

Delight of Spring. May 2019.

Contributed by Jos
Last Updated Thursday, 27 June 2019

Traditionally an excellent month in Lithuania, the numbers of butterflies rapidly increasing as the month progresses, including flights of some of the most enchanting species in the country. Good month, with Swallowtails, Dingy Skippers and Clouded Apollos among the 20 species seen in the first half of the month, then a dramatic upswing with almost 40 species on the wing, including more Clouded Apollos, highly localised Mallow Skippers and Violet Coppers, plus other goodies such as Bog Fritillary, Little Blue and Green-underside Blue.

1-9 May. Upswing in Variety. After a period out of the country (Golan Heights and Israel), I arrived back in Lithuania to a whole bunch of species flying for the first time this season - among the common species, plenty of Pieridae (Brimstones, Green-veined Whites, Small Whites, Wood Whites and Orange Tips), plus other "wave two" butterflies - all my first of the year in Lithuania, several Small Coppers, six Holly Blues, a couple of dozen Map Butterflies and three Speckled Woods. Best of the lot though, exploring meadows and gravel areas south of Vilnius on the 9th, I not only bumped into plenty of Queen of Spain Fritillaries and Weaver's Fritillaries, along with Small Heaths and Small Coppers, but also an impressive eight Swallowtails, one Grizzled Skipper and, a rather localised species, eight Dingy Skippers. 12 May. Apollo Landing. Very pleasant trip out of the city - a window in the clouds coinciding with a window in work schedules gave me a quick hour or so at one of my favoured sites near Vilnius. And what a reward, alongside expected species such as Orange Tips and Map Butterflies, a very welcome pair of Clouded Apollos. A fairly localised species in Lithuania, not only were these a week or so earlier than I might expect, but they were also totally unexpected at this site - many times in past years I have explored the slopes here, never before have I encountered Clouded Apollos in this area. Indeed, never have I seen them within 70 km of this locality! 14 May. Bird Vocals. Sun struggling to break high clouds, a day dedicated to birds at Labanoras. And a treat of vocals awaiting - to a backdrop of a Bittern booming yonder, the reel of a Savi's Warbler and the melodies of Golden Orioles, a distinct kuak kuak kuak emanating from a patch of mixed reed, sedge and open water. Not the first time I have this song at this spot - before me was my third ever Little Crake for my land! And most welcome he is too! What with Common Rosefinches also fresh in, plus Marsh Harrier and Crane both breeding, plus a magnificent seven breeding pairs of Great White Egret (a long awaited and much anticipated coloniser), this breeding season is already looking most fine 18-19 May. Mid-month Bonanza. Cracking weather, endless sun and up to 28 C - not exactly typical of mid-May in Lithuania. Superb stuff with it - not only Lesser Spotted Eagles, Turtle Doves and other spring birds, but a grand collection of butterflies, 21 species on day one and 27 species on day two. Day One. Arrival of the Ladies. Knew it was going to be a good day with the discovery of two Short-toed Blues on my land, along with several Pale Clouded Yellows and a Painted Lady. Shifting across to the Ukmerge area, it soon got even better - a smart Northern Chequered Skipper, a colony of about 35 Clouded Apollos floating around a sunny slope and my first White Admiral of the year. Perhaps even more notable, quite a number of Painted Ladies - at least 40 by the day's end. An irregular migrant species in Lithuania, Painted Ladies are totally absent some years, moderately common in others, but rare indeed are they so early in the season. However, with hundreds of thousands streaming north in southern Europe over the last month, I have a feeling this is going to be a bumper year in Lithuania! Also flying, my first Wall Browns of the year, both Small and Sooty Coppers, a dozen Common Blues, several more Short-tailed Blues and no shortage of the more common species. Day Two. Skipper Haven. Turn of meadows and open pines in the south this day, starting near Marcinkonys and later driving across to Merkine. Oodles of good butterflies from the outset, several Camberwell Beauties and my first Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries of the year among them, but I harboured ambition to seek out the highly localised Mallow Skipper. A fairly recent coloniser of Lithuania, I saw my first Mallow Skippers in the country only in 2018, a single in mid-May at one locality and a colony of six in late June at another site. With high hopes of finding more this year, I initially checked one of the localities where I had seen then the year before. No luck there, but did find one not long after - in typical high activity mode, this smart Mallow Skipper was favouring a hot sandy track, frequently landing on broken grass stalks, then zooming off only to return a few moments later. One kilometre away, adorning flower tops, another! Right little crackers, these already made my day! Complimenting them nicely, also five Grizzled Skippers during the day and, even better, 12 Dingy Skippers at one locality (this latter butterfly is also a localised species in Lithuania). One Green-underside Blue also here, plus several Short-tailed Blues, a single Little Blue and a bunch of Common Blues. Pretty amazing overall, several Brown Argus adding to the general experience. Climbing to 27 species for the day, this turned out to be the most productive day of the year so far. 25 May. In the Bog, Violet Coppers et al. Morning in Labanoras, Little Crake still singing, Bitterns booming and both Red-backed Shrikes and Spotted Flycatchers both newly-arrived. Afternoon however was dedicated to finding a trio of Lithuania's marshland jewels - early season fliers all, Marsh Fritillary, Bog Fritillary and Violet Copper. Worried looks towards developing clouds as I hiked in, but fortunately I arrived to a window of about an hour of mostly warm sun. A nice bonus of a False Heath Fritillary started things off, a classic dark individual attempting to sun itself during a brief period of cloud. Didn't see this species in 2018, so was pleased indeed to find this. Continuing the theme of the month, a few Painted Ladies flying past, plus several Grizzled Skippers and a range of more common species, Brimstone et al. As for the specialities, a bit of searching and the main goal of the day revealed itself - a Violet Copper sunning on reed stalks. A real gem of a butterfly, Violet Coppers indeed have a violet sheen, but are tiny butterflies and not very easy to follow. Found four in total, not bad at all. As cloud threatened to roll in, also located a couple of Bog Fritillaries, the white-filled spots distinctive on the underwing. For the more stunning Marsh Fritillary however, I will have to wait another day.