clearly an exceptional year for them, here I watched another four White-letter Hairstreaks, bringing the total to six in three days. One more addition - a Geranium Argus pausing just long enough to identify, yet another new species for my Lithuanian list! An impressive three days, far beyond what I could have expected. At this still early stage of the 2010 butterfly season, I had now seen 60 species of butterfly in Lithuania - surely chances of breaking my previous best of 70 species, set only the year earlier.

4 July. Spent the day on my land - management of the meadows, cutting back and removing some trees in the regeneration zone, the purpose to promote a greater variety of micro-habitats and protect areas rich in orchids and other flowers and attractive to butterflies. Chose the wrong day to do it, a sweltering 28 C, so soon gave up. One Purple-edged Copper was the best of the rewards, but then ventured east to the lands around Kuotony, finding yet more rich meadows to add more butterflies to my tally - a good flush of Silver-washed Fritillaries on the wing, along with Lesser Marbled Fritillaries and my first Pallas's Fritillaries of the year, a grand total of three. Two White Admirals also seen, then in meadows nearby another butterfly of interest - initially stumping me, it was one of the studded blues, a quartet of species that frequently cause major headaches to identify. This one shouldn't

have caused any problem, whilst I debated the perennial issue of Idas Blue, I overlooked the easiest in the group, it was a Cranberry Blue, a relatively rare species, one I saw for the first time in 2009. 5 July. Last day in the bonanza run, a return to my Ropejos Forest patch. Despite thunderstorms overnight and torrential rain that brought trees down, butterfly numbers remained high, the hot sun bringing many species onto the wing. Thirty-five species noted, all the familiar favourites, including Purple Emperor, Pallas's Fritillary, Large Coppers and Silver-studded Blues, along with a few notable extras - the first Little Blue and Short-tailed Blue of the season, along with the first of the second-generation Holly Blues, Queen of Spain Fritillaries and Small Heaths. 6 July. A lazy day, basically in my garden all day, a brief wander in the meadows nearby adding one further species to the year tally - the first Turquoise Blues of the year, two males and a female flying. Also, amongst the others, Common and Mazarine Blues, plus a Queen of Spain Fritillary. Species tally now sits at 64 species for the year. 10-11 July. Days of Plenty, the Continuation. Middle Lithuania, territories I rarely venture. A blazing sun and stonking 32 C, just the biz for exploring new lands, my route plan taking me into the range of several localised butterflies that rarely occur further to the east. Starting in the valley of the Dubysa River, slowly I wandered south, stopping wherever meadow appealed. Large Coppers appeared in good numbers, always nice. Amanda's Blues, especially abundant this year, still dominated that part of the spectrum, but I had eyes out for other members of the tribe. One of the early stops was nearing its end, a fairly run of the mill mix had already notched up a few Painted Ladies, two White Admirals, both Small and Essex Skippers, plus assorted coppers, browns and whites. Then, however, another blue scurried by, barely touching down - a Scarce Large Blue almost certainly it was, a localised species that had evaded all my earlier attempts to photograph. So too did this one, alighting on flower tops for barely a second, before rising to spin off into never never land. Some way on, I strayed off the road to explore a small sidetrack. Then I stopped, on the roadside wires, a Bee-eater! Not a million miles away, a small colony of Bee-eaters had been found the previous year, the first ever breeding record for Lithuania, but this was far from that colony, so no chance of a straggler from there. Hawking, taking food and vanishing, ten minutes later the reason was apparent - a breeding pair of Bee-eaters in a sand quarry, pretty neat, an unexpected bonus! Continued onward, stopping at random damp meadows, concentrating on flower-rich sites in river valleys where I found them - dozens of Amanda's Blues, a few Short-tailed Blues, two Holly Blues, no more of the desired one. The sun was beating down, humidity was high, my dog was moaning at the exertion. I paid no heed, continuing to check good looking spots …and then I hit jackpot, a whole colony of Large Scarce Blues. Perhaps as many as 40 individuals, with females laying eggs and males chasing each other around, finally I would get my photographs. The high temperatures were not helping, the butterflies mostly staying on the wing and absolutely never opening their wings once landed, but concentrating on the egg-laying females, soon my quest was accomplished, photographs of another of Lithuania's butterflies. A good day all in all, only 28 species of butterfly, but what with the Scarce Large Blues, plus the Bee-eaters and a rufous-phase Cuckoo, I was to head home quite content, albeit half doolaaly from the sun! 11-17 July, Big Day Butterfly'ing. Attempt One. The season reaching its climax, the height of butterflies, both in terms of numbers and variety. With temperatures sitting at a cool 32 C, and threatening to rise several degrees higher in coming days, all was set for a classic day on the local patch. And indeed it was a classic, kicking off with a wonderful Camberwell Beauty patrolling a forest glade, only my second of the year. With Silver-washed Fritillaries, Large Coppers, Silver-studded Blues and Map Butterflies in particularly high numbers, and Dark Green Fritillary and Sooty Copper on the wing for the first time this season, a big species count was on the cards.

Scarce Coppers and Heath Fritillaries appeared a little lower in numbers, but with plenty of High Brown Fritillaries and Ringlets, plus Pallas's Fritillary, Comma galore and lingering Purple-shot Coppers, the tally continued to climb. At my favoured little patch, the numbers and variety truly impressed - oodles of browns and heaths, Green-veined Whites by the truckload, all three of the common skipper species. Amongst the masses, a Purple Emperor on the track, a couple of White Admirals, one Reverdin's Blue, several Red Admirals. A slight distraction as two cars came trundling along and promptly crashed into each other, but otherwise it was all eyes for the butterflies. Dozens of Silver-studded Blues, single Holly Blue, plus a couple of Short-tailed Blues.

By midday I'd reached the 32 species mark, all was still going well. Next, under a sun now blazing down, I hit the open meadows - glorious, a feast for the eyes and an additional four species, all fritillaries - a couple of Queen of Spain Fritillaries, my first Weaver's Fritillary of the year, along with both Small Pearl-bordered and Lesser Marbled Fritillaries. So, it was now 36 species and still I had a major card to play - a visit to forest heath ecotype. Not rich in butterfly variety or numbers per se, but home to a few notable specialities, my totals went soaring - Spotted, Niobe and Glanville Fritillaries, Grayling, Rock Grayling and Dusky Meadow Brown, that little bunch took me to the grand total of 42, a stop on the way home added Turquoise Blue to reach a grand 43. Not quite matching my previous best (47 in 2009), but I had called it quits early afternoon, the potential to achieve 50 in a day is on the cards. Attempt Two. So dawned 17 July 2010, the weather forecast promising another stonking hot 33 C. The challenge was on again, to hit the Big 50. Woke early and decided this was the day, the final chance of the year - many of the early species now dwindling, but the variety boosted by the late July butterflies just emerging, i.e. the season was just about at its climax.

07.45. Meadows west of my house.

With meetings at my house scheduled for 10 a.m., these early hours had two basic targets - Turquoise Blue and Little Blue, both localised species hard to find on my usual butterfly patch. What a cracking start it was, Peacocks out in abundance (none flying a week earlier), close on 20 Large Whites (also not flying a week before), plus Map Butterflies by the bucket load, all three of the common skippers and, right at the end of their season, late tatty Mazarine and

Amanda's Blues, a few Scarce Coppers and, quite a turn-up, one Northern Chequered Skippers, a species not common in the middle of July. An hour ticks by, Short-tailed Blues now under the belt, then the first of my targets, a Turquoise Blue fluttering by. Flushed a Corncrake, the first bird distraction of the day, then a bonus, my first Pale Clouded Yellows of the year, two active over thistle fields.

'was now 9.45 a.m., the species total sat at 25, quite a good start. Wasted a while talking to contractors at my house, then off again.

11.00. Ropejos Forest.

Prime butterfly territory, prime butterfly time of day. However, things were not looking so rosy - hundreds of Peacocks, dozens of Red Admirals, no shortages of Ringlets and Meadow Browns, but overall there was a distinct lack of activity on many fronts - numbers for many species had crashed from the week before. No Heath Fritillaries, no Amanda's Blues here, absolute minimums for many other species. I had to work for my butterflies, scrapping together butterflies that had previously been common - three Purple-shot Coppers, a lone Large Copper, a few Silver-studded Blues. Got to my favourite spot, very much the make or break of my record attempt. Hmm, not amazing - no White Admiral, no Purple Emperor, still no Heath Fritillary. Amazingly, no Small Tortoiseshells, there had been hundreds just a week before!

However, not all was lost, Silver-washed Fritillaries remained abundant and Pallas's Fritillary numbers had risen, at least eight floating about flowers in bloom. For the others, I needed to search - eventually the tally including several High Brown Fritillaries, one Dark Green Fritillary (these right at the beginning of their flight season) and three Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries. Close to 12.30, I tallied up - 33 species, a long way from the target!

With the temperature way up above 30 C and humidity high, I did consider giving up, but decided that might be premature - superb meadows still lay ahead, maybe they would turn things around.

12.30. Meadows.

Bonus, bonus. Superb butterflies greeted my arrival! First, a species I last saw in 2007, one Large Tortoiseshell fluttering along a forest track as I approached the meadows, then, a right stunner, my second Camberwell Beauty of the year, a pristine individual. And the meadows certainly did their stuff - sweltering under the sun, Queen of Spain Fritillaries were next, then Weaver's Fritillary, followed by one Common Blue, a Small Heath and a very ragged Painted Lady. Short-tailed Blues and two more Pale Clouded Yellows were also seen. An hour later, departing to find a shop to quench my thirst, the tally stood at 40 species, the door to the Big 50 again open …albeit needing a certain degree of luck.

14.45. Heathland.

A week earlier, this change in habitat had produced an additional six species. Today it had to do more than that! A slight detour prior to arrival reduced the deficit by two - an expected Lesser Marbled Fritillary in a favoured area and, a little less expected, my first Large Wall Brown for two weeks. Up onto the heath, quickly notched up three more guaranteed species - Grayling, Rock Grayling and Spotted Fritillary - and then set out to find two more that were on the target list, both of which are uncommon and past their peak. At exactly the same spot as where seen a week earlier, I found the first, a rather jaded Granville Fritillary, I then bumped into another bonus, a Small Copper (an early second generation). A little more searching and my final target fell, landing on my car to take salts, a Niobe Fritillary - almost certainly the same individual that I'd found a week earlier. Silver-studded Blues and yet another Pale Clouded Yellow also seen.

So the heathland had really exceeded expectations, my goal was now temptingly close …and then with a major stroke of luck, it took a giant step closer - my first of the year, a Swallowtail sailed past, pure grace. Swallowtail is a species I usually see in June, but 2010 seems a poor year for this species, so I considered myself truly fortunate.

17.30. Return to Ropejos.

Total sat at 49 species, still no Heath Fritillary, no Small Tortoiseshell, no White Admiral, no Purple Emperor. All had been seen in the week previous, surely I could find at least one, or perhaps a rarer skipper or maybe Poplar Admiral.

Some kilometres on, nothing new. The evening was drawing in, still hot and sunny, but never so productive for butterflies. My last ditch attempt would be the banks of pools at Baltoji Voke, then a return to Ropejos. Sought out patches of Hemp Agrimony, my last chance of the Heath Fritillary or Small Tortoiseshells - scores and scores of Peacocks, Red Admirals by the dozen, Silver-washed Fritillaries common enough. And then, 18.15, finally I struck lucky …surrounded by Peacocks, one smart Small Tortoiseshell!!! Yo, species number 50, the long hot day was over, I had achieved my Big 50, excellent.

Continued to trawl the byways and tracks through Ropejos Forest - no more additional species, but did see another Small Tortoiseshell! It was now 19.00, I called it a day.

Footnote.

Three additional species seen next day - on a visit to an oak forest, a Camberwell Beauty hawked a glade. Though I'd seen it the day before, such a dramatic butterfly is always worth a stop. Immediately however, a greater prize appeared - my third of the year, a Lesser Purple Emperor dropped down to take salts. Photogenic to the point of obscene, this cracker of a butterfly landed on my camera, on my hand, even on my head! Very nice indeed. Just to complete the family album, also not seen the day before, a Purple Emperor also drifted past. In nearby meadows, equally elusive the day before, three Little Blues appeared.