

Quest for the False Apollo, 29 March - 6 April 2018.

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One of the rarest and most dramatic of Europe's butterflies, the European range of False Apollo is restricted to just a handful of localities in north-eastern Greece and associated offshore islands. Flying at the end of March and early April, this nine-day trip was primarily dedicated to finding this butterfly.

Beyond broad knowledge that a colony of False Apollos occurred somewhere in the Potamos Valley, a few kilometres north of Alexandropolis, I actually had no specific prior information as to an exact site for the species, thus was far from sure I would find the butterfly. My basic plan was to explore the valley to find suitable looking habitat, then hopefully locate the species. Alongside False Apollo, I also hoped to find a range of other early-flying species such as Southern Festoon, Powdered Brimstone and Gruner's Orange Tip, plus naturally any other species happening to be flying so early in the season, such as Green-underside Blue. With time to also explore other sites in Greece, including Lake Kerkini and the Delphi/Parnassus area, this trip far exceeded my expectations, notching up a impressive 49 species of butterfly and numerous birds, including countless Dalmatian Pelicans and Pygmy Cormorants, plus passerines such as Eastern Orphean Warbler and Moustached Warbler.

DAILY LOG 29 March. Lake Karla. Arrived in Athens at 9.00 a.m., glorious blue skies a welcome sight. A quick zip through the airport and in no time at all I was on the road heading north, my wallet taking a battering from the rather steep Greek road tolls, but occasional white butterflies already flitting over. With my actual destination some 800 km to the north, I decided to make the best of the good weather by pausing for the day at Lake Karla, a mere 350 km north of Athens. And what a good decision it was, a flock of 16 Lesser Kestrels welcoming in, plus a Spur-thighed Tortoise, then an impressive spectacle of birds on the lake itself & oodles of Dalmatian Pelicans and a bunch of Pygmy Cormorants at the very first bay, many more stretching into the distance. Along the southern shore, estimated Dalmatian Pelicans at 260, far more than I had expected. Also more than 200 Garganey, 35 Spoonbills and umpteen Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes. A very nice introduction to Greek butterflies too & a stream of Pierids transpiring into Southern Small Whites and Eastern Dappled Whites, plus a single Krueper's Small White, my first new species of the trip. Also Swallowtails, a half dozen Mallow Skippers and, amongst the more common species, both Common Blue and Small Copper. A good few hours here, numerous Clouded Yellows and occasional Painted Ladies as I explored the stony lakeside meadows and adjacent rocky slope, additional birds also including a Short-toed Eagle, five Stone Curlews, a couple of Red-rumped Swallows, several Eastern Subalpine Warblers and my first Black-eared Wheatears and Rock Nuthatches of the trip. As mid-afternoon passed, I then headed into the low hills south of the lake & another amazing spectacle, Nettle-tree Butterflies everywhere! A year earlier, I had spent days searching for this species in Catalonia, eventually finding six, a cause for celebration. Now, however, I was surrounded by dozens of them! Settling on the road, chasing each other around the bushes, a single line of shrubbery supported at least 50 individuals of this quite unique species. And around them, a very nice pair in yellow & gorgeous orange tints on numerous Cleopatras, alongside a near dozen Brimstones! As the sun began to dip, I had managed to tally seventeen species of butterfly, not a bad start to the trip I thought. Off we went to Volos for a night in the town. 30 March. Lake Karla & Axios Delta. Cold at dawn, only 5 C. No point looking for butterflies just yet, so plenty of time for some excellent birding around Lake Karla & highlights on the lake included four White Pelicans among a couple of hundred Dalmatian Pelicans, good numbers of Pygmy Cormorants, a single Black Stork and a Moustached Warbler, while hillsides added Woodchat Shrike and Red-rumped Swallow and flooded fields to the east supported hundreds of Little Egrets and Glossy Ibises, a half dozen Great White Egrets, a few dozen Spoonbills and masses of Mediterranean Gulls, plus a Long-legged Buzzard, a Hen Harrier and a couple of Marsh Harriers. First butterflies only at 10 a.m. as temperatures finally climbed above 10 C ...but then a rapid warming and swirls of butterflies taking to the air. On a limestone bluff just east of the lake, Swallowtails and Scarce Swallowtails sailing around the slopes from the outset, Wall Browns abundant and a small number of Krueper's Small Whites and Mountain Small Whites among the abundant Southern Small Whites. As it warmed further, Southern Comma and Queen of Spain Fritillaries sunning, a Large Tortoiseshell flying at the edge of woodland and at least 25 Nettle-tree Butterflies at the same location. In open meadows, more rewards - abundant Painted Ladies and Clouded Yellows, plus a good selection of smaller species, the best being two Mallow Skippers, six Green Hairstreaks, six Brown Argus and three Chapman's Blues. The highlight of the morning however was awaiting a couple of hours later & now pleasantly warm at over 20 C, a small dark butterfly flitted up from a patch of limestone plateau. Off it zipped, but then about turned and returned to exactly the same place. Very skitty, it repeatedly flew off, but always returned & the butterfly in question, a new species for me, one fine Inky Skipper. Rock Nuthatch, Black-eared Wheatears and Eastern Subalpine Warblers also in the area, plus another flock of Lesser Kestrels. Mid-afternoon I resumed the journey north, driving a couple of hours to spend the remainder of the day in the Thessaloniki area, specifically the Axios Delta and, accessed via a very rutted coastal embankment, the Kalohori Lagoon. Windy, but good general birding & abundant Pygmy Cormorants, flocks of Greater Flamingoes, Glossy

Ibises and Spoonbills, numerous dabbling ducks, assorted waders including Avocets, Kentish Plovers and Marsh Sandpipers, and many other birds, not least a pair of Merlins and flocks of Spanish Sparrows. At sunset, I departed and drove the remaining 350 km to the Potamos Valley, just north of Alexandropolis. Arriving near midnight, I parked up and spent the night in the car - here, I hoped, I would find False Apollo next morning.

31 March. Potamos Valley. A cold dawn woke me from an uncomfortable night in the car! Cirl Buntings, numerous Hawfinches, Nightingales and Eastern Subalpine Warblers all in the chilly 6 C early hours. Way too early for butterflies on the wing, so I decided to set off up the valley to try and identify a potential locality for the main target, False Apollo. On top of general knowledge of habitat, my only real clues were a couple of online photos of the species that seemed to suggest it liked to bask on dead elm leaves – so basically I was looking for a nice area of meadow bordered by elm groves. Problem one, exceptionally heavy rains the previous week had raised water levels and the track through the valley crossed the stream several times, this becoming precarious in the little hire car I was driving. Managed three stream crossings in the initial few kilometres, but no way I was going to make the fourth! Walked from there and fortunately reached a fantastic looking meadow shortly thereafter ...perhaps I was now in the lands of the False Apollo! Waited around till about 10 a.m. for the temperature to reach 12 C, the first butterfly of the day then appearing, a nice Large Tortoiseshell sunning on a track. Rapid warming thereafter and masses of butterflies following in short succession -

Holly Blues and Small Coppers to begin things, then increasing numbers of Small Whites, plus my first new species of the day – a rather vivid male Grecian Copper, the first of several during the day. Adding to the mix, three Swallowtails, a Krueper's Small White, quite a number of Orange Tips and, at least 25 present, my second new species of the day, Powdered Brimstone. A shade larger than Brimstone, the easiest way to distinguish these were by their pale-tipped antennae, though they also possessed a more angular rear wing and the males seemed to lack the vividness of Brimstone. As for my main two targets however, False Apollo and Southern Festoon, I was drawing a blank – perhaps too early in the season I wondered, perhaps not a correct location. For the latter species though, I need not have worried – as the temperature climbed near 20 C, suddenly they were out and sunning, a cracking mosaic of yellow and black chequering and spots, Southern Festoons in all their glory. Within an hour, at least sixteen of these fabulous butterflies had been seen. Back and fro across the meadow I zigzagged, along the margins of the fields, up a scrubby track, many Brown Argus noted, a Wood White, a Mallow Skipper and a couple of Nettle-tree Butterflies too, but as for False Apollo, not a sign! Many Clouded Yellows flying, one Berger's Clouded Yellow, a couple of Southern Commas and a number of more familiar species, Peacock, Red Admiral and Painted Lady included. Also saw another three Large Tortoiseshells, and my only Small Tortoiseshell of the trip, but False Apollo simply eluded me. In compensation, a Spur-thighed Tortoise trundled by, a Glass Snake zipped off through undergrowth and some nice birds too – not least abundant Eastern Subalpine Warblers, two Hoopoes and both Green Woodpecker and Syrian Woodpecker. Overhead, four Black Storks soared and Crag Martins zoomed around the limestone tops. I seemed destined to not find False Apollo at this site, so explored elsewhere in the valley and neighbouring sites near Kirki – added a couple of Camberwell Beauties to the day's tally, but didn't really find another chunk of habitat that looked quite as promising as my morning locality. With the skies clouding a little in the late afternoon, I decided to call it quits and headed for a hotel near the coast. A grand total of 28 species during the day, many in good numbers, including the fantastic Southern Festoons, but of course no False Apollo. Not ready to give up on my main target, I vowed to return to the Potamos Valley the following day. 1 April. Potamos Valley & Dadia Forest. The weather gods were not smiling upon northern Greece on this day – looking out a dawn, I was decidedly unimpressed to see a blanket of cloud and trees swaying to a gusting wind! Thoughts of False Apollo rapidly evaporated and I half contemplated going back to bed. Still, with the Ebro Delta nearby, it wasn't difficult to come up with a Plan B – a day of birding. No sooner had I got to the delta however, with the first Purple Herons rising from channels and Marsh Harriers quartering, than a broad swathe of blue sky appeared to the west. Hmm, change of plan again – back to the Potamos Valley! Traversed the three streams again and parked at the same site as the day before. Now 10 a.m., a pleasant sun was filling this sheltered valley and already butterflies were flying – Powdered Brimstone, Nettle-tree Butterfly, Grecian Copper, etc. Checked the best areas again, found a Glass Snake, but almost predictably no False Apollo again. Checked a small patch near the river – rank grass surrounding elms, many dead leaves in the litter – found a Southern Festoon, then flushed another butterfly, a largish creamy thing. Initially supposed it was another Southern Festoon, but as it landed some twenty or so metres away, a sharp intake of breath – bingo, resting on a dead elm leaf, male False Apollo! One brief photo, then it flew again, flying quite some distance, me in pursuit, my feet going straight in some wet bog on route. As it settled again, a nice juxtaposition of two of Europe's most stunning butterflies – False Apollo on dead leaves, a Southern Festoon sunning on grass stalk just adjacent. A short while later, I then found a second male, False Apollo, a slightly darker male with more extensive markings. And then, literally fifteen minutes later, clouds rolled in, butterflies vanished and the sun failed to reappear for the entire day, I counted my lucky stars for this mere 90 minute window of sun!!! For a change of focus, travelled across to Dadia Forest – horrendously windy on exposed slopes, but did walk to a viewpoint over the reserve's famous vulture restaurant. And superb it was, albeit quite distant, five Black Vultures and three Griffon Vultures dominating the remains of a carcass, two Egyptian Vultures, a Black Kite and a couple of Ravens lingering at the fringes. Back at hotel, I completed my notes for the day – only 13 species of butterfly seen, less than half the total of the day before, but right there in amongst them, in nice big bold letters, False Apollo! I was quite content, target number one of the trip had fallen, it also being my 37th species of butterfly for the trip, a tally already exceeding my expectations

2 April. Nestos Gorge & Porto Lagos. Superb weather – sun, still and 20 C. Primarily hoping for Gruner's Orange Tip and Greenish Black-tip, destination for this morning was the very scenic Nestos Gorge, a drive of about 100 km from Alexandropolis. Following a path hugging vertical limestone cliffs, initially little suitable butterfly habitat, but as it

opened out slightly, so butterflies appeared - Wall Browns abundant, Holly Blues and a couple of Nettle-tree Butterflies, a single Camberwell Beauty cruising the path, plus several Large Tortoiseshells and my only Speckled Wood of the trip.

Plenty of Orange Tips and Southern Small Whites too, unfortunately however I did not find either Gruner's Orange Tip or Greenish Black-tip. Had to make do with three Green-veined Whites, also my only ones of the trip. In meadows and roadside embankment below, added a single Southern Frestoon, plus a number of Powdered Brimstones and Brown Arguses, a couple of Chapman's Blues and a scatter of Common Blues. Perhaps the best find of the morning though was not a butterfly, but an absolute midget of a Carpathian Scorpion – perfectly formed, but less than a centimetre from end to end, it took a bit of a sharp eye to spot this one! I cannot claim the honour, it was my young assistant, she most excited with this critter. Spur-thighed Tortoise also here. At this point, I should really have returned to the gorge to explore the path further along, but instead I made a bit of a tactical mistake and departed with the idea of finding some meadows in the limestone hills above the gorge. Did find a few meadows with abundant Clouded Yellows and a few Queen of Spain Fritillaries and Small Coppers, but overall all was pretty quiet, probably better later in the season. With a half day still spare, I decided to then explore the extensive coastal wetlands at the nearby Porto Lagos. Though butterflies were limited to a few Eastern Bath Whites, a single Swallowtail and five Large Tortoiseshells, the birding was not bad at all – some of the highlights including a Spur-winged Plover, hundreds of Whiskered Terns hawking over the on sea, abundant Black-necked Grebes on a lagoon, three Slender-billed Gulls among the abundant Black-headed Gulls and Mediterranean Gulls and a scatter of Dalmatian Pelicans and Pygmy Cormorants. Also notched up Hen Harrier and Marsh Harriers and assorted passerines such as Red-rumped Swallow, Cetti's Warbler, Nightingale and Black-eared Wheatear. European Pond Turtles common here. Day over, we checked into a nearby hotel, White Storks on a nest out front, one Little Owl calling as dusk. 3 April. Falakro Mountain. Perfect weather again, not a breathe of wind, unbroken sunshine. Decided to explore the mountains north of Drama, more specifically Falakro Mountain and the road leading up to the ski resort. Still cold (7C) in the foothills at 10 a.m., but first butterflies nevertheless - a Camberwell Beauty, then a Large Tortoiseshell, not bad at all. Soon after, as the temperatures climbed, more butterflies – a half dozen Nettle-tree Butterflies, several Queen of Spain Fritillaries, a few Wall Browns and, becoming common, Clouded Yellows and Orange Tips. Also here, my only Comma of the trip. Higher up mountain, things remained decidedly chilly and butterflies were few and far between – an occasional Peacocks, a few Red Admirals and that was about it. Deciding on a change of tack, I then ascended and was rewarded with some superb stony meadows at the mountain's base. Now 22 C, these slopes were choc a bloc with butterflies – amongst the species, abundant Clouded Yellows, Queen of Spain Fritillaries and Wall Browns, numerous Brown Arguses, a few Chapman's Blues, and several Mallow Skippers. Also a single Swallowtail, my first Small Heath of the trip and a mix of Mountain Small Whites and Southern Small Whites. The highlight of the day however was a butterfly I very much desired to see – flying with a few Orange Tips, the butterflies in question were Gruner's Orange Tips. Having failed to find them at Nestos Gorge, this was a pleasing indeed, even more so to have the two species flying together. Not very cooperative though, settling very rarely and generally staying well clear of camera lenses! After a couple of pleasant hours at this locality, I then resumed my westward drift, destination for the evening Lake Kerkini – a few stops on route added Brimstones and Wood White in woodland, two splendid Eastern Wood Whites on a sunny hillside and a Scarce Swallowtail in a scrubby area. Home for the night was the village of Lithotopos, a couple of Dalmatian Pelicans drifting on the adjacent Lake Kerkini, White Stork on nests all around and a Little Owl calling as dusk fell. 4 April. Lake Kerkini. Crisp clear morning, snow glistening on mountains to the north. However, as I departed Lithotopos for a day of birding at this leading wetland, the first sections of Lake Kerkini initially hinted that day of disappointment might follow – the waters were largely empty at this southern end, Great Crested Grebes here and there, an occasional Dalmatian Pelican and was about all. Venturing up the eastern shore, a drainage channel midway failed overall to change the opinion, but did add a couple of Squacco Herons and two Moustached Warblers, as well as Syrian Woodpeckers in a neighbouring grove and abundant Nightingales. But then I reached the north-east of the lake! An amazing transformation – a shallow bay bordered by a swathe of damp grass to the one side, a tangle of submerged trees and islands to the other, it was absolutely teeming with birds! Even at this very early stage of the season, it was truly one of the spectacles of Europe, the trees and islands supporting a huge breeding colony of many thousands of Great Cormorants and Dalmatian Pelicans, the masses punctuated by hundreds of Pygmy Cormorants and smaller numbers of White Pelicans in their midst. From the colony, great rafts of the pelicans drifted on the waters across the bay, yet more roosting on the grassland. Abundant Great Crested, Little and Black-necked Grebes adding to the bird soup, plus numerous dabbling ducks and gulls, as well as four Black Storks and an assortment of herons and egrets, mostly Grey Heron and Little Egret, but also a few dozen Great White Egrets and three Purple Herons. A couple of hours split between this locality and another viewpoint on the northern shore (equally impressive and even closer views), then I decided to explore the low limestone hills to the north common. Primary purpose was to try and find Sombre Tits – failed in this pursuit, but did add two very smart singing Eastern Orphean Warblers, plus abundant Eastern Subalpine Warblers and Cirl Buntings. Goshawk and Short-toed Eagle also seen. Even more impressive though was an extraordinary mass movement of butterflies – from about 10 am till midday at least, hundreds upon hundreds of Nettle-tree Butterflies were streaming past, a near constant stream moving downhill. Whether it was a localised altitudinal movement or a more general southerly migration, I am not sure, but staggering it was, many tens frequently settling in the groups on the track before continuing on their way. The movement had lessened to a degree by midday, but at this single locality the numbers involved clearly amounted to many thousands, the number across the whole hillside must have been astronomical. And to think, prior to this trip, I had seen just six Nettle-tree Butterflies ever! Other than the Nettle-trees, the butterfly selection was not particularly outstanding – just 16 species, mostly a collection of temperate Europe species such as Wood White, Orange Tip, Brimstone, Small Copper and Holly Blue, along with 12 Large Tortoiseshells and three Scarce Swallowtails. Leaving the hillside, returned to Lake Kerkini, I debated a boat trip to the breeding colony, but decided against (better in the early

morning), then pottered for a couple of hours, generally enjoying the spectacle, adding a nice Bittern posed at the base of a tree and other odds and ends such as Hoopoes and Spanish Sparrows, the latter nesting in White Stork nests, Tree Sparrows and House Sparrows alongside. My intended plan was to spend the day at Kerkini, then depart at about 5 pm for the long drive to southern Greece to spend the last couple of days in the Delphi area. Good plan and all went fine until just before 5 pm when I got a puncture and then discovered that the rental car no spare wheel! With no phone reception, I cursed 'National', then limped the car back to my hotel of the previous night, fully expecting to totally wreck the wheel. On arrival, the hotel guy was absolutely top notch – sent me in for coffee while he arranged a free tow truck to a nearby village where some other guys met me and patched the tire. Only an hour or so lost and off we went again, a drive of 350 km ahead, arriving in the hills at the base of Mount Parnassus in the wee hours. 5 April. Mount Parnassus & Delphi. After a night in the car, started the day at the top of Mount Parnassus – snowboarders and skiers arriving to enjoy the lingering snow, me up there just for a bit of sightseeing. A Red Admiral sunning on the snow was the only butterfly seen, so soon descended a few kilometres back down the access road to a set of high altitude meadows. Better in the mid-summer months, these meadows were nevertheless pretty good – aside a mix of species such as Mountain Small Whites, Brimstones, Queen of Spain Fritillaries and Brown Arguses, this stop also gave me chance to enjoy the stunning Southern Festoons again, at least 30 on the wing, several of which were of a slightly orange morph. For the rest of day, I explored the more arid environs of Delphi. A very good mix of dry country species at these sites, all nicely complementing the species present on the higher slopes. Amongst these, Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail drifting about, several Powdered Brimstones and four Cleopatra, plus reasonably plentiful Gruner's Orange Tips. Highlights of the day however were the assorted blues – as well as Common Blue and Chapman's Blues in a grassy meadow near Delphi village, I also found four exquisite Green-underside Blues in the gully above the village, two Eastern Baton Blues and a Little Blue on a slope some way below Delphi. Managed to fall head over heels down the steep slope pursuing these, and attracted the attention of dogs guarding roaming goats, but eventually managed to get a couple of photographs, as well as a few scratches! With several Mallow Skippers and singles of both Dingy Skipper and Orbed Red-underwing Skipper also seen, all in all, it was a pretty good day – and by the day's end, I had notched up 32 species, the highest day count of the trip. Not bad for birds too - Rock Nuthatches fairly common, Pallid Swifts over Delphi, a few Black-eared Wheatears and Crag Martins knocking about and, as everywhere, Eastern Subalpine Warblers common on the slopes. 6 April. Delphi. Final day. Largely overcast, but bright spells and sun late afternoon. With dark skies threatening to spoil this last day, we decided to do a bit of culture and visit the Delphi archaeological sites. By the time we had bought tickets however, a rare patch of sun broke through and our wander through the Temple of Apollo et al proved to be a pleasant mix of pretty impressive relics and not bad butterflies too – Swallowtails and Scarce Swallowtail, Clouded Yellows, Eastern Dappled White, etc. As clouds returned, I pondered the rest of the day – few butterflies were flying, but perhaps it might work in favour to try and I would get photographs of the highly mobile Gruner's Orange Tips and Green-underside Blues of the day before. So back to the gully I went – nothing flying. Wandered around for a while, found nothing. Waited in the car a while, the skies improved somewhat – not exactly sunny, but brighter. Taking short flights, one or two butterflies fluttered across, so up the gully I scrambled again ...bingo, I found two Green-underside Blues, and not very active ones at that. Got the photographs I desired, then set out again to find Gruner's Orange Tips, eventually rewarded with three individuals, success. With cloud over Mount Parnassus and Delphi, I decided to leave in the early afternoon and head east towards Athens. Sunny skies midway, so detoured to hills near Erythres – a good final stop, the handful of species including six Small Heaths, a few Brown Arguses, and best of all, a last new species for the trip, a Granville Fritillally. And so ended the trip, a grand total of 49 species of butterfly seen, far exceeding my expectations. Better though, the warm glow of having found False Apollo, trip deemed successful. For a full list of all butterflies seen during this early spring trip, [CLICK HERE](#). A little over two months later, I would be back in Greece, exploring the mountains of the south - lots of excellent species, for a detailed report, [CLICK HERE](#).