

## Part Two. Return to the Golan Heights.

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Following my earlier trip for Lebanese Festoons and other early season species in April, this short visit from 8-10 June was very much a follow-up, concentrating only on the uplands of the Golan Heights and Mount Meron areas and targeting the many mid-summer species that inhabit these highland regions. Abundant butterflies, including Ascentria's Fritillary, Little Tiger Blue and both Tawny and Lebanese Silverline.

### DAY LOG.

8 June. Mount Gilboa & Gamla NR. Late morning arrival in Tel Aviv, warm but overcast. No such worries at Mount Gilboa, 80 km to the north-west. Arriving there early afternoon, the temperature was 32 C and the sun was burning down. The lowlands in Israel are not prime butterfly terrain in summer - though Gilboa had been magical in April, with flowery slopes full of butterflies, it was now a parched and withered landscape, flowers long gone, grass dry and yellow. As for butterflies, predictably very few - walking the rocky slopes produced Painted Ladies and the occasional Eastern Bath White, beyond that nothing. Little Tiger Blue, note the dark markings on the upper wings. Fortunately, a roadside area of relative greenery at one spot did compensate the situation somewhat - buzzing around clumps of flowers scattered along the verge, in addition to a couple of Common Blues and two Mallow Skippers, four species of rather more note - one African Ringlet, a single Small Desert Blue and, among a number of Mediterranean Tiger Blues, at least two Little Tiger Blues. Identification of these is problematic to say the least, but the marked upper wings of the males was a good pointer. In temperatures now topping 35 C, I then ambled onwards, pausing at a random track aside the Sea of Galilee. A sweat-inducing walk, enriched by a panting Spur-winged Lapwing and Woodchat Shrikes ...and six tiny little butterflies buzzing about. After what seemed an eternity, I finally got views of them settled - rather nice Small Desert Blues! And with that, I then climbed into the hills of the Golan Heights, stopping at Gamla Nature Reserve. Still pretty arid, but additional few hundred metres of altitude did knock a few degrees off the temperature, plus preserved a modicum of greenery to occasional patches of the grassland - still relatively few butterflies, but did find one area with flowers - and with it butterflies. Small Whites most common and only seven species in total, but this did include several Lesser Fiery Coppers, three Brown Argus and one Dark Grass Blue. So, day one essentially over - skirted the Syrian border, destroyed buildings apparent, a family living in the ruins of one, then continued to the Syrian Druze village of Majdal Shams. As expected, this introductory afternoon had been pretty poor in comparison to April in terms of butterflies. Next day however was Mount Hermon, high hopes for that!

9 June. Mount Hermon. Basic plan was to start at the bottom ski lift station, altitude 1700 metres, then to meander up to the top station at 1900 metres. And fantastic it was, butterflies in abundance at all altitudes. Even before reaching the base station, quite a number of Levantine Marbled Whites active in the early morning sun, plus ever present Painted Ladies and a couple of Dusky Meadow Browns.

On the slopes immediately above the base station, it was apparent that I was going to have a good day - hundreds of Long-tailed Blues massing around small shrubs was pretty impressive indeed! Also on these lower slopes, a single Anatolian Fiery Copper and the first fritillary of the day - very sparse spotting, it turned out to be my target species of the trip, a male Ascentria's Fritillary! A species only described to science in 2017 (having previously thought to be an isolated population of Persian Fritillaries), Ascentria's Fritillaries are currently thought to exist on this single mountain and nowhere else on the world! If however I had had any illusions that the species would be difficult to find, I was wrong - as I climbed higher, Ascentria's Fritillaries became more and more common, many dozens seen on the higher slopes.

And not just Ascentria's Fritillaries, but many other butterflies too. As I continued upwards, though Long-tailed Blues diminished in number, overall butterfly numbers and variety increased massively.

Zigzagging up through stony mixed grass/shrub, butterflies seen included many Zephyr Blues, several smart Clouded Apollos, a few dashing Lebanese Clouded Yellows (plus many of the smaller Clouded Yellows) and four big chunky Dark Rock Browns. As always, many Painted Ladies too.

Some hours later, above the top ski station, it truly proved fantastic, bar the fact that most of the area is closed military zone! Dodging occasional Israeli Defense Force patrols, I managed to meander across to relatively lush areas fed by rapidly melting snow. And these were superb in terms of butterflies - masses of Zephyr Blues puddling, plus Lebanese Clouded Yellows, several Cleopatra, one Swallowtail and a rich assortment of fritillaries, including Ascentria's, Glanville, Niobe and Queen of Spain Fritillaries. Then however I got caught by the IDF who politely sent me back to the top ski lift station. Trying to walk the other way, another patrol blocked my route, so I decided to begin my descent instead. And darn me, another IDF patrol stopped me a few hundred metres down and also said this was a closed military zone! They wanted to put me in their vehicle and transport me back to the bottom of the mountain, but I managed to persuade them to not do this and began to walk back to the ski lift again. Once the patrol was out of sight, I nipped off the track and clambered downward undisturbed. More amazing butterflies on route down - new for the day, several Powdered Brimstones, three Green Hairstreaks and, totally unexpected, one splendid Lebanese Festoon! Target of my April trip, I had imagined these would have long since stopped flying, I guess those at higher altitude fly a little later than the ones I saw. Very cooperative individual too, daintily flying from flower to flower. Eventually I reached the base station, no further encounters with the IDF. Now late afternoon and 32 C, I then had a potter around in areas some kilometres further down the mountain, Levantine Marbled Whites the main species here, but also Dusky Meadow Brown and a variety of more common species. And with that, I retired for the day, a pleasing 25 species noted, many in impressive numbers.

10 June. Mount Hermon, Bar'an & Mount Meron. I had expected to potter around this day, mopping up the occasional species that I had missed. What I had not expected was a phenomenal day, seeing 43 species, over half of which were new for the trip, including a couple of butterflies that I had only dreamed about. All started in the lower meadows on Mount Hermon, exploring a wooded valley below the Lower Car Park. Relatively dry and arid here, overall butterfly numbers were low on comparison to the higher slopes, but good numbers of Levantine Marbled Whites and, rather more hoped-for, several Ilex Hairstreaks feeding on flowers adjacent to woodland. Also a brief Eastern Mazarine Blue here and returning to the car park, one Baluchi Rock Brown flitting about on boulders at the edge of the car park. For the rest of the morning, my plan was to explore the slopes immediately above the lower ski lift station. I avoided an IDF checkpoint and then had a very pleasant few hours of meandering. Staying at relatively low altitude, I only encountered one or two Ascentria's Fritillaries this day, but there was certainly no shortage of other fritillaries - all flying together, at least 20 Glanville Fritillaries, six Knapweed Fritillaries, one or more Spotted Fritillaries and, the bigger beasts, two Niobe Fritillaries and one Cardinal Fritillary.

Also in this area of short stunted vegetation on open rocky slopes, a nice medley of coppers and skippers, both offering identification challenges in their own ways. Small Coppers were simple enough, but a number of fiery coppers were initially more puzzling - first eliminating Lesser Fiery Coppers, it then took me a while to realize that both Anatolian Fiery Coppers and Turkish Fiery Coppers were present, small wonder I was getting confused!

As for the skippers, it is always a headache where multiple species occur and on this slope, there were several of the golden skippers as well as both Muschampin and Carcharodus skippers! As usual, the Carcharodus skipper got me scratching my head - from photographs, I assume Oriental Marbled Skipper. Also present, several Mallow Skippers and the more evocative-sounding Syrian Skipper. With the scent gland giving a good pointer to identification, at least two species of golden skippers also present - Levantine Skippers were identified due to the split gland, while the long thin gland indicated Small Skipper. Several went unidentified!

A few hundred metres above the lower ski lift station lies a slither of woodland in a gully, flanked either side by herbs and flowers growing in abundance upon the rocky slopes. A cracking area - constant Clouded Apollos floating back and fro, regular Cleopatra and Powdered Brimstones, but even better was to be found among the small species. Many Long-tailed and Zephyr Blues, plus some real gems - not just two very smart Eastern Brown Argus (complementing the Brown Argus seem at lower altitude), but also no less than four species of hairstreak - the first, that I initially assumed to be a Bluespot Hairstreak, turned out to be a Persian Hairstreak, (dark spot on forewing and subtly different blue spot and surrounding markings). Next up, a couple of Ilex Hairstreaks, then another Mount Hermon speciality, the rather small and nondescript Rebel's Hairstreak (a bit like a dull uncoloured Green Hairstreak, though with faint rear wing markings). And just to complete the set, two Green Hairstreaks also seen, these preferring the trees in the gully. After a few top class hours, I decided to descend and leave the Hermon area, driving through the scorched Jordan Valley (36-40 C) and across to the rather greener hills adjacent to the Lebanese border midway to the Mediterranean. At the heart of this area is Mount Meron, rising to over 1200 metres, the highest mountain in Israel outside the occupied Golan territories. In contrast to Mount Hermon, the mountain and surrounding areas are well-forested (Palestine Oak, Eastern Strawberry Tree, etc) and support a luxuriant undergrowth of bramble et al, this giving off a distinctively European feel. In this radically different habitat, I had hoped for different butterflies and, stopping at three localities (pine forest near Yir'on, thick scrub forest at Bar'an and Mount Meron itself), I was not disappointed. The Yir'on stop, a dozen or so kilometres short of Meron, was purely a random affair - seeing a nice track leading through open pines, I pulled over to explore. And good it was, a buzz of skippers hurtling about, all chasing each other - like a mini skipper convention, Mallow Skippers, Eastern Marbled Skipper and Orbed Red-underwing Skippers! Was 34 C here and I only stayed about 20 minutes, but after sorting the skippers out, I also added my only Eastern Baton Blues of the trip, plus several Lesser Fiery Coppers, a few Brown Argus and both Powdered Brimstones and Levantine Marbled Whites. Not bad for a random bit of roadside verge. Five kilometres further, Bar'an was a locality that I had explored in April. I dared here to dream of one of the silverline butterflies, stunning species that have very restricted ranges in Israel. I did not truly have much expectation however - the extent of my knowledge of exact distribution amounted to small blobs close to the Lebanese border in the 'Butterflies of Israel' book. Still 34 C as I walked along, but I was immediately impressed by the abundance of hairstreaks

active along the track - in just a few hundred metres, no less than 30 Bluespot Hairstreaks and ten Ilex Hairstreaks. However, what came next was the icing on the cake - resting on a stalk of dry grass, a small fat-bodied butterfly with a distinctive underwing of tawny brown blotches on cream base ...one stunning Tawny Silverline! Yay, immediately became top butterfly of the trip. It didn't hold onto the crown very long however, stopping in the campsite at the base of Mount Meron, the very first butterfly I found was a Levantine Silverline! Daintier than the Tawny Silverline, with exquisite leopard spotting on the underwing, this was an absolute cracker, the new top butterfly of the trip! Lots more good butterflies here - both Cleopatra and Powdered Brimstones, plenty of Turkish Meadow Browns, a few more Bluespot Hairstreaks, about 35 Long-tailed Blues and a range of species more typical of Europe, Holly Blues, Large Whites and ever-present Painted Ladies all included. To end the day, one Black Whip Snake crossing the road, a bunch of Fire Salamanders in a damp cave and a further two Levantine Silverlines on the grassland above the campsite. And with that, it was time to hit the road, a two-hour drive back to Tel Aviv to be ready for the flight out of Israel. Trip over, a very successful mini-excursion, notching up 54 species, over a dozen of which were new species for me. For full systematic list of all butterflies seen on this trip, in both April and June, [CLICK HERE](#)