

Arctic Butterflies, July 2020

Contributed by Jos
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On remote mountains far beyond the Arctic Circle, there live a whole bunch of specialised butterflies, species that are, to me, almost mystical. About 16 species in all, the names alone are mouthwatering enough - Arctic Blue, Polar Fritillary, Dewy Ringlet, Norse Grayling and more.

However, with the world blighted by Covid-19 and its associated travel restrictions, and with myself suffering the consequences of tick-borne encephalitis, it was not perhaps the best time to ponder global travel. However, it was exactly what I felt I needed, so I decided on a 5350 km round-trip from Lithuania to the extreme north of Scandinavia to locate a number of these highly localised butterflies.

For the best chances of seeing the widest range of them, the ideal scenario would be to visit northern localities in both Sweden and Norway, plus several in Finland whilst on route. However, in the current era, that was not going to be possible and, in many ways, this trip had potential to not quite go as planned. At time of leaving, of particular concern were:

Borders. Due to Coronavirus restrictions, the Swedish land borders were absolutely closed, no chance of crossing. The Finland-Norway border was also closed when I departed for the trip, though the Norwegian government announced a few days into my trip that it would open to residents of Lithuania from 15 July. That was fortunate - without Norway, the trip would have been doomed.

Health State. None too good - a month on, the after-effects of tick-borne encephalitis were still resulting in considerable pain, plus some paralysis/weakness in my limbs. Fortunately, despite falling over numerous times, including once into a water-filled ditch and once head over hills down a steep slope, my health showed signs of improvement during the trip - driving the required distance proved no issue and climbing the mountains not so bad.

Weather. All the key butterflies occur on high mountain tops and all require sunshine to fly, a rare commodity in such areas. In the event, by watching forecasts and planning the route accordingly, I only lost a full day at Kilpisjärvi in Finland. Elsewhere, it was mostly sunny and temperatures reached up to 30 C.

Flight Season. Many of the key butterflies fly from June to "mid-July". Arriving in the best areas only after the 15th, numbers of some species were clearly reduced, particularly in the mountains around Alta. Early July would have been optimal, though Coronavirus restrictions wouldn't have allowed it this year. DAY LOG 9 July. Through the Baltics.

Sleep is hard these days, pain limiting me to just a few hours at best, so finally giving up at 4.30 am, I clambered out of bed and decided it a good time to start the journey north, it would give me the time to explore some of the butterfly delights of Latvia on route. In terms of targets, there are two key butterflies that occur in Latvia but not Lithuania - Arran Brown and Titania's Fritillary. I wasn't too worried about the first, as that would be easy in Finland, but I did have high hopes for the second.

I slipped across the Latvian border at 7 am and was on site at an excellent locality in the centre of the country three hours later. Bright sunshine on arrival, but a chilly 13 C …nevertheless, hordes of butterflies already flying - lots of Lesser Marbled Fritillaries, heaps of Ringlets, plenty of Meadow Browns and Chestnut Heaths. Also one False Heath Fritillary, never a butterfly I see very often. Plus quite a few Amanda's Blues and all three of the skippers. Though clouds kept scuttling across the blue sky, the next couple of hours were pretty good - despite a couple of showers dampening things down and my wayward leg not always cooperating, the sunny periods did produce plenty of butterflies. And among the highlights, one Ilex Hairstreak, one Cranberry Blue, several Northern Brown Argus and, after much searching, one very welcome Titania's Fritillary - found it flying on a patch of overgrown meadow aside a wet ditch.

About midday, an unfriendly slab of thick cloud parked itself overhead, basically halting most butterfly action, though it was at this moment that I found both the Cranberry Blue and a Large Copper. And with that, it was time to continue northwards towards Estonia. Cut towards the coast and the road to Tallinn. Now basking in unbroken sunshine and 20 C, I decided to make a random stop in forestlands aside the Baltic Sea. Excellent decision - found a forest track heaving in butterflies! Among many species present, two superb Black Hairstreaks, a couple of Little Blues, one Poplar Admiral, one Large Tortoiseshell and a superb range of fritillaries - lots of Silver-washed Fritillaries and Lesser Marbled Fritillaries, several Heath Fritillaries and, stars of the afternoon, one Pallas's Fritillary and two very nice Scarce Fritillaries.

So, a productive start to the trip, 37 species of butterfly, some corkers among them. Hit the road and drove up to Tallinn. Arms aching, right leg wobbly, happy. 10 July, Northbound, Southern Finland. Arctic Terns in its wake, Common Scoters and Common Eiders as we approached Finland, took the 6.00 am ferry from Tallinn to Helsinki, thereafter began

the long drive north, covering 740 km by evening to reach the Finland-Sweden border for an overnight stop at the northern tip of the Gulf of Bothnia. Immediately apparent the relative sparsity of butterflies in comparison to the Baltic States - random stops generally producing just an occasional butterfly here and there. Even at the best stop, a patch of flowering forest edge, a grand total of just 13 species seen - Silver-studded Blues the most common, but also including Black-veined White, Moorland Clouded Yellow and four species of fritillary ... several Silver-washed Fritillaries, three High Brown Fritillaries, fairly common Lesser Marbled Fritillaries and one Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary. 11 July, Northbound, Arctic Finland. A glorious sunny morning, I continued the push north, crossing the Arctic Circle at 8.00 am and reaching Kilpisjärvi late afternoon, another 460 km notched up. With good sunshine, I stopped several times to explore the margins of cottongrass bogs, some good butterflies as a result. Moorland Clouded Yellows and Silver-studded Blues proved fairly common, plus a nice scattering of added extras along the way - one Cranberry Blue, a few Mazarine Blues and Idas Blues, several Cranberry Fritillaries and, in a couple of locations, colonies of both Pearl-bordered Fritillaries and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries. One butterfly of note, for it sent me tumbling to land on my back in a water-filled ditch as my leg collapsed, also found my only Baltic Grayling of the trip.

Arrived at Kilpisjärvi just as cloud rolled in, one Pale Arctic Clouded Yellow vanishing over the slopes being the only butterfly seen.

12-14 July. Kilpisjärvi. At the north-west extremity of Finland, 300 km north of the Arctic Circle and in a small arm of land flanked by both Norway and Sweden, Kilpisjärvi is a peculiarity on Finland – the only Alpine region, home to the country's highest points. And upon these peaks, my first chance of Arctic butterflies. A monolith rising above the village, Saana Fell is the most famous, though my main focus was on the plateau beyond and the high top of Korkea-Jehkas. Provide the weather Gods and my health played ball, a good chance of many species here, the tops being Polar Fritillary and Arctic Fritillary.

Day One. Essentially lost the whole day to cloud and rain - a grand total of two butterflies seen – one Common Blue and one bicolorata Green-veined White. Day Two. Somewhat greater potential, a cocktail of scurrying clouds, bursts of sunshine and, latter on, periods of heavy rain. In this, I hiked a round trip of 18 km, a test for my knee that was still very prone to random buckling, me tumbling for the umpteenth time to the ground. Up I slowly went, eyeing patches of blue sky around the higher slopes of Korkea-Jehkas. Bluethroats, Redwings and Bramblings abundant in the lower birch zone, Meadow Pipits and occasional Wheatears just about the only birds seen on the open tundra. The sun proved a very elusive commodity this day, the sunny patches always seeming a little further up, butterflies totally absent. But then, at about altitude 850 metres, suddenly a brief break in the clouds and I was bathed in sunshine ...immediately butterflies on the wing, fritillaries quartering the slope, browns in jerky flight too. Off in pursuit I went, new species both – Arctic Fritillary tracked down first, then Dewy Ringlet. Thoughts of further species were dashed when the sun once again vanished, a window of a mere 10 minutes. Upward I trudged, past patches of snow and finally onto the highest plateau, altitude 975 metres. And it was here that I was treated to my second sunny spell of the day, a more fulfilling half hour of pretty good sunshine. Arctic Fritillaries again, plus four hyper active Northern Clouded Yellows. Trick here was to really study each of the fritillaries – underwing the key. Alas I did not find a Polar Fritillary, but I did find a very cooperative Arctic Fritillary thoughtfully settling on a rock as the sun briefly went behind a cloud. Arctic Fritillary Mountain Fritillary With dark skies brooding, the sun would not last much longer – I tried to find an Arctic Blue among patches of its favoured Mountain Ravens ...no sign, but did find another new species, a very nice Mountain Fritillary. And then it started to rain, down the mountain I went, my knee buckling rather often in the descent. So, summary of the day – only four species, but classic species all ...Northern Clouded Yellow, Arctic Fritillary, Mountain Fritillary and Dewy Ringlet. Attempted to get into Norway in the evening, hoping to get to Alta to coincide with good weather forecast for the next day. No big surprise, we were turned back at the border. Day Three. Excellent weather, 19 C and sunny all day. Explored the lower slopes of Saani Fell, climbing to about 900 metres before dropping back to the lower fells. Many butterflies flying, Cranberry Blues and Cranberry Fritillaries common, plus both Northern Clouded Yellow and Pale Arctic Clouded Yellow. Also at least 25 Dewy Ringlets, eight Mountain Fritillaries and, in the open birches lower down, two Freija's Fritillaries, another new species for me. All in all, a very nice day, walked about 12km. With the Norwegian border set to open next day, I decided to drive a little to the east and position myself at the Kalkenenai border with the plan to cross at midnight, thereafter just a two hour drive to Alta. As it was, got to the border at 6pm and found it unmanned ...so crossed and continued on my way. Two kilometres inside Norway, one stunning Hawk Owl by the roadside, nice welcome indeed. Thirty kilometres inside Norway, a border control point, oops! Totally expected to be turned back, but after a few minutes of questioning, mostly ensuring we had not been to Sweden (with its high rates of Coronavirus), we were allowed to continue. Nice border guards and just two hours later we were on the Baeskeden Plateau in the hills above Alta. Perfect evening, camping out in the Arctic, midnight sun, breeding Golden Plovers calling just yonder.

15-16 July. Alta. Day One. Vast open tundra plains, mournful calls of Golden Plovers echoing out, Temminck's Stints, Wood Sandpipers and Ringed Plovers breeding aside cottongrass bogs, a wonderful setting. With unbroken sunshine, the plan for this day was to explore some of the higher hills – herds of Reindeer sauntering past, but an obvious scarcity of butterflies immediately apparent. Possibly slightly related to a strong wind, but I think more likely the peak of the season was over. Either way, I had to work for my rewards here, many kilometres of drudging the tundra for an occasional butterfly that all too often went zooming off in the wind! Of the handful of species seen, Dewy Ringlets were the most common, followed by Pale Arctic Clouded Yellows. Other than these, two Arctic Graylings were the highlight and one Polar Fritillary, both unfortunately not submitting to photographs! In a lower damp area, also added one Bog Fritillary and two Freija's Fritillaries. Middle afternoon, with cloud beginning to build to the west, I decided to drop down to the coast – the main target of my trip resided down there, namely Arctic Blue. Predictably, there was little sun

down on the coast and at my chosen spot for my target the sun weather did not look very promising at all. Started by fluffing one identification – thought I had found Arctic Woodland Ringlets only to then realize they were Arran Browns ...didn't know these occurred so far north! As for blues, a brief spell of hazy sun brought out quite a number of Idas Blues and Common Blues, plus a Small Copper, but then pretty thick cloud set in and it seemed all was over for the day. Departing the locality however, a steep back of loose scree looked just perfect for Arctic Blues ...maybe I could find one roosting. The biggest problem here was my leg and arm – steep scree, a leg with a collapsing knee and an arm with limited mobility do not make happy bed fellows! Fortunately there was nobody present to watch my ungainly climb up the shale, it was very much a scramble on all fours, slipping back down many times. All for no butterfly! Next problem was how to get down – no way my knee was going to stand that, so I sat on my butt and slid down! Midway down, I spied a butterfly quietly roosting on a stalk. Stopped my slide and there he was, a perfect (albeit slightly tatty) Arctic Blue, complete with ghostly white patches on the underwing. After managing to reorientate without falling, I even got the photos I wanted, good result. As I was about to leave the butterfly, I then noticed a break in the clouds, perhaps it would be sunny for a few moments. And indeed it was, enough to tempt the Arctic Blue into activity, opening its wings to reveal to slate blue uppers, a perfect colour match to the scree. Five or ten minutes of activity from the butterfly, then onward down the slope I continued. Excellent end to the day. Day Two. Concentrated on the northern end of the Baeskenen Plateau this day, slightly lower and perhaps better for butterflies I thought. Very nice weather this morning, a warm 20 C, no wind and non-stop sunshine, but still butterflies were few and far between – clearly the season was near its end in these northern latitudes. What it lacked in quantity however, it made up for in quality – of the seven species I saw, three were new species for me! The new ones being Frigga's Fritillary (three seen), Norse Grayling (two) and Arctic Ringlet (one), nice butterflies all. Along with these, several Cranberry Blues, at least 15 Dewy Ringlets, a dozen Northern Clouded Yellows and, near the birch line, a few Moorland Clouded Yellows. Mid-afternoon, the weather began to change and the forecast for the following days was pretty dire – no point in hanging around, dropped off the plateau and headed back to the boreal forests closer to the Finnish border, Rough-legged Buzzard and Goshawk en route. 17-18 July. Bound for Eastern Finland. 1000 km relocation, leaving the tundra of Alta and driving to the boreal forests of the Kuhimo region on the Russian border in central Finland. A journey through landscapes of fens, bogs and forests, I added a detour to Neljan Tuulen Tupa for a touch of civilized birding at the feeders of this remote restaurant – coffee with Pine Grosbeaks et al at point black range, nice stuff. So over the coffee and bun, with Red Squirrels scampering below, the bird tally amounted to five Pine Grosbeaks, four Siberian Jays, one Hawfinch, at least 50 Bramblings, numerous Common Redpolls and Greenfinches. No Siberian Tits here this morning, but did have them around my tent the next morning.

As for butterflies, very few north of Rovaniemi, but impressive numbers between Rovaniemi and Kuhmo – alongside assorted bogs, hundreds of Cranberry Fritillaries, plenty of Idas Blues and Cranberry Blues, quite a few Lesser Marbled Fritillaries, plus my several Arran Browns. Nearing Kuhimo, now south of the Arctic Circle, flavours of the south back on show – Scarce Copper, High Brown Fritillary and Essex Skipper all seen. 19-20 July. Big Beasties, Kuhmo. There are bears and wolves out there in them there woods. In extensive boreal forests straddling the Russian border, the region is home to some of the best concentrations of large predators in Europe, Brown Bears in particular, but also Wolves and, rather more elusive, Wolverines. And throughout the region, numerous opportunities exist to see some of these, hides available for the night overlooking baited meres that attract the animals in. And that was the plan for the evening, Brown Bears near guaranteed, Wolves hopefully a bonus. Before that I had a day to spare. And a pleasant day it was, 32 C and sunny, plenty of butterflies. Butterflies with a distinct southern flavour was back in the mix – 13 species, headed by numerous Lesser Marbled Fritillaries and Cranberry Fritillaries, backed up by assorted other fritillaries, a few Arran Browns, my first Small Tortoiseshells of Finland and both Idas and Silver-studded Blues. A couple of hours of R & R, then it was 5 pm, time for the main event of the day. Via a few kilometres of forest tracks, destination was a large open mere just a stone's throw from the Russian border. And here we were left on our own, home for the next 15 hours a wooden hide overlooking an area baited with fish offal and the remains of a reindeer carcass. Beyond a sunny expanse of meadow and mere stretching to pines beyond, the temperature was still over 30 C. Well, we settled down for the wait. And what a 'long' wait it was - a mere ten minutes after arriving, there was an animal moving along the distant forest edge, oh giddy me, the first Wolf of the evening. Though I had high hopes of Wolf, and indeed had chosen this locality specifically for its high possibilities for this magnificent species, they are far from guaranteed. But here it was, a sleek sandy Wolf sauntering along, grand stuff. Twenty minutes later, from the immediate right of our hide, a lumbering hulk of fur emerged from the woodland, barging through willowherb and out into the open right in front of us ...the first Brown Bear of the evening, a dark individual with fairly blond face. Then things went ballistic, almost nonstop bear and wolf action for the next hour: 17.45: Pale-face Brown Bear in front of hide, several Ravens, many Hooded Crows, one Lesser Black-backed Gull. 17.50: Black Kite swoops in, grabs some chunk of fish. 18.00: Second paler Bear arrives from the right, eyed by the first Bear. 18.05: The two Bears feeding 30 metres apart. 18.10: Both Bears exit left separately. 18.20: Distant Wolf returns, trots across mere to the area where the Bears had gone. Adult White-tailed Eagle arrives. 18.25: Wolf right in front of hide, a sleek young animal. 18.30: Second larger Wolf appears from the right. 18.35: Two Wolves greet, nuzzling each other. 18.45: First Wolf trots to left to rest middle distance in the meadow, c20 Ravens around. 18.50: New Brown Bear individual, all dark, moving along the distant forest edge. 18.55: The larger Wolf moves off, heading to distant forest, exits rear, then appears again ten minutes later.

As the final Wolf slipped back into the forest, there then followed a somewhat quiet period – an hour of no big predators, just Ravens, Hooded Crows and gulls ambling about in the place. Had some thoughts that perhaps that was it for the evening, but absolutely not, a Wolf returned just after 8 pm, then another, then again Brown Bears. And so the evening continued, near continuous things to see. The period around midnight, still quite bright despite being south of the

Arctic circle was very good - the Brown Bears and Wolves squabbling over the Reindeer carcass, large chunks of it dragged away by the Wolves. Into the early hours, much activity continued, the final Wolf being at 4.00 am, the final Brown Bears being two feasting on cloudberry on the forest edge from 4.20 till 4.55 am. For the next couple of hours, I kept an eye open for Wolverine, these occasionally sneaking in once the Wolves have departed. Alas, no sign. At 8 am, with the sun still shining, we departed the hide, quite an experience it had been. With many of the nights bears and wolves returning many times, it is difficult to say how many individuals we had seen, but they had been at least 4-5 different Brown Bears and a minimum of three Wolves. One Red Squirrel too. Bears: Wolf: And at the midnight hour, Brown Bear and Wolf:

20-21 July. Southbound to Helsinki. With bears and wolves well and truly seen and all my likely butterfly targets now found, it was now time to head south. Bought a ticket for the Helsinki to Tallinn ferry and set off on the final 660 km leg across southern Finland. Stopped off at a few sites en route, most notably Kittee in the east and Soneby on the Baltic coast. A distinct southerly flavour to butterfly fauna here, many of the species similar to those found in the Baltic States, but pleasurable wanderings all the same - a grand total of 26 species seen, the highlight being at least 40 Arran Browns at Kittee. Also added Wood White, Brimstone, Holly Blue, Amanda's Blue, Dark Green Fritillary, Heath Fritillary and Peacock ...all my first in Finland. And that was that, I booked a ticket for the evening ferry on the 21st and crossed back to Estonia. 22 July. Estonia. Questionable weather, quite blustery with clouds scurrying over, but fortunately enough sunny spells to savour some of Estonia's butterflies. Decided to explore the Aegviidu area, a former Soviet military training area and today a rare example of open heathland. Cracking start in the surrounding woodland with good numbers of Silver-washed Fritillaries (at least 60), High Brown Fritillaries (30+) and smaller numbers of Dark Green Fritillary, Lesser Marbled Fritillary and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, as well as two Arran Browns and a very fine Large Copper. Then it was to the heathland, the plan to try and find a few of the more localised species that occur here, notably Eastern Baton Blue. Several hours wandering around, plenty of Silver-studded Blues and Idas Blue, but typical of this habitat, numbers of other butterflies were pretty low. Adding to the collection of blues, managed four Amanda's Blues, one Mazarine Blue, two Short-tailed Blue and, unfortunately all too brief, one Eastern Baton Blue. Also one Grayling, the only one of the trip. By mid-afternoon, cloud was again building, I'd seen 26 species of butterfly for the day and I decided it was enough - the forecast for next day was not very good, so I turned for home, 600 km later I was in Vilnius, trip over.

SPECIES LIST (BUTTERFLIES)

Black-veined White - Latvia, Finland/Norway Small White - Latvia, Finland/Norway Green-veined White - Latvia, Finland/Norway Wood White - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Moorland Clouded Yellow - Finland/Norway Pale Arctic Clouded Yellow - Finland/Norway Northern Clouded Yellow - Finland/Norway Brimstone - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Ilex Hairstreak - Latvia Black Hairstreak - Latvia Large Copper - Latvia, Estonia Purple-edged Copper - Latvia Purple-shot Copper - Estonia Scarce Copper - Estonia, Finland/Norway Small Copper - Estonia, Finland/Norway Holly Blue - Finland/Norway Little Blue - Latvia Short-tailed Blue - Estonia Eastern Baton Blue - Estonia Arctic Blue - Finland/Norway Silver-studded Blue - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Idas Blue - Estonia, Finland/Norway Cranberry Blue - Latvia, Finland/Norway Northern Brown Argus - Latvia Mazarine Blue - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Amanda's Blue - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Common Blue - Estonia, Finland/Norway Lesser Purple Emperor - Latvia Poplar Admiral - Latvia Small Tortoiseshell - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Large Tortoiseshell - Latvia Comma - Latvia, Finland/Norway Peacock - Finland/Norway Pallas's Fritillary - Latvia Silver-washed Fritillary - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Dark Green Fritillary - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway High Brown Fritillary - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Lesser Marbled Fritillary - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Pearl-bordered Fritillary - Estonia, Finland/Norway Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary Finland/Norway Arctic Fritillary - Finland/Norway Polar Fritillary - Finland/Norway Mountain Fritillary - Finland/Norway Cranberry Fritillary - Finland/Norway Frigga's Fritillary - Finland/Norway Freija's Fritillary - Finland/Norway Titania's Fritillary - Latvia Bog Fritillary - Finland/Norway False Heath Fritillary - Latvia Heath Fritillary - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Scarce Fritillary - Latvia Meadow Brown - Latvia Ringlet - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Arctic Ringlet - Finland/Norway Dewy Ringlet - Finland/Norway Arran Brown - Estonia, Finland/Norway Grayling - Estonia Baltic Grayling - Finland/Norway Arctic Grayling - Finland/Norway Norse Grayling - Finland/Norway Pearly Heath - Latvia Chestnut Heath - Latvia, Estonia Large Wall Brown - Latvia, Finland/Norway Small Skipper - Latvia Essex Skipper - Latvia, Estonia, Finland/Norway Large Skipper - Latvia, Estonia

(66 species trip, 45 species in Finland/Norway)