

Butterflies of the Italian Alps, August 2020.

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A short trip, primarily targeting late summer butterflies of Trentino, a picturesque area of the Alps north-west of Milan. Highly successful it proved, the five days producing no less than 73 species, including 15 species of ringlet and grayling, as well as other delights such as Provincial Short-tailed Blue and both Apollo and Small Apollo.

Introduction. From Arctic to Alpine, returning from northern Scandinavia, I arrived back in Lithuania to a country steadily imposing restrictions on travel to more and more countries. Thus, before all doors potentially closed, I decided it a good idea to squeeze in another trip ...and what better compliment to the butterflies of the Arctic than those of Alpine lands. So it was, at a cost of 30 euro round trip, I bought some last minute flight tickets to Milan, rented a car and spent five very enjoyable days in Trentino, dramatic landscapes, fantastic weather and a whole bunch of late season butterflies, ringlets of assorted species the main targets.

6 August. Monte Baldo. Early morning flight to Milan, nice upgrade from Europcar, off onto the autostrada. Three hours later, just after midday, I was at the base of Monte Baldo, a limestone massif towering above Lake Garda. The intention had been to climb immediately to the higher altitudes, but that soon got waylaid by the discovery of the amazing Valle dei Molini, a steep winding valley that cut through the precipitous eastern flanks of the mountain. Green and lush, abundant flowers on roadside verges, the valley was choc-a-bloc with butterflies – my upward progress came to a crashing halt! I had assumed these lower latitudes would be past their best, but upon flowers in every directions, hundreds of Scotch Arguses, dozens of Meadow Browns and a good scattering of Marbled Whites. And in among them, loads of other butterflies, not least Clouded Yellows and Berger's Clouded Yellows, three White Admirals, five species of fritillary, a splendid Dryad, several Short-tailed Blues, two Adonis Blues and a single Lulworth Skipper (along with Small, Essex and Large Skippers). Eventually, leaving the narrow Valle dei Molini, I reached open limestone slopes and left my car. I was now at just over 1500 metres altitude, it was no over 30 C. Almost no Scotch Argus here, but loads of Chalkhill Blues in their place, this becoming the most abundant butterfly as I ascended on foot. Climbed this day to about 1750 metres, but a rather disappointing lack of butterflies at the top, Chalkhill Blues thinning out and the only additions of any note being two Silver-spotted Skippers and a couple of very faded Darwin's Heaths. Still, what with Alpine Swifts hurtling about, a Rock Thrush on an old building and a Black Kite floating around, I couldn't complain too much. Found a colony of ten Bluespot Hairstreaks on the scramble down towards my car, a nice finale to the first afternoon in Italy. From here, I drove north and checked into a hotel in Dermulo, a nice base for my next few days of exploration. 30 species of butterfly this day, quite content with that.

7 August. Valle di Rabbi. I had hoped that the Val di Rabbi would be the highlight of my trip to the Alps ...and indeed it so proved. In a ten-hour hike up to 2500 metres, a wonderful progression of landscapes and a truly amazing number of butterflies at the various altitudes. The high peaks already bathed in sunshine, I started my hike at 8.30 am in the still deep-shaded valley just above the Terme di Rabbi, not a single butterfly to be seen. Ninety minutes later, after a considerable upward slog to 1700 metres, I departed the shadow and stepped onto an dappled bank, the steep slope soaking in the first rays of the already warm sunshine. And giddy me, a splendid Apollo floating round, a stunner for the first butterfly of the day. Turned out to be several just here, sunning themselves, nectaring on the abundant flowers, flying up and down the slope. A momentary pause turned rather longer as more and more butterflies appeared, including the first Titania's Fritillaries of the day, along with Scarce Coppers and Wood White. Continuing upward a little, I reached a large open meadow at about 1775 metres, a rare patch of relatively level ground. Full of flowers and full of butterflies! Much time here, sifting through the many species present - Dark Green Fritillaries and Niobe Fritillaries in abundance, Titania's Fritillaries and Lesser Mountain Ringlets common, Scarce Coppers everywhere. And in among all these, lots of other butterflies, including a couple of Purple-edged Coppers, several Alpine Heaths, both Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Heath Fritillary and a good number of both Essex and Silver-spotted Skippers. Eventually, it was time to resume the climb to higher altitudes. Passed through an open wooded section with a couple of Marbled Ringlets and a number of Large Wall Browns, then began a really steep section as the trees petered out and the landscape became one of open rocky slopes. Fabulous for butterflies, more Apollos seen, plus numerous Lesser Mountain Ringlets, several Almond-eyed Ringlets, three Osiris Blues, one Peak White and another Purple-edged Copper. Next a near vertical section, then over a rock ledge to an open broad valley gently climbing towards the Rifugio Silvio Dorigoni at over 2400 metres. And truly amazing this area was - one Small Apollo almost immediately, then a steady stream of rather mobile ringlets of assorted flavour - Common Brassy Ringlets common, a few Silky Ringlets and Almond-eyed Ringlets and still Lesser Mountain Ringlets (though less common than lower down). Finally reaching the rifugio, a final treat in the meadows immediately below - not only one more Apollo, but also a colony of Shepherd's Fritillaries, at least 30 around a flower patch. Well deserved drink at the rifugio, Crag Martins zooming around, Marmots whistling somewhere in the crags, then the long slog back. Took an alternative route down, saw many of the same species again, but also four Water Ringlets. Highlight of the return route however, in an extensive area of grassland at about 2000 metres, was the finding of several Swiss Brassy Ringlets, these also proving most challenging to (a) identify and (b) photograph! Think there were several at this locality and no Common Brassy Ringlets. What I presume to be Swiss Brassy Ringlet - small twin spots on forewing, unmarked upper rear wings.

By the time we finally reached the valley's bottom some hours later, it was 6.30 pm, the valley was once again in shade and butterflies absent. One species only, a Large Wall Brown. Superb day it had been, 29 species seen, very good for high altitude. 8 August. Valle di Peio. Took the easy route up this day, two rather pleasurable ski lifts carrying me to the lofty heights of 3000 metres. Barren rocks and scree, patches of snow, precious little vegetation, not classic butterfly habitat ... and indeed only two species seen at this altitude - one rather unexpected Small Tortoiseshell and, more exotic and initially causing me some identification issues, three Piedmont Ringlets. Hadn't expected this species on the trip, so very nice indeed. From 3000 metres, I then hiked downwards, a total of eight hours in all, but the first section unfortunately mostly clouded by a puff of cloud that stubbornly sat over the summit of the mountain. Got back to sunny slopes, now richly dotted by Alpine flowers, at about 2300 metres ... and this was truly a Goldilocks zone, many species of butterflies in abundance. Among the more prominent, Niobe Fritillaries, Alpine Heaths, Lesser Mountain Ringlets, Common Brassy Ringlets, Water Ringlets and Scarce Coppers. Onward and downward, slowly the butterfly selection evolved, masses of Dark Green Fritillaries becoming dominant (including at least 150 in one small area of thistle), plus at least 20 Silver-spotted Skippers. Essex Skippers joined the selection and, at about 1600 metres, so too a Large Skipper. Now well within the forest zone, it was a boiling 30 C in these lower lands, a couple of Scotch Argus made an appearance, plus Meadow Browns and my first Large Whites and Peacocks of the trip. And for the finale of the day a meander through meadows at 1460 metres - non-mountain species now much in evidence, a Marbled White fluttering by, plus four Clouded Yellows, a couple of Silver-studded Blues, one Silver-washed Fritillary and several Small Heaths.

Got back to Peio village at 5 pm, 31 species of butterfly this day. 9 August. Madonna di Campiglio. Shifted a little further south this day to the slopes above Madonna di Campiglio, the dramatic dolomite peaks at their most magnificent here. As for searching for butterflies, decided on a relatively gentle hike of about six hours from Patascoss at 1640 metres to Rifugio Laghi at 2060 metres. Now familiar species to kick the day off - Lesser Mountain Ringlets, abundant Dark Green Fritillaries, quite a few Silver-spotted Skippers, etc. Sweltering hot on the ascent, temperatures above 30 C even at mid-altitudes, but plenty of good butterflies all the way up, including relatively fresh Darwin's Heaths, my first Commas of the trip and many Silver-washed Fritillaries and Niobe Fritillaries. Very friendly cows too! From Rifugio Laghi, I took a narrow path to Lago Ritort - not ideal for photographing along this path due to the steep slope, but big numbers of butterflies, especially browns and ringlets – Scotch Argus, Silky Ringlets, Common Brassy Ringlets, Marbled Ringlets and Large Wall Brown all noted along the path. Most pleasant. From Lago Ritort, it was then a long meander down to lower altitudes, largely through forest, not too good for butterflies, though I did add more Marbled Ringlets and my only Arran Browns of the trip here. Lots of nice stuff lower down, mostly usual lower altitude species, but also including a Large Tortoiseshell, also my only one of the trip. With desires to try and find some lowland species, I then departed the mountains and drove towards Trento, stopping at a couple of localities on route that looked good. And splendid they turned out! First stop was a wooded gorge aside a stream at an altitude of just 460 metres, a broad path zigzagging down to the water. White Admirals and Silver-washed Fritillaries floating past, a couple of Brimstones, several Wood Whites. But even better were the butterflies I found on open ground aside the stream - not only a Purple Hairstreak and several Holly Blues on a buddleia, but just adjacent also three Provincial Short-tailed Blues (a new species for me) and, even better, a small colony of Chequered Blues, a very nice butterfly and another new species for me. Common Blue and a Chalkhill Blue completed the set. More rewards some kilometres further, this time in arid roadside grassland near Lago di Cavedine, altitude 240 metres. Excellent selection here, including several new for the trip – a cracking Geranium Bronze (one of my favourite butterflies), four Bath Whites, a Tree Grayling and a Woodland Grayling. Also plenty of Small Whites, Small Heaths, etc. And that was just about it for the day, I continued another few kilometres and stayed in a hotel near Arco, a splendid 43 species of butterfly this day, the highest day total of the trip. 10 August. Monte Baldo. Return to Baldo, the plan today being to climb to the highest altitudes to look for a couple of localised species that occur up there. Before that, started at a scrap of waste land in the Adige Valley, altitude 145 metres. This random stop due to a couple of buddleia spotted roadside turned out to be a fortuitous pause - on the buddleia just Red Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary, but alongside I found yet more of the little exquisites ...four Geranium Bronzes, three Provincial Short-tailed Blues and two Mallow Skippers. The latter were new for the trip, as were several Spotted Fritillaries alongside. Not a bad start to the day! Then it was up the Valle dei Molini, plenty of Scotch Argus again, plus a Tree Grayling, a Short-tailed Blue and increased numbers of Dryads. Chalkhill Blues as I reached the top of the valley, then I took a chair lift up to the high ridge of Monte Baldo, a relatively easy walk from there to a peak at 2146 metres. Very few butterflies as I walked, occasional Chalkhill Blues and Small Tortoiseshell, that was about it, but at the peak somewhat better - a number of butterflies active on a steep bank of scree. Yes, this was what I had come up here for! And soon I found the butterfly I was looking for ...one Sooty Ringlets, unfortunately very mobile and far better at traversing the steep scree than me! Didn't get a photo of that one, but did better with its cohorts on the scree - photographed one of the several Silky Ringlets present and a couple of the Mountain Fritillaries. One Great Banded Grayling did a rapid fly-by too. With my targets seen, and the next peaks along the Baldo ridge looking very far, I decided it was enough for high altitude. Wandered back to the chair lift and returned to the mid-altitudes. Added a Bluespot Hairstreak to the day tally, plus Silver-studded Blue. And with that, now late afternoon, the trip was nearly over. Made a few random stops in nearby lowlands, seeing Spotted Fritillary and Short-tailed Blue, then hit the autostrada for the few hours back to Milan. Overnight in a hotel, early morning flight next day.

SPECIES LIST

Apollo. All at altitudes between 1580 and 2375 metres, about 12 seen in the Val di Rabbi (most in two loose colonies) and one in the Val di Peio. Small Apollo. One seen in the Val di Rabbi at an altitude of around 2160 metres. Large White. Scattered individuals - four on Monte Baldo, eight in the Val di Rabbi and one at Madonna di Campiglio. Small White. Quite common, seen throughout low country, mostly below 200 metres, occasional at mid-altitude. Green-veined White. Only two seen - one on Monte Baldo, one north of Lake Garda. Bath White. In arid grassland, four aside Lago di Cavedine (north of Lake Garda). Peak White. High altitude species, one seen in the Val di Rabbi at 2060 metres. Wood White. Moderately common along woodland edges at lower altitudes - 20+ on Monte Baldo, two in the Val di Rabbi, one in the Val di Peio and three north of Lake Garda. Brimstone. Recorded twice - one Monte Baldo, two north of Lake Garda. Clouded Yellow. Scattered individuals, mostly mid-altitudes - four on Monte Baldo, five in the Val di Peio and four at Madonna di Campiglio. Berger's Clouded Yellow. Three on Monte Baldo, one in the Val di Rabbi. White Admiral. In wooded valleys at lower altitudes, four at Monte Baldo and four north of Lake Garda. Red Admiral. Seven seen - two on Monte Baldo, two in the Val di Peio, two at Madonna di Campiglio and one north of Lake Garda. Peacock. Five on Monte Baldo, seven in the Val di Peio, three at Madonna di Campiglio. Large Tortoiseshell. One on the lower slopes at Madonna di Campiglio. Small Tortoiseshell. With individuals right up to 3000 metres, a total of 15 were seen on Monte Baldo and 10 in the Val di Peio. Comma. Three at Madonna di Campiglio Silver-washed Fritillary. Fairly common in the lower and middle altitudes, totals included 50+ on Monte Baldo, one in the Val di Peio, 40+ at Madonna di Campiglio and 25 north of Lake Garda Dark Green Fritillary. Common, mostly middle to higher altitudes - best localities were the Val di Peio and Madonna di Campiglio, both supporting a minimum of 150 individuals each. Elsewhere, four at Monte Baldo and four in the Val di Rabbi. High Brown Fritillary. Possibly overlooked to a degree among the more abundant Dark Green Fritillaries and Niobe Fritillaries, two were seen in the valley bottom at Monte Baldo and a small number in lower areas at Val di Rabbi Niobe Fritillary. Mostly middle and moderately high altitudes, frequently 1500-2000 metres. Totals included 40+ in the Val di Rabbi, 40+ in the Val di Peio and 60+ at Madonna di Campiglio. Shepherd's Fritillary. Quite common in the Val di Rabbi at about 2380 metres, at least 30 seen close to the Silvio Dorigoni Rifugio. Mountain Fritillary. 12 on scree slopes at 2100 metres on Monte Baldo. Queen of Spain Fritillary. Seven Monte Baldo, two Val di Peio, one north of Lake Garda. Titania's Fritillary. Abundant in the Val di Rabbi, many dozens seen at all altitudes, but especially in the mid-altitude meadow at 1775 metres. Also four in the Val di Peio and eight at Madonna di Campiglio. Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Two in the Val di Rabbi. Lesser Marbled Fritillary. Both fairly faded individuals, one seen on Monte Baldo and one at Madonna di Campiglio. Spotted Fritillary. Six at low altitude in Adige Valley below Monte Baldo. Heath Fritillary. Moderately low altitude, ten on Monte Baldo, one in the Val di Rabbi, six in the Val di Peio. Marbled White. Mostly along flower-rich roadside verges, at least 45 seen at Monte Baldo, predominantly in the mid-altitudes of the Valle dei Molini, but occasional up to 2000 metres. Elsewhere, one in the Val di Peio and one north of Lake Garda. Woodland Grayling. One in the Valle dei Molini below Mount Baldo, one north of Lake Garda. Tree Grayling. One north of Lake Garda. Dryad. Single seen at about 300 metres altitude in the Valle dei Molini at Monte Baldo on my first visit, 12 at the same locality on my second visit. Great Banded Grayling. One seen along juniper edge at 2100 metres on Monte Baldo. Scotch Argus. Impressive numbers on Monte Baldo, at least 250 seen per visit, mostly along flower-rich roadside meadows at mid-altitude in the Valle dei Molini (300-900 metres), some higher. Elsewhere, two in the Val di Peio and eight at Madonna di Campiglio. Arran Brown. Eight at Madonna di Campiglio. Lesser Mountain Ringlet. Mostly seen on the slopes at moderately high altitude (mostly below 1800 metres), totals included 250+ in the Val di Rabbi, 40+ in the Val di Rabbi and 40+ Madonna di Campiglio. Almond-eyed Ringlet. Only seen in the Val di Rabbi, at least ten at high altitude. Sooty Ringlet. One very mobile individual on steep scree slopes at 2200 metres on Monte Baldo. Piedmont Ringlet. Three on open exposed rock debris between snowfields at just below 3000 metres in the Val di Peio. Silky Ringlet. Several at high altitudes in the Val di Rabbi (below the Silvio Dorigoni Rifugio) and Val di Peio. About 15 also seen on steep scree slopes at 2100 metres on Monte Baldo. Common Brassy Ringlet. Quite common in the higher altitude meadows at Val di Rabbi (100+ in the meadows below the Silvio Dorigoni Rifugio) and Val di Peio (200+). Eight also seen at Madonna di Campiglio. Swiss Brassy Ringlet. Several seen at one locality in the Val di Rabbi, these in meadows at about 2000 metres. Water Ringlet. In higher altitudes (2600-2700 metres, near damp areas), four seen in the Val di Rabbi and 30+ in the Val di Peio. Marbled Ringlet. Moderately high altitude (1600-1900 metres, within the open tree zones), two were seen in the Val di Rabbi and four at Madonna di Campiglio Meadow Brown. Common in lowland meadows, 120+ at Monte Baldo, 15 in the Val di Peio and five north of Lake Garda. Small Heath. Lowland species, two were seen below Monte Baldo, three in the Val di Peio and ten north of Lake Garda. Alpine Heath. At high altitudes, about 18 in the Val di Rabbi and 12 in the Val di Peio. Darwin's Heath. Middle to high altitude, two faded individuals seen on Monte Baldo, six rather fresher individuals at Madonna di Campiglio. Wall Brown. One at the bottom of the Valle dei Molini below Monte Baldo. Large Wall Brown. One at Monte Baldo, ten in the Val di Rabbi, three in the Val di Peio, 20 at Madonna di Campiglio, one north of Lake Garda. Purple Hairsteak. One in riverside woodland north of Lake Garda. Blue-spot Hairsteak. Total of 11 seen at Monte Baldo, at upper edge of forest zone. Scarce Copper. Abundant in the Val di Rabbi (hundreds flying), Val di Peio (50+) and at Madonna di Campiglio (25+). Purple-edged Copper. Three in the Val di Rabbi. Purple-shot Copper. One in the Val di Peio. Geranium Bronze. In hot dry areas at low altitude, three in the Adige Valley below Mount Baldo and one north of Lake Garda. Osiris Blue. Three in the Val di Rabbi, all above 1800 metres. Provincial Short-tailed Blue. In hot dry areas at low altitude (below 200 metres), three in the Adige Valley below Mount Baldo and four next to Lago di Cavedine (north of Lake Garda). Short-tailed Blue. Three in the Valle dei Molini below Monte Baldo. Chequered Blue. Three north of Lake Garda. Holly Blue. Five at Monte Baldo, four north of Lake Garda. Little Blue. One in grassland meadow at low altitude below Monte Baldo. Silver-studded Blue. Two on Monte Baldo, two north of Lake Garda. Chalkhill Blue. Abundant on high level limestone grassland on Monte Baldo, hundreds between 1400 and 1700 metres altitude, smaller numbers higher and lower. Elsewhere, one north of Lake Garda. Adonis Blue. Two on Monte Baldo just above the tree line. Common Blue. Moderately widespread in lower

altitude grassland, including five Monte Baldo, six in the Val di Peio and five north of Lake Garda. Also one in the Val di Rabbi at 2380 metres. Mallow Skipper. Two in the Adige Valley below Monte Baldo. Essex Skipper. Quite common on higher slopes, including at least 10 on Monte Baldo, 15 in the Val di Rabbi, 25+ Val di Peio, four Madonna di Campiglio and five north of Lake Garda. Small Skipper. Up to ten in the valley bottom below Monte Baldo. Not seen at any of the higher altitude sites. Lulworth Skipper. One in the Valle dei Molini below Monte Baldo. Silver-spotted Skipper. Quite common on mountain slopes, including seven on Monte Baldo, 12 in the Val di Rabbi, 20+ in the Val di Peio and 25+ at Madonna di Campiglio. Large Skipper. Six at Monte Baldo, three in the Val di Rabbi, one in the Val di Peio.

73 species