

For A Festoon, Italy 2019

Contributed by Jos

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Travelling in early April, the main goal of this three-day trip to southern Italy was to find Italian Festoon (*Zerynthia cassandra*), a species of butterfly restricted to the Italian Peninsula.

Flying into Naples, the basic plan was to spend some time near Bari checking localities around the Foresta di Mercadante for Italian Festoon, plus other butterflies, before heading to the orchid-rich limestone hills of the Gargano Peninsula and finally the hills near Naples. The weather forecast was far from ideal for butterflies - sunshine till early afternoon on the first day, but then clouding over, remaining hit and miss for the next two days. Nevertheless, the trip proved most successful, not only producing the desired Italian Festoon, but a total of 29 species of butterfly in all, a good total for so early in the season. 11 April. Arrival. Thanks to a three-hour flight delay, arrived late night. Picked up a rental car, hit the autostrada for the 250 km drive to Foresta di Mercadante. Camped nearby overnight. 12 April. Foresta di Mercadante. As per forecast, a cloudless sky early morning. Locality one was an area of meadow in the heart of Foresta di Mercadante. After a walk of a kilometre or two through the forest, I arrived at the meadow at about 8.00 am, still too chilly for butterflies, but quite a few Subalpine Warblers singing, plus hundreds of orchids on the steep slopes. As warmth began to build, finally butterflies began to appear - Wall Browns first, then Green-veined Whites, then the first of the day's couple of dozen Green Hairstreak. Within an hour, the floodgates had opened, abundant butterflies nectaring across the meadow - Wall Browns, Orange Tips and Green-veined Whites particularly abundant, Small Heaths, Small Whites and, a little later, Brimstones also common. Painted Ladies flying about, plus a couple of Large Tortoiseshells. Walking a track to an adjacent meadow added a Grizzled Skipper and a couple of Brown Argus, plus a loose colony of Swallowtails, at least eight patrolling an area of slope. Also found a few Eastern Dappled Whites among the myriad of whites flying. Overall, a very impressive set of meadows! Notable among the absentees however was Italian Festoon! I'd had a brief distant glimpse of a flying butterfly that I think was an Italian Festoon, but searching failed to relocate it. And, as midday approached, a worrying block of clouds was beginning to build, blotting out the sun every now and then. If the forecast were to prove correct, my chances to find Italian Festoon might be slipping away! Thinking it might remain sunny longer on the coast, I decided to relocate to another location some 30 km to the south-east. So, in patchy sunshine, back to the car I trudged. And what should I find there? Right next to my car, one quite resplendent Italian Festoon nectaring on flowers along the forest track!!! What a fantastic butterfly, and what a fantastic concluding experience to this wonderful forest. So, change of plan again, scrubbed the idea of the relocation and instead drove a mere couple of kilometres to an area of limestone grassland adjacent to Foresta di Mercadante. A very good idea - in a last couple of hours of sunshine, heaps of butterflies on the grassland, and even more along a hedgerow adjacent - including several Large Tortoiseshells and five Nettle-tree Butterflies. Also here, Montagu's Harrier, several Lesser Kestrels and Hoopoe. Around 2 pm however the cloud did finally kill the day off - no more flying butterflies, so I departed and headed north. Birding at salt pans near Margherita di Savoia produced rather many Slender-billed Gulls and Little Gulls, along with Pygmy Cormorants, Spoonbills and Greater Flamingos, but then it started to rain! Drove up to the hilltop town of Monte Sant Angelo, checked into a hotel, day over. 13 April. Gargano Peninsula. Heavy grey skies, mist hugging hilltops ...not a promising start. On the theory that the day's butterflies were likely going to be a washout, decided to change focus - to seek out some of the 40 or so orchid species that occur on the Gargano Peninsula. Pretty much at the peak of the orchid season, it didn't take long to find them - and impressive they were, many hundreds adorning meadows, virtual carpets. I am no orchid specialist, but these were a treat. Found a dozen species of orchid, but find of the day, from my perspective, was a single Early Spider Orchid, truly a remarkable flower.

Dropping off the limestone tops just after midday, the Weather Gods kindly granted me a brief window of glorious sunshine - and with it, an immediate flush of butterfly activity, Wall Browns again the most abundant, plus mixed whites, but more pleasing were several species that I had not seen the day before - a cracking male Cleopatra, two Eastern Bath Whites, several Red Admirals and a small flight of Holly Blues. All too soon, a high wispy cloud weakened the sun considerably, staying pretty much that way for the remainder of the day. Effectively stopped the butterflies flying, but didn't make them hide away - so covering the kilometres, still could find individuals sitting on the ground. Among more common species, one corking Red-underwing Skipper, one Mallow Skipper, one Small Copper and two Chapman's Blues, all new species for the trip. Ended the day with a total of 21 species, beating the tally for the day before. Pity it hadn't been a truly sunny day! And with that, turned the car west and headed towards Naples, flight out next day. 14 April. Amalfi Coast. Final morning and a few hours to spare before my flight out. Inland hills cloaked in cloud, so headed to the Amari Coast. Sunny and highly scenic, but not overly amazing for butterflies on the steep rocky slope that I decided to explore. That said, plenty of Speckled Woods and Orange Tips and I did add two species to the trip list - a Peacock and, rather more exotic, two Green-underwing Blues.

And with that, back to Naples and flight back to Lithuania. A short, but successful trip completed. Species List. Old World Swallowtail - ten at Foresta di Mercadante (eight in forest meadow, two on adjacent limestone grassland), one at Gargano. Italian Festoon - two at Foresta di Mercadante. Large White - six at Foresta di Mercadante, about 20 at Gargano, eight Amari Coast. Small White - moderately common at Foresta di Mercadante, at least 30 at Gargano, 20 at Amari Coast. Green-veined White - common at Foresta di Mercadante, one Gargano. Eastern Dappled White - several in forest meadow at Foresta di Mercadante, more common on adjacent grassland Eastern Bath White - two at Gargano. Orange Tip - abundant at Foresta di Mercadante, at least 15 Amari Coast. Clouded Yellow - 10 on limestone grassland

adjacent to Foresta di Mercadante, one Gargano. Brimstone - common at Foresta di Mercadante, eight Gargano, one Amari Coast. Cleopatra - one at Gargano. Green Hairstreak - 15-20 at Foresta di Mercadante, one at Gargano. Small Copper - one at Gargano. Holly Blue - four at Gargano. Green-underwing Blue - two Amari Coast. Brown Argus - 2 at Foresta di Mercadante, 12 at Gargano, two Amari Coast. Chapman's Blue - two at Gargano. Common Blue - one at Foresta di Mercadante, 15 at Gargano. Nettle-tree Butterfly - 5 bushes on the edge of the limestone grassland adjacent to Foresta di Mercadante. Large Tortoiseshell. 3 forest meadow at Foresta di Mercadante, 6 on edge of adjacent limestone grassland. Peacock - one Amari Coast. Red Admiral - four at Gargano, two Amari Coast. Painted Lady - 20-25 at Foresta di Mercadante, five at Gargano. Wall Brown - abundant at Foresta di Mercadante and Gargano, common on Amari Coast. Speckled Wood - one adjacent to limestone grassland at Foresta di Mercadante, two at Gargano, at least 20 Amari Coast. Small Heath - moderately common at Foresta di Mercadante, at least 15 at Gargano. Grizzled Skipper - one at Foresta di Mercadante. Red Underwing Skipper - one at Gargano. Mallow Skipper - one at Gargano.