

Late Season. August 2016.

Contributed by Jos

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As the season began to wind down, the focus in August turned to a few rare and localised species that appear late on the wing - chief amongst them Tree Grayling in Lithuania and Scotch Argus in Latvia. Also encountered a Brown Hairstreak, two Brown Argus, a few more Chalkhill Blues and, major rarities, a Clouded Yellow and a second Meleager's Blue.

1 August. Military Day. Target, Tree Grayling. In the Baltic States, this species is restricted to a few fragments of habitat in a plot of land barely three kilometres by three kilometres. All of which is within a military training area surrounded by numerous 'no entry' signs and subject to live fire exercises a dozen days or so a month! Hmm, my heart rather sank when I discovered this, sandy slopes beckoning me in, but a military camp certainly warding me off! I made enquiries to see if it was possible to access the area if there was no active training that day. 'Sort of' was the reply, theoretically entry was not prohibited if training wasn't occurring in that zone that day, but it could be closed anyhow and I would need to have a reason to be there if challenged. That was good enough for me, Tree Grayling seemed a perfectly good reason I thought. I admit being a tad nervous venturing past the line of 'no entry' signs - hopefully I would see the Tree Grayling before the military saw me! I initially searched an area on the fringes of the zone, i.e. as far from a very visible military camp as I could. And super it was, dozens of Silver-studded Blues all over the place, six Silver-spotted Skippers, three Camberwell Beauties, one Niobe Fritillary and, moving towards the correct family, a dozen Graylings and seven Rock Graylings. No Tree Grayling though! Zigzagged a number of times, Dusky Meadow Browns here and there, but not a single Tree Grayling did I find. Checking habitat further into the zone, a deep rumbling signified a military truck coming up a track towards me. I nipped out of sight, then ran pretty nifty a few hundred meters and vanished into an area hidden by bushes. If they saw me, they didn't care. Beyond, I came across a barbed wire fence ...I decided it prudent not to cross that! Ambled off the other way, Swallowtail floating past, but still did not find the desired Tree Grayling. Decided I had pushed my luck enough for the day, perhaps I was still too early in the season for Tree Grayling, I would return another day!

4-5 August. Grasslands. Target, Brown Argus. Already two weeks, I had been looking for this, travelling to numerous sites across southern and eastern Lithuania all to no avail. Tried the Ukmerge area on the 4th, cloudy skies basically thwarting my attempts, tried again on the 5th, the weather now simply amazing, blazing sun all day and temperatures touching 30 C. Three localities on my radar, one west of Vilnius, two to the north. Loads of Common Blues at the first, eight Turquoise Blues and four Little Blues too, but no Brown Argus. At the next two sites, things were even better - they were buzzing with butterflies, the combined tallies including at least 80 Common Blues, an impressive 75 plus Pale Clouded Yellows, 55 Brimstones and 60 Small Heaths. Also one Swallowtail, 13 Little Blues, eight Queen of Spain Fritillaries and 14 Wall Browns. Walked a couple of hours, wading through Common Blues in search of a Brown Argus all the way. Didn't find one. Almost back at the car, one last 'female Common Blue' fluttering on the slope. But, ah ha, it wasn't one! At last, I had found my elusive target butterfly, slightly faded, one Brown Argus ...one more for the year lists, species number 100 for Lithuania, 104 for the Baltic States. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 104. Brown Argus (100 for Lithuania)

6 August. Success on the Belarus Border! Ominous looking skies nearly turned me back, blanket cloud cover and spells of rain on route. I persevered however, my destination once again the Belarussian borderlands to the far south-east of Lithuania. My goal was yet again Chalkhill Blue, plus I planned a perhaps optimistic search for the super star of the week previous, the female Meleager's Blue. No sun on arrival, but the clouds had thinned to a considerable degree. Some activity amongst butterflies. I checked a couple of meadows, including the site where I had found the Meleager's Blue, to rather better results than I had feared - along with a dozen or so more common species, one Queen of Spain Fritillary, three Large Grizzled Skippers and several Silver-spotted Skippers. No Chalkhill Blue however and, despite quite an extensive search, no sign of the Meleager's Blue. Moving a kilometre further, I then began a search along the wide margins of a sandy track, rough pasture to the one side. Bingo! Almost immediately ran into a male Chalkhill Blue, the uppers appearing an almost ghostly pale whitish-blue when in flight. Quite a few Common Blues at the same locality. Quite active initially, the Chalkhill Blue briefly had a run-in with another largish blue butterfly at one point, my thoughts running along the lines of 'hmm, that looked interesting' but as it did not settle, I did not pursue it beyond that as I had not yet photographed the Chalkhill Blue. As the cloud thickened slightly, the Chalkhill Blue became a little less active, sitting on flower heads for rather longer, I got my photographs! The largish blue butterfly began to bug me, I had a sneaking suspicion that I had perhaps walked away from a rather significant butterfly! With most butterflies now inactive, I began to search for the butterfly and about ten minutes later, I found it sitting quietly on a stalk of grass. My suspicions were confirmed - a male Meleager's Blue! Not sporting the classy features of the female, the male is far more subdued and moderately easy to overlook ...and that was what I had almost done! Weak scalloping to the rear wings, underwing markings shadowing the female's more prominent pattern - the identification was secure.

Amazing, second record ever for Lithuania! However, given that this is a non-migratory species, the presence of this male at a distance of only 550 metres from the female location must further strengthen the likelihood that a hitherto unknown population may well exist in the vicinity, potentially across the border in Belarus or quite possibly on the Lithuanian side. Rather chuffed with this, I continued my day, finding two more Chalkhill Blues at another location nearby, plus an assortment of other species, including two Camberwell Beauties, several Reverdin's Blues, a few Dusky Meadow Browns and one Weaver's Fritillary. Markedly though, I saw no Marbled Whites, the impressive flights of weeks previous seemingly over.

BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 105. Chalkhill Blue (101 for Lithuania)

7 August. Weather Warning. A mere two weeks or so of the season left for any hope of my final targets and the weather forecast is ongoing doom and gloom - cool, wet and cloudy for the most part! Tasks to do at Labanoras this day ...not that enjoyable, mostly cool and windy. A small selection of butterflies seen, the best being Large Grizzled Skipper, the rest being a few tatty Scarce Coppers, a couple of Red Admirals and a dozen or so other species. Felt like autumn!

8-12 August. All For Tree Grayling! The humble Tree Grayling, probably the most challenging species that I was attempting to see in 2016 ...as mentioned earlier, one location only in the Baltic States, rare even there, 100% within an active military training ground and, just to top it off, dodgy weather right at the heart of the season combining with days of live artillery firing to leave it highly problematic to see this butterfly. On the 8th August, on my third attempt in less than two weeks, I failed to find my target when I noticed a significant increase in the amount of military hardware moving into the area - I checked some areas, but learning that five days of live artillery firing were just getting underway snubbed out any ideas of sneaking into a big open central area. Did see Niobe Fritillary and three Camberwell Beauties for my troubles however. Was back again on the 12th, military activities were scheduled to wind down from 3 pm, but being a rare day of warm sunshine, I decided to have a nose round from late morning - initially avoiding the main firing range, butterfly numbers were clearly somewhat reduced from days earlier, but still I soon found a selection of the typical heathland butterflies, Silver-studded Blue, Dusky Meadow Brown, Grayling and Rock Grayling but yet again no Tree Grayling. At around 2 p.m., avoiding a couple of soldiers who appeared to be on sentry duty, I got to the open area, an expansive area churned up by military activities, but looking perfect for Tree Grayling. All seemed quiet on the battlefield, so decided it was 'now or never', I began my explorations, choosing an area of fairly open sands dotted by scattered small pines - ambled around the area for over an hour, saw very few butterflies, basically one or two Rock Graylings, a Queen of Spain Fritillary and a few Small Heaths. Thoughts of success were beginning to fade. Then however, catching the light breeze, a butterfly with very dark uppers went zooming past. Had to be Tree Grayling! I darted off after the butterfly, rather alarmed at the speed it was covering ground - fortunately I did not lose the butterfly and it eventually settled, bright creamy-ringed 'eyes' on the dark underwings, white spots on the centre ...Tree Grayling indeed! Then it shut its wings, now blending perfectly into the background. Exquisite and quite a relief, I got a few photographs before it decided to fly again, seeming to settle a short distance away, I however could not relocate it. Half an hour later, I found another two a couple of hundred metres away, my quest was over, a species I particularly wanted to see.

BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 106. Tree Grayling (102 for Lithuania)

14 August. Scotch Argus Tumbles in Latvian Backwoods. Third excursion of the year into Latvia, target Scotch Argus, a species not seen in Lithuania for several decades, but still very common in the open pine forests south-west of Riga. Forecasts of very mixed weather did not bode particularly well, but with sunny spells at least theoretical, I set off from Vilnius at 6.00 a.m. for the three-and-a-half hour drive.

Overcast and dull on arrival! Remarkably however, even before parking the car, I spied a dark butterfly fluttering weakly across the roadside verge. Scotch Argus! Parked and wandered for a while, soon found more ...five Scotch Argus, mostly settled on the ground or low vegetation. Then, a bare ten minutes after arriving, it began to rain, butterflies vanished, game over for a while. Fortunately, just over an hour later, broad pockets of blue sky appeared, resultant sunny spells lasting through to afternoon...and with the better weather, numerous more Scotch Argus, perhaps 60 or more, plus a small assortment of other species, one Camberwell Beauty and several tatty Silver-studded Blues amongst them. Banks

of cloud then rolled in, I departed and began the return journey. A few kilometers further however, blue skies returned, so I stopped at a random patch of forest, exploring broad tracks and seas of clear fell. A good decision - two dozen species seen, a very fine late summer collection, including Weaver's Fritillary, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Large Grizzled Skipper, Pale Clouded Yellow and a motley crew of faded left overs from earlier in the season, Scarce Coppers, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries and the like.

So there we have it, a day in Latvia, 28 species seen, critically including Scotch Argus, my 107th species of the year in the Baltic States. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 107. Scotch Argus (102 for Lithuania)

15-17 August. Season's Decline. One day of reasonable sun, two days of cool, wet and blustery conditions. Even on the sunny day, a marked decline in butterfly numbers - visiting Labanoras and Kernave, I notched up 21 species, top of the pick being my second Brown Argus of the year, with other nice butterflies including Little Blue and three Queen of Spain Fritillaries. These aside though, numbers of most species were well down, the key exceptions being Red Admirals and Small Tortoiseshells, both of which were more abundant than in recent weeks, perhaps the start of a final flush. All in all however, especially with the onset of heavy rain, the season truly felt near its end. 18-21 August. Grand Finale. Scraping the barrel, there were only a couple of final potential species remotely possible this year ...Brown Hairstreak was the most likely, a butterfly that I had not seen in Lithuania since 2009, and after that a vagrant species from south, one of the clouded yellow group being at the top of my mind, even though none are annual in Lithuania! And so I turned my attentions to these butterflies! 18 August. Dukstos. Despite searching for Brown Hairstreak without success in several localities over the previous couple of weeks, I reasoned I had as good a chance in the Neris Valley as anywhere else, so decided upon the mixed forest and meadow landscapes of the Dukstos area this day. Hit and miss weather, good sunny periods and about 20 C, but so too occasional banks of clouds and spots of rain. Further reductions in butterfly numbers immediately apparent, only 13 species seen with Common Blues and Small Heaths the only species appearing in fairly good numbers. As for Brown Hairstreak, I searched high and low in areas that I thought looked encouraging, but saw zilch. Then however, as I tramped back towards my car after three hours of wandering, there was a Brown Hairstreak! Surely the most stunning of the Lithuanian hairstreaks, the vivid oranges of this fresh individual were simply splendid. Probably the last new species for the year, a wonderful finale to an excellent year. Stupid me, I forgot to put a memory card in the camera, so no shots this day - fortunately I have a photograph of a near identical of this stunner from 2009 (below). BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 108. Brown Hairstreak (103 for Lithuania) 21 August. Druskininkai. Southern border areas again. Basic reason to be in this region was to search for potential vagrants from more southerly parts of Europe, for example Clouded Yellow, Berger's Clouded Yellow or, probably unlikely these days, Danube Clouded Yellow. With temperatures topping 26 C, a fine day it turned out, 28 species seen in all, with exceptional numbers of some late butterflies - my highest ever single day count, I estimated a minimum of 460 Red Admirals were present, quite possibly quite an under-estimate. Alongside, also at least 80 Queen of Spain Fritillaries, another personal record for a day count. And much more too - ten Weaver's Fritillaries, five Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, five tatty Silver-spotted Skippers, a couple of small colonies of Reverdin's Blues and, wonderfully fresh individuals, seven Chalkhill Blues. Checked two main localities along the border, numerous butterflies at both, but numbers of migrant butterflies were decidedly low - a mere seven Painted Ladies and six Pale Clouded Yellows. However, late afternoon, I hit the jackpot - the deep yellows of a Clouded Yellow catching my eye. Typical of the species, it was highly mobile, flying at speed across the territory, appearing to have actually flown in from Belarus. Went racing after it, had it settle for a brief second, before it stormed off north, eventually rising over a line of trees to vanish into Lithuania's interior! Clicked my camera wildly at the rapidly disappearing butterfly, a vivid yellow blurry blob the result. The Clouded Yellow near Druskininkai: And a comparison of Clouded Yellow (left, photographed in France) and Pale Clouded Yellow (below, Lithuania) :

BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 109. Clouded Yellow (104 for Lithuania)

22 August. Pabrade. Labanoras fairly quiet, so decided to cut back to the military areas near Pabrade. Rat-a-tat of automatic gunfire at the first block, but fortunately all clear at my favoured site some 3 km further. Camberwell Beauty to welcome me, then a steady procession of Red Admirals and occasional Painted Ladies as I walked the kilometre or so to the central open areas. 26 C again, bright sun, I had high hopes of further Tree Graylings on the heath. And I was not disappointed - a little beyond where I encountered them the previous week, I found no less than four this time. Slightly faded, especially the creamy rings, but nice all the same. Also, remnants of flights earlier in the season, a couple of Rock Graylings in the same area, a dozen Silver-studded Blues too. Wandering back to the car, added single Wall Browns and Speckled Woods, quite probably my last of the year.

24-27 August. Bears, Butterflies and Birds. Mini trip to lands a little more exotic than Lithuania - a few days in the Cantabrian Mountains of northern Spain to seek Brown Bears, a trip nicely supplemented by close to 60 species of

butterfly and assorted birds including Lammergeier, Griffon Vultures and Iberian Green Woodpecker ...see [HERE](#) for a full account of this trip.

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