

May 2017. Sun and Season.

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An amazing transformation from the preceding month, sun taking over and an immediate surge of butterflies - twenty species in the first half of the month, including Dingy Skipper, Camberwell Beauties and Swallowtails, then a superb selection thereafter, not least Scarce Swallowtail, Baltic Grayling and Violet Copper.

1 May. Bath Day. A near month of dreary weather, depression was almost setting in, the forecast for the first days of this month none too promising either. But with the new month, unexpected blue skies and a blazing sun, albeit not far off freezing at dawn! By 10 am, with the temperature already 7 C, conditions were looking good, maybe a few new species this day, I thought. In meadows to the south of Vilnius, a few Small Tortoiseshells already on the wing, I began to explore. And what a classic day it quickly turned into, my second species of the day being Eastern Bath White, not one I expected on the first day of May! As it warmed up, at least four were active in this small area, very nice indeed. And along woodland edge, plenty more butterflies appearing in short succession, a dozen or so Orange Tips soon on the wing, my first Green-veined Whites of the year, plus one Green Hairstreak. Also, lots more Small Tortoiseshells, several Peacocks, one Comma and 20 or so Brimstones. Four new species for the year and, all in all, a very pleasant couple of hours. Did have plans to check out a new site just east of Vilnius in the early afternoon, but a thick band of cloud had parked itself across the capital for much of the day, slowly advancing westwards. As I departed my meadows, I lost the sunshine and realised my day of butterflies was about to be over. Pondered a while, then decided to outdrive the cloud, expanses of blue still visible on the western horizon. Had to go a bit further than I expected, ending up over 80 km from Vilnius, but the reward was worth it – a full afternoon of glorious sun and temperatures of 12C, feeling quite a bit higher. Made a stop at a random area of woodland edge bordering abandoned meadow. Most productive it was – eight species seen, Peacocks, Brimstones and Small Tortoiseshells again the most abundant, but also a few Orange Tips again, three Commas, a couple of Green-veined Whites and my second Green Hairstreak of the day. Better still, mostly gathering around catkins, my first Holly Blues of the year, at least six in total. My final treat, three Map Butterflies, newly emerge and sunning on a grassy bank. And with that I turned back into the bank of cloud and returned to Vilnius, ten species and about 150 individual butterflies seen during the day, this including six new for the year. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 9. Eastern Bath White
 - 10. Orange Tip

 - 11. Green-veined White

 - 12. Map Butterfly
 - 13. Green Hairstreak
 - 14. Holly Blue
- 4 May. Spring in the Air. A good run of fair weather days, sun and temperatures touching 20 C. Big arrivals of bird migrants, Pied Flycatchers and Whinchats in force at Labanoras, a male Montagu's Harrier too, plus the first Wrynecks, Cuckoos et al. On the butterfly front, continuing variety with Orange Tips, Holly Blues and other early season species in good numbers at Labanoras, along with increased numbers of Map Butterflies, an emergence of at least 30 Green Hairstreaks and my first Wood Whites of the year, six in all. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 15. Wood White

6 May. Continuing Highs. North-south divide in the weather across the country, cloud banks obliterating the south, open skies to the north. Took advantage of the latter to make my first visit of the year to the Sventoji river valley near Ukmerges on this day ...and was immediately rewarded with a fine Swallowtail, a very early individual. Temperatures climbed to 20 C, plenty of butterflies active, albeit species such as Brimstones and Small Tortoiseshells not in very high numbers. Amongst the main attractions, one Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell, a notable emergence of Wood Whites and growing numbers of both Map Butterflies and Green-veined Whites. Noted eleven species, the best day total so far in 2017. Didn't however find either Speckled Wood or Small White, both of which I thought quite possible. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 16. Swallowtail

8-12 May. Topsy Turvy World of Lithuanian Spring! Hot and sunny, a blanket of snow, back to hot and sunny, a week in early-May! Exactly how was, 20 C on the 6th, minus 2 C and several centimetres of snow on the 9th, 20 C and blue skies again by the 14th. Not a real dent to butterflies however, saw my first Speckled Wood of the year near Vilnius on the 8th (as well as Orange Tips, Holly Blues et al), then after a couple of days of predictable nothingness, started to see Brimstones and Wood Whites again by the 12th. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 17. Speckled Wood

13-14 May. Full Speed Ahead! A fabulous day, heading to the south of the country to investigate areas in the Marcinkonys area. Warm and sunny by a little after 9.00 a.m., the abundance that I was to encounter was soon apparent - Brimstones, Green-veined Whites, Wood Whites, Green Hairstreaks and Map Butterflies all abundant, Orange Tips, Peacocks and Holly Blues also fairly common. Was checking out the area for potential new species later in the season, but had a few nice surprises this day too - two Camberwell Beauties, two Swallowtails and, first of the year, four Grizzled Skippers. Also added a couple of Small Whites, also my first of the year, but by mid-morning high cloud was beginning to edge in. Some decent breaks in the cloud allowed another three Grizzled Skippers (two nearby, one near Druskininkai), but as the cloud seemed stubbornly static, I decided to head north back into sunnier skies. An excellent move - meadows south of the capital were alive with butterflies! A good 150 or so assorted whites, including at least three Eastern Bath Whites, plus a range of other species, the best of which were six Queen of Spain Fritillaries and three Small Coppers, both new additions for the year. Sixteen species of butterfly this day, best day of the season so far. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 18. Small White
- 19. Small Copper
- 20. Queen of Spain Fritillary
- 21. Grizzled Skipper

Tried various locations in the north the following day, Labanoras, near Ukmerge, near Kernave - not a bad selection, but despite sun and 20 C, it was certainly less productive than the day before, highlights were two Yellow-legged Tortoiseshells near Ukmerge. 15 May. Bonus Day, Dingy Skipper. Managed 109 species on my quest in 2016, travelling extensively throughout Lithuania and neighbouring Latvia. One species that I did not manage to find however was Dingy Skipper, a localised species mostly occurring in southern parts of Lithuania. To be more accurate, it was actually more than a decade ago that I last saw this species in this part of the world! Task for this year was to find the few species that had eluded me in 2016 ...as an early season species, Dingy Skipper was first on the hit list. Warm and sunny again, I travelled only a short distance from the capital, selecting an open sandy area, vegetation sparse. Orange Tips and Wood Whites in good numbers, two Swallowtails fluttering about, one Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell at adjacent woodland edge ...a good start. Criss-crossed the area for a half hour or so, found a scattering of Green Hairstreaks amongst other species. Then, just as I was wondering if I was perhaps a little too early in the season for them, a small dark butterfly zipped past and settled briefly ...a fine Dingy Skipper! Unfortunately, before I got a chance for a photograph, it rose, caught the light wind and vanished over a slight hillock. Couldn't find it again! Luckily, relocating a half kilometre or so, I found another excellent area and found two more Dingy Skippers, one rather brief again, but the other very cooperative, sitting and posing for pictures at length. And with that, as skies began to cloud, I headed back to the city, mission accomplished! BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 22. Dingy Skipper

Two days later, I found another Dingy Skipper on the outskirts of Vilnius ...resting on a gravel track behind a kebab stall!

18 May. Explorations. After a short visit to Labanoras, I cut west to explore new areas in the Kaunas region. Idea was to check out sites that might hold Clouded Apollos and Chequered Skippers in the coming weeks, perhaps get lucky and find an early one. Well, I did find some good sites, one well-worth returning to, but certainly didn't see either Clouded Apollo or Chequered Skipper on this day! I did however see 18 Grizzled Skippers, six Weaver's Fritillaries, two Sooty Coppers and one Short-tailed Blue, the latter two new for the year. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 23. Sooty Copper
- 24. Short-tailed Blue
- 25. Weaver's Fritillary

20 May. Scarce Swallowtail, major surprise! Hottest day of the year so far, a splendid 26 C. Plan was to head to the south of the country and target two localised species – Green-underside Blue (though perhaps too early in the season) and Baltic Grayling. Not far from Marcinkonys, site one was a set of small meadows flanked by mature open pine forest on all sides, the rich aroma of the pines floating on the air. Could immediately see it was going to be a good day on arrival, it was barely 9.00 a.m., but butterflies of several species already on the wing – Brimstones, Green Hairstreaks, Map Butterflies, etc. Walked a circuit of about four kilometres, mostly investigating meadows up against the forest edge, classic habitat for Green-underside Blue I thought. Grizzled Skippers proved very common, at least 35 seen, so too Small Whites, Green-veined Whites and Wood Whites. Better still however, an impressive number of Swallowtails present, no less than 10 appearing at this locality as I strolled around, plus two Camberwell Beauties, six Weaver's Fritillaries, a couple of Sooty Coppers and a dozen Small Coppers. Also found a Short-tailed Blue, a couple of Speckled Woods and my first Large White of the year. No sign of Green-underside Blue, but an excellent day anyhow I thought as the species tally steadily rose. It was about to get a whole lot better. At the edge of the pine forest, on a nice sunny slope, a large distinctive butterfly suddenly appeared – flying rapidly through the open pines, flashing tiger stripes on a pale background, it was a Scarce Swallowtail! Typical of the species though, it was highly mobile, exiting the pines without landing, only to flutter briefly around flowers and then vanish down an adjacent sandy slope. (Scarce Swallowtail, this one photographed in southern Europe) Scarce Swallowtail is a regular species in north-east Poland, breeding right up to the Lithuanian border. In Lithuania however, it remains almost unknown – the only records in the country being specimens thought to have been collected in the Trakai region some 50 years ago and a single near

Marijampole three years ago. So why the lack of records in Lithuania ? My guess is that is probably overlooked – even though a striking species, there's a awful lot of perfect habitat to hide in between Marcinkonys and the Polish border, much of it relatively rarely visited. That said, early spring 2017 also appears to be outstanding for Swallowtails – against just 12 in the whole of 2016, I saw more than 20 in the first three weeks of May alone, including 14 this day. Perhaps related? Failing to relocate this butterfly, I continued my walk. Over the next hour or so, I added a few more species, including three Pale Clouded Yellows and a couple of Small Heaths, both new for the year. Next locality was less productive – open meadows a few kilometres further south. Three more Swallowtails amongst the haul, plus another 15 or so Grizzled Skippers and a Queen of Spain Fritillary, but otherwise the most numerous butterflies were whites – best being three more Large Whites and one Eastern Bath White. Decided I was probably too early in the season for Green-underside Blue, so moved on to my next target, Baltic Grayling. A very localised species in Lithuania and flying early in the season, it is restricted to select bogs where it seems to prefer areas with sparse stunted pines in wet areas. Cepkaliai is one one such place, but I opted to try another known locality further west on the Polish border. An hour drive and I was there, skirting the Polish border posts and arriving at the destination. Abandoned shoes and squelched out into good looking habitat – immediate success, settling on the trunks of the pines and occasionally chasing each other around, Baltic Graylings! Actually many Baltic Graylings! In the small area I checked, at least 40 were present, undoubtedly far more in the wider area. Other butterflies were far less prominent – a few Green Hairstreaks, one more Swallowtail, but otherwise just mainly a few Brimstones and Wood Whites. Slight cloud was beginning to gather to the south, so I opted against a planned visit to sites on the Belarus border and returned instead to the north, stopping for a final walk of the day in sand pits near Merkinė. Not bad at all, Camberwell Beauty and Dingy Skipper amongst the first species seen, several Short-tailed Blues and Small Heaths added also. So a classic day, the best of 2017 so far – 25 species in total, some pretty good ones included. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 26. Scarce Swallowtail

- 27. Large White

- 28. Pale Clouded Yellow

- 29. Small Heath

- 30. Baltic Grayling

21-23 May. Lithuanian Specials, Violet Copper et al. With a whole bunch of Lithuania's most special butterflies due on the wing in the coming couple of weeks, all highly localised and restricted to certain habitats, the plan for these days was to spent some time investigating possible sites and trying to find good habitat. DAY ONE. Continuing excellent weather. Explored areas in the Ukmerge area, hoping to perhaps find early Scarce Heaths or Large Heaths. Failed on both and actually managed only 13 species! Did see however another Swallowtail, plus four Speckled Woods and my first Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary of the year.

DAY TWO. Rare and highly localised, Violet Copper occurs in just a handful of localities in the country. Not a species that I had ever seen, not in Lithuania, not elsewhere, this dainty little species was my number one target for 2017. As such, I had already checked out localities that I thought promising and today was the day to return to perhaps the best. Locality should also support assorted fritillaries and heaths, but barely a butterfly was flying on arrival despite a warm sun. Hmm, perhaps still early in the season. Walked around for about half an hour, added a Speckled Wood and one or two common species, no sign of any of the more unusual species. But then there it was, the Holy Grail of my butterflies, a simply delightful Violet Copper! Smaller than I was expecting, it was flying on the edge of a wet area, settling frequently on leaves between reed stalks and other vegetation. But then a calamity - I discovered I had forgotten to put a memory card in my camera! Argh, my most eagerly sought butterfly of the year sitting just in front of me and my camera was out of action! Fortunately I did manage to get a few shots with my phone camera, literally putting the phone right up to the butterfly as it sat and sunned itself. With another Violet Copper flying quite nearby, I can say that I will be returning to this locality in the coming days!

DAY THREE. Back to Kaunas region for the second time in a week – still high hopes for Clouded Apollo or Chequered Skipper. Cloudy all morning, not a help at all, but it did begin to clear around midday. And I didn't have to wait long for the result – didn't find any Chequered Skippers, but as the clouds parted, one of the first butterflies that I found was a smart Northern Chequered Skipper soaking up the first hints of the sun! As the sun grew in strength, this butterfly became more and more active, eventually disappearing into grassy glades just yonder, plenty of other species becoming active at the same time, Speckled Wood and a presumed Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell amongst them.

As time was limited, I moved onto my next destination, grassy slopes that might produce a Clouded Apollo. Alas they didn't, but under a warm sun now beating down, I did add my 21st Swallowtail of the season, a dozen more Grizzled Skippers, several Sooty Coppers and my first Common Blues of the year, three in all. Not bad at all for a few hours in the field, not only the Northern Chequered Skipper, but with the 12 additional Grizzled Skippers, my year tally for these now stood at almost 90, already my best ever year for them. Unfortunately I needed to get back for work, so that ended that. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 31. Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary

- 32. Violet Copper
- 33. Common Blue
- 34. Northern Chequered Skipper

25 May. Violet Copper. Top butterfly of the month, went back for another look at the Violet Coppers ...taking a memory card in my camera this time! Quite a search for them, but ended up with three different individuals this day, most exquisite butterflies: Plenty of butterflies in surrounding areas too, not least several Weaver's Fritillaries, a notable emergence of Sooty Coppers and a couple of Short-tailed Blues. 27-28 May. Clouds, Chequers and Pearls. A hundred kilometres north of Vilnius, a roadside verge, 9.30 am, warm and sunny, clouds of butterflies active, clouds of Clouded Apollos! Had been looking for this species for a week and here they were, a synchronised emergence of a whole bunch of them, pristine individuals sailing across the grassy slope, more pumping life into their wings as they entered adulthood.

Quite a magical sight indeed, at least 45 Clouded Apollos at this single spot, enhanced by a Pale Clouded Yellow and growing numbers of both Sooty Copper and Small Heath. A few kilometres further, I found another four Clouded Apollos drifting along a riverbank, then explored a hillside to find my first Heath Fritillary of the year and five Wall Browns. Target two, Chequered Skipper. Middle Lithuania, wet deciduous woodland. Located a sunny glade and set out to explore, within a kilometre bumping into two chequers of the 'wrong' sort – Northern Chequered Skippers, bright creamy-yellows on the wings. Fortunately the third chequer along this very same glade was an exquisite pockering of brown and cream, a classic Chequered Skipper. All too brief, I managed not a single photograph before it disappeared! No big problem, checking further glades, I located yet more, this single forest block finally producing a total of three Northern Chequered Skippers and five Chequered Skippers, one of the latter even perching on my finger for a while! With success on my two main targets, I decided to cut across to a couple of sites in the Kaunas area for the remainder of the day – wispy high cloud quietened things down a tad, but not too much – in sunny spells, I added a whole bunch of species, not only my third dose of Clouded Apollos of the day, but also two more Chequered Skippers, my first Mazarine Blue of the year and my first Little Blue of the year. Next day, with temperatures soaring to an impressive 28 C, it was the turn of some of my favourite meadows to impress. Meandered around with butterflies rising from all quarters – dozens of Sooty Coppers, a few Small Coppers, at least 15 Queen of Spain Fritillaries, one Weaver's Fritillary, several Pale Clouded Yellows, a couple of Eastern Bath Whites, a minimum of 45 Small Heaths. Best of all however, the pair of pearls – a number of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries in the grassland, then the crowning glory, three Pearl-bordered Fritillaries at woodland edge. Not a species I see very often in Lithuania, these were welcome indeed. Also one Swallowtail and a good dozen or so other species. Rounding off the weekend, I went for a squelch in a raised bog – low and behold, more Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, about eight present this time, plus a wholly rare species, Baltic Grayling. Second time to see this bog specialist within ten days, many were present here, a minimum of 45 in the small area of habitat that I explored. Also a last couple of Green Hairstreaks and one more Swallowtail. And so ended my weekend - not bad at all, several very localised species under the belt and 33 species noted in all. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 35. Clouded Apollo
- 36. Little Blue
- 37. Mazarine Blue
- 38. Heath Fritillary
- 39. Pearl-bordered Fritillary
- 40. Wall Brown
- 41. Chequered Skipper

29 May. Neris Valley. Two additions to the year list today – in the Neris Valley, one Knapweed Fritillary and a couple of first generation Brown Argus. Localised species both, these are good butterflies to locate, especially the fritillary, something I see at best only once or twice a year. Also, amongst 20 species, increasing numbers of Heath Fritillaries, continuing Pale Clouded Yellows, one Mazarine Blue and no less than eight Little Blues. BALTIC YEAR LIST

- 42. Knapweed Fritillary
- 43. Brown Argus

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