

Spain, Bears, Butterflies & Birds.

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Last Updated Friday, 23 September 2016

Travelling between 24-27 August 2016, this short trip was timed to coincide with the relatively brief period each year that Brown Bears emerge onto the open slopes of the Cantabrian Mountains to feed on berries. The plan was to look for the bears morning and evening, then spend the days searching for late season butterflies, this proving very successful with many species seen.

DAILY LOG

24 August.

Arrived in Madrid early evening, set out for the 450 km drive north to Pola de Somiedo, heart of the Cantabrian Mountains. One fatal road accident on route temporarily closing the motorway, plus several Booted Eagles and Short-toed Eagles. 25 August. Pre-dawn, one Red Fox trotting along the road, one puncture! These aside, I soon arrived at the small settlement of La Peral. Here, a picture perfect setting, mountain slopes rising in each direction, rocky crags high above. These were the slopes favoured by the Brown Bears, pockets of forest and expanses of open landscape dotted by the berry bushes that entice the bears out at this season. Just before I arrived (darn that puncture), a bear had already ambled across, so it was high hopes that I settled down and joined quite a few Spanish observers to scan the slopes. Warm sun rising, three Pyrenean Chamois on the slopes, several early Griffon Vultures launching into the skies, Hobby circling above and Black Redstarts flicking across the rocks. Three hours drifted by, not unpleasant at all, but as the temperature rose, it was clear that no more bears would be seen this morning. No point sitting on this mountain ridge too long, time to look for butterflies! After repairing the puncture, I started with a random meadow near the village of Gua, one that immediately proved good - Speckled Woods and Gatekeepers aside the hedgerows, then Clouded Yellows and Marbled Whites in abundance on the slopes, a little more investigation soon adding Chalkhill Blue, a few Weaver's Fritillaries, a single Chapman's Blue, a Southern Grizzled Skipper and dozen or so other welcome species - I was impressed, I had not expected so many butterflies still on the wing. At midday, I moved to meadows beneath La Peral, these also proving most excellent. As temperatures approached 30 C, dense masses of blues began 'puddling' on damp patches along a track beside a stream: mixed Chalkhill Blues in the main, supplemented by Mountain Argus, numerous Small Whites, a Queen of Spain Fritillary and, a gem indeed, an exquisite Lang's Short-tailed Blue. On the hillside above, yet more Clouded Yellows and Marbled Whites, plus Mallow Skipper, Lulworth Skipper, High Brown Fritillaries, Silver-washed Fritillaries and many more. About 4 pm however, deep rumblings sounded out as thunder approached, the skies rapidly darkening. Within fifteen minutes, heavy rain lashing the mountain side, soon followed by massive hailstones and a temperature plunging to about 16 C. That ended the butterfly action! No bad thing, bears are not big fans of the blazing sun, so the cooler weather was far more likely to bring them out into the open. So, with a break in the rain, back to the ridge I went, a good couple of hours earlier than planned. Most atmospheric it was, wisps of clouds hugging the tops, thunder echoing through the valley, two Griffon Vultures drifting across the dark sky, Black Redstarts on a fence and there, nonchalantly ambling from berry bush to berry bush, one Brown Bear! Spot the bear! Big blond shoulders, a fine individual indeed. Watched this bear for about half an hour until it chambered up onto a large rocky outcrop. Then, after a period of stretching to reach berries on an overhanging shrub, the bear chambered down behind the boulders and vanished. Spots of rain returned, the bear didn't emerge ...until maybe 15 minutes later when not one, but two Brown Bears appeared in view! Blonde shoulders and another fairly pale individual. Together, they slowly proceeded across the slope, up and over rocks and finally into an area of woodland. Heavy cloud again approaching, I decided that was a splendid finale to the day, so back to the car I jogged as ominous big drops of rain began splattering down. A night of impressive lighting storms thereafter followed. 26 August. Returned to the La Peral ridge at dawn, low cloud and a last band of rain moving through. Chough, Black Redstart and Serins knocking about. Waited in the car till the rain stopped, then trundled back up the slope. Two Brown Bears feeding opposite, the same pair as the evening before, blond shoulders and chum. Five Pyrenean Chamois to the right, one left too. Then, a third Brown Bear crossing a small meadow at the valley bottom, a very dark one this time. Poor weather produces the goods again! As for the rest of the day and butterflies however, things were not looking too optimistic - not only did the cloud show little sign of clearing, but it was also very windy. Drove a long circuit of the general area, seeing little beyond a few European Bee-eaters and a Short-toed Eagle, then decided to explore the Saliencia Valley north of Pola de Somiedo. Early afternoon, just as I was debating writing the rest of the day off, suddenly the sun broke through ...and immediately it was butterflies galore. First site, a roadside verge, produced a dozen species, including several Long-tailed Blues, one Lang's Short-tailed Blue a single Obether's Grizzled Skipper and a Mallow Skipper. The second site that I stumbled across was even better - a flower-rich meadow on a steep slope, there were loads of butterflies soaking up the now warm sunshine, temperatures having quickly rising to 30 C. Without even leaving the road, I was in the midst of dozens of Chalkhill Blues, a single Adonis Blue, a very nice Red Underwing Skipper and a couple of Small Skippers. Cleopatra, Marbled Whites and Clouded Yellows drifted down the slope beyond, one Berger's Clouded Yellow also picked up, along with Sooty and Scarce Coppers, plenty of Meadow Browns

and a nice mix of other common species. Headed down to the main Someido Valley thereafter, hoping (but failing) to find more productive meadows. It was a very narrow limestone gorge in this region, but after a bit of trial and error, I did find another splendid site - a steep scree slope, dotted with brambles and flowering shrubs and ending at the river itself. Hard to work, loose rock and snagging brambles predominating, but some superb rewards for the effort, the absolute highlight being male Cleopatra that allowed me to get a few photographs - this mobile species has always eluded my camera in the past. Also Niobe Fritillary and Bath White here, along with Wall Browns, Gatekeepers and, complementing the Cleopatra, a couple of Brimstones. Given the excellent weather and warm conditions, an evening return to the La Peral ridge was a very pleasant experience, albeit with the expectation that bears would not appear very early. Immature Lammergeier appeared in the afternoon sunshine, three Pyrenean Chamois too. But indeed the bears didn't appear early ...well past 7pm this evening when finally I spotted a Brown Bear, a mid-brown individual clambering up the slope. After watching the bear for about 10 minutes, it entered woodland and so ended the day - a pretty good day by any standards, four different Brown Bears, 34 species of butterfly and a whole bunch of birds, not least Lammergeier. 27 August. With success on the bear front in previous days, I had a bit of a lie-in on this day and left the Someido area shortly after breakfast for a relatively short drive to the lower altitudes of the Sil River valley, an area I then explored by taking random turns until I stumbled across an absolutely fantastic area near the village of Cuevas del Sil. Meandering up a steep slope, the abundance of butterflies was simply amazing - a dizzying array of species, clouds of butterflies from start to top! Got the ball rolling with a couple of splendid Tree Graylings, resting on the trackside. Wall Brown, Large Wall Brown, Grayling and Rock Grayling also present. Also very prominent, Clouded Yellows, my first Esper's Marbled Whites of the trip (Marbled Whites present at Someido), numerous Gatekeepers, many Meadow Browns, several Speckled Woods and various fritillaries, Queen of Spain Fritillary included. Soon however I was getting bogged down by masses of blue and argus butterflies, each flower clump attracting multiple species and many dozens of individuals. With many rather similar species sharing flower tops, it was quite an identification headache initially and I probably managed to cover each hundred metres in about half an hour! Turquoise Blue, Chalkhill Blue and Common Blue proved to be the most numerous species present, but not far behind were the full trio of argus species - Spanish Brown Argus, Mountain Argus and, best of the lot, the localised Spanish Argus. In amongst this lot, Long-tailed Blue and Lang's Short-tailed Blue, plus plentiful Small Coppers, Sooty Coppers and Scarce Coppers. A small adjacent patch of grassland, rich in vetch, attracted yet more butterflies to add to the tally, not least several Red Underwing Skippers and an Obether's Grizzled Skipper. Departing at midday, my species count was standing an impressive 33 species, not bad at all for a single hillside. I had hoped to find further meadows at lower altitudes down the valley, but in lands turning ever more arid (and in temperatures climbing to 30 C), I failed to find any sites that matched this first site. I did however have a very pleasurable stop in some oak woodland, the highlight being a whole bunch of Purple Hairstreaks flitting in the canopy, along with a fast-flying Great Banded Grayling. With that however, I hit the hot arid plains of central Spain, stopping for a while at Lagunas de Villafáfila to look for Great Bustards. Middle of the day, late summer, 34 C ...predictably I did not see any bustards! Didn't even see any 'lagunas' - they had dried up! Did see a few Bee-eaters, a couple of Montagu's Harriers and a Short-toed Eagle however. Butterflies were limited to a couple of Bath Whites, another Lang's Short-tailed Blue and a single field full of Long-tailed Blues, Clouded Yellows and Small Whites, the minimums of each approximately 40, 45 and 30 respectively. And so ended this little trip to Spain, down to Madrid I went for the flight out. Four Brown Bears seen, 55 butterfly species and an assortment of birds including Lammergeier. Systematic List of Butterflies Small White.Green-veined White.Bath White.Clouded Yellow.Berger's Clouded Yellow.Brimstone.Cleopatra.Wood White.Purple Hairstreak.Small Copper.Scarce Copper.Sooty Copper.Long-tailed Blue.Lang's Short-tailed Blue.Short-tailed Blue.Silver-studded Blue.Spanish Brown Argus.Spanish Argus.Mountain Argus (Northern Argus).Turquoise Blue.Chalkhill Blue.Chapman's Blue.Common Blue.Camberwell Beauty.Red Admiral.Peacock.Silver-washed Fritillary.High Brown Fritillary.Niobe Fritillary.Dark Green Fritillary.Lesser Marbled Fritillary.Queen of Spain Fritillary.Weaver's Fritillary.Marbled White.Esper's Marbled White.Rock Grayling.Great Banded Grayling.Grayling.Tree Grayling.Meadow Brown.Gatekeeper.Small Heath.Large Wall Brown.Wall Brown.Speckled Wood.Obether's Skipper.Red-underwing Skipper.Mallow Skipper.Southern Grizzled Skipper.Essex Skipper.Small Skipper.Lulworth Skipper.Silver-spotted Skipper.Large Skipper.