

Montes Universales & Pyrenees, August 2021

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Following on from a trip to the Italian Alps a couple of weeks earlier, a shift to the west - ten days in north-east Spain between the 4th and 15th of August. Primarily focussing on the Montes Universales, a range of mountains located between Madrid and Valencia, I then added a day on the coast near Valencia and a short extension to the eastern Pyrenees. With the walled town of Albarracín at its heart, the Montes Universales rise to 1900 metres and are a mix of arid scrub at lower altitudes and juniper or pine forest at higher elevation. Hot and dry in summer, with temperatures touching 40 C, a relative abundance of greenery and flowers does nevertheless exist along river courses and streams. In these areas, butterflies are abundant and include quite a number of species endemic to the region or north-east Spain. The main targets on this trip were Zapater's Ringlet, Mother of Pearl Blue and Southern Hermit, though the ultimate goal was simply to enjoy the spectacle of butterflies in dramatic landscapes.

Having had a very productive first week, I then spontaneously decided to add extensions to the coast and the Pyrenees, the ideas here being to see African Grass Blue and Mediterranean Skipper on the coast and thereafter a selection of high mountain species.

4 August. Barcelona to Albarracin.

No direct flights to the closer airport in Valencia, so instead flew to Barcelona, approximately five hours distant from the Montes Universales.

Arrived mid-afternoon, picked up a rental car and immediately hit the road. With no chance of reaching butterfly areas near Albarracin before evening, I decided to make good use of the afternoon and made a fairly random stop in the low hills west of Barcelona - chosen spot was on the edge of the Parc Natural de la Muntanya de Montserrat. Exceptionally arid however - no flowers, nothing green and basically no butterflies. I found a grand total of only six butterflies - one Southern Brown Argus, two Common Blues and three Mallow Skippers!

Gave up pretty quickly and continued the drive across the equally dry plains of Aragon, not a single butterfly seen on the wing. Did see a Golden Eagle however, plus one Griffon Vulture, a couple of Marsh Harriers, a flock of Lesser Kestrels and a bunch of White Storks.

Arrived in Albarracin at 8.30 pm, calls of Bee-eaters over the hills, Black Redstarts around my accommodation.

5 August. Noguera.

After the absolute lack of butterflies on the route across the plains the previous day, I was slightly apprehensive as to how many I would see on this day ...I needn't have been, the elevation and relative greenery of the Montes Universales resulted in miracles - a superb day it was to be. I mistimed sun up and arrived at Noguera, my destination for the day, far too early ...the deep barranco north of the village still in deep shadow. As it was 8.30 am and pretty warm, I decided to try instead a nearby hillside already bathed in sunshine. On a bramble hedge, the first butterfly of the day was a very faded Sloe Hairstreak, good start! This would also be the only Sloe Hairstreak of the trip! Moments later, more butterflies began to take to the wing, first several Small Whites and Gatekeepers, then a whole flood of species, tops being Azure Chalkhill Blues, Damon Blue, Oberthur's Anomalous Blue and Cinquefoil Skipper. Soon, among a good scattering of other species, plenty of Clouded Yellows, Iberian Marbled Whites and Silver-spotted Skippers.

Looking back towards Noguera, it seemed the barranco might now be in sunshine, so via a village bakery, there I headed. Essentially, from the village, the barranco opened out into a lush wet meadow fed by a small stream, then divided into two forks, one side leading through a lightly wooded area, the other more open but rich in streamside flowers. All areas were simply superb! Several Great Banded Graylings and Rock Graylings along the rocky path to kick things off, plus a number of Tree Graylings and a Black Satyr, then immediate success at the wet meadow with a couple of pristine Spanish Sooty Coppers - now split from Sooty Copper, the underwings are a warm orange, especially so in these very fresh individuals. Sharing the same broad patch of flowers, many more butterflies, including abundant Gatekeepers, lots of Silver-washed Fritillaries, a few Queen of Spain Fritillaries, three Lesser Marbled Fritillaries, both Long-tailed Blues and Lang's Short-tailed Blues, many Southern Brown Arguses, several Silver-spotted Skippers and a couple of Cinquefoil Skippers. A little further up, another patch of damp meadow supported yet another Spanish Sooty Copper, plus a few Spanish Chestnut Heaths, a couple of Holly Blues and several Wood Whites, while nearby thistles added yet more fritillaries - same species as before, plus Provincial Fritillary, Dark Green Fritillary and quite a lot of High Brown Fritillaries. Really was beginning to buzz now - Iberian Scarce Swallowtails drifting up and down, Red Admirals and Painted Ladies, a Cleopatra among more frequent Brimstones.

Taking the left fork, butterflies were beginning to puddle aside a small trickle, mainly blues and skippers, also more Iberian Scarce Swallowtail and a couple of Striped Graylings. Very many Graylings and Rock Graylings here too, plus one False Grayling! And it was here that I found one of my main targets of the trip - a couple of exquisite Mother-of-Pearl Blues. Underwing very similar to Turquoise Blue, several of them also present, but cold grey-blue uppers making them

distinctive ...even had one friendly enough to come and take salts from my hand. Lots more butterflies along this track, not least quite a few Azure Chalkhill Blues, several Spanish Chalkhill Blues, quite a few Common Blues, one False Ilex Hairstreak and more Southern Brown Arguses. After a very enjoyable couple of hours, I eventually decided to return to the fork, where yet more butterflies were now puddling - Silver-spotted Skippers numbering a dozen or so, assorted blues including another Mother-of-Pearl Blue, Turquoise Blue, a number of Azure Chalkhill Blues and an Oberthur's Anomalous Blue. Pretty hot now, I then decided to walk the more open right fork ...no tree cover and pretty dry away from the stream, but a glorious strip of flowering herbs along the water's edge. And on these flowers, many Iberian Scarce Swallowtails, numerous Gatekeepers and a good number of fritillaries, mostly Silver-washed and High Brown. Early afternoon I returned to my car on the outskirts of Noguera, one Comma just adjacent, plus three Large Whites and a Peacock in a weedy patch of cultivation.

Not too many kilometres away, Sierra Alta marks the highest point of the Montes Universales - here, at 1854 metres, the open rocky summit is supposed to be home to Mountain Brown Argus. Whether it was or not, I did not discover that day - due to my useless Spanish, I misunderstood a sign and thought it said 'no vehicle access without permission'. What I later realised it said was 'no collecting without permission!' Given it was 35C and the summit was a good three kilometre walk, I opted for laziness over Mountain Argus and departed instead.

To conclude the day, I made a couple of very nice stops midway back to Albarracin. Random sites where habitat looked good, I added some nice butterflies at both places - tops being Damon Blue, Ilex Hairstreak and Bluespot Hairstreak.

And so finished my first full day, a grand total of 56 species, happy enough with that.

6 August. Albarracin.

Just to the north-east of Albarracin lie three barrancos (dry valleys) running north from the Guadalaviar Valley. Hot and arid, a relative profusion of flowers do nevertheless still grow along the course of the dried out streams. Under a bit of a baking sun, I explored two of the barrancos on this day and very productive they were - 45 species seen, impressive for such an arid locality.

Hardly surprising given the change of habitat, but also quite a different butterfly selection to the previous day - all absent or rare at Noguera, these hillsides were absolutely choc-a-bloc with hundreds of Spanish Chalkhill Blues, Southern Gatekeepers and Sage Skippers. The Spanish Chalkhill Blues in particular were a treat indeed - ghostly white, they very much appeared to be Pierids in flight, but upon settling were most co-operative, even taking salts from my hands. In both barrancos, also many Cinquefoil Skippers and Silver-spotted Skippers, plus dozens of Long-tailed Blues and a good number of Chapman's Blues (and Common Blues). By contrast however, opposite to Noguera, almost no Gatekeepers, limited numbers of the big fritillaries and very few Azure Chalkhill Blues.

I spent most of the morning along the first barranco, this one broad, wide and lacking any form of shade. In the lower areas, along with the Spanish Chalkhill Blues and Southern Gatekeepers, and abundant Bath Whites, Clouded Yellows, Berger's Clouded Yellows and Iberian Marbled Whites, I also encountered a few Queen of Spain Fritillaries, three Lesser Spotted Fritillaries and a nice bunch of graylings - Graylings, Rock Graylings, Tree Graylings and Great Banded Graylings all common, a couple of Striped Graylings and one False Grayling. Adding to this mix, lots of Dusky Meadow Browns, a single Meadow Brown, several Dusky Heaths and one Wall Brown. Also two Ilex Hairstreaks here and one Bluespot Hairstreak. I had hoped to find Southern Hermit somewhere here, but no sign. Occasional glances upwards however added Booted Eagle and Griffon Vultures, plus common birds of the dry Mediterranean such as Black-eared Wheatear, Rock Sparrow and Rock Bunting.

Later in the day, specifically in the heat of early afternoon, I shifted to the second barranco, about four kilometres further east. This was quite different in nature - pretty narrow and steep sided, very soon I was following the bed of a dry stream as it twisted through the valley. I initially thought this wouldn't be so good for butterflies, but not bad it turned out - not only plenty of Azure Chalkhill Blues and Sage Skippers again, but also several Iberian Scarce Swallowtails, about ten Cleopatras and my first Spanish Gatekeepers of the trip, rather battered individuals suggesting they were nearing the end of their flight season. Also a couple of standard Gatekeepers here, plus ever present Southern Gatekeepers - the full Spanish trio! A couple of kilometres along I happened across a couple of very small remnant pools in the stream bed. The largest pool barely 20 cm or so across, the damp edges nevertheless proved a magnet - butterflies galore, it was a puddling mix of a hundred or so Azure Chalkhill Blues, a couple of dozen Cinquefoil Skippers and plenty of Sage Skippers and Silver-spotted Skippers. In among, a Turquoise Blue, four Oberthur's Anomalous Blues, several Lang's Short-tailed Blues, a few Holly Blues and several Southern Brown Argus. No sign of Southern Hermit again, I had to presume their flight season was over.

By late afternoon, with the temperature sitting well over 35 C, butterflies became decidedly less active, many simply retreating to shade. I retraced my route without major addition, so then decided to try greener areas near the Guadalaviar River - wanders along the brambles and grassy meadows added a few new for the day, Wood White and Speckled Wood most notable.

Decided it had been a pretty good day, hadn't expected this most arid of areas to produce so many butterflies. Spent the evening in the walled town of Albarracin - very quaint indeed, well worth a visit.

7 August. Moscardón, Ojos del Cabriel & El Vallecillo.

Day to search for Zapater's Ringlet, endemic to the Montes Universales and one of my main targets of the trip. Flies late in the season and, even here in the heart of its range, it is a localised species. I however had high hopes - not only was the timing of my trip just about perfect to coincide with the peak flight season, but I also had approximate localities of some sightings in earlier years. So it was, an early departure from Albarracin and a drive of about 25km to a valley just south of Moscardón, the habitat being a series of meadows bordered by coniferous forest rising up the slopes.

Arrived to find the sun had not yet penetrated the valley, so I started a little lower and was soon clocking up the first butterflies of the day - Gatekeepers, Cinquefoil Skippers and Dusky Heaths. Around 9.30 am, a rogue band of clouds suddenly appeared and I began to have some fears that my day might come to a crashing halt! Fortunately it never succeeded in knocking out the sun and the clouds had vanished by 10 am and I was then in the Moscardón valley surrounded by simply amazing numbers of butterflies. Truly was staggering - hundreds of Great Banded Graylings, Rock Graylings, Dusky Meadow Browns and Iberian Marbled Whites, oodles of Gatekeepers, loads of Cardinals and Silver-washed Fritillaries, literally thousands of Azure Chalkhill Blues. Just masses of butterflies everywhere! And in among them, soon the species tally began to rise - both Ilex Hairstreak and False Ilex Hairstreak, Long-tailed Blue and Lang's Short-tailed Blue, a few Oberthur's Anomalous Blues, a mix of Common Blues and Chapman's Blues, three Spanish Chestnut Heaths and a bevy of additional graylings to stir the passions - 30 or so Graylings, three Tree Graylings, five Striped Graylings and six False Graylings. And then, perusing the abundant Iberian Marbled Whites, I found another of the targets of the day - Esper's Marbled White, a slightly larger species with a diagnostic cross bar in the cell of the forewing. Found five in the end.

After an hour or so, despite immense numbers of butterflies along both the woodland edge and in the open meadows, there was a certain butterfly that was conspicuous by its absence ... Zapater's Ringlet! I had checked all the areas that seemed perfect, but had found not a single one. 'Hmmm', thought I, 'not very good'. For no particular reason, I then decided to follow the track back down the valley for a kilometre or so - still butterflies in abundance, including Damon Blue and Silver-spotted Skippers. A good move it turned out to be - on a steep grassy slope to the side of the track, I caught a brief glimpse of a fairly small dark butterfly that seemed to land in the grass. In the grass out of sight and on the wrong side of an electric fence! Well, I waited a while and nothing flew up, 'maybe I had imagined it' I thought to myself and prepared to continue walking. But it nagged me just enough to persuade me to check it out - I crawled under the electric fence, climbed the slope and stared down into the grass …one Zapater's Ringlet happily sunning itself!

And that particular slope seemed to be the bee's knees for the species - soon I had at least six Zapater's Ringlets floating around the slope, sunning on vegetation and generally being most showy. Success, the main target of the trip well and truly seen!

Plenty of Clouded Yellows and Berger's Clouded Yellows here too, plus a Swallowtail. And if that were not enough, one more treat before leaving the Moscardón area - a little further up the slope, flying with several Lesser Marbled Fritillaries and Queen of Spain Fritillares, one very nice Twinspot Fritillary. Not renowned as a late season species, I had not expected this butterfly!

As it was still barely past midday, I then decided to continue to Ojos del Cabriel and El Vallecillo, a couple of localities an hour or so further south. Kilometres of hot dry pine forest followed, no shortage of Graylings, Great Banded Graylings and Rock Graylings, but little else. And turning to the rocky track to Ojos del Cabriel, I had doubts that it would be very different. Leaving the car, a couple of Swallowtails drifted by, plus a Wood White, but overall still not many butterflies in this rather parched landscape. Things however got considerably better when I reached the relative greenery of the Cabriel River a kilometre or so down - first several smart Southern White Admirals nectaring at streamside flowers, then a fantastic number of butterflies puddling at the river's edge: at least 30 Iberian Scarce Swallowtails at one spot, a mass gathering of hundreds of Azure Chalkhill Blues and at least 50 Cinquefoil Skippers at another. Quickly added a few more species, not least about 30 Turquoise Blues, several Holly Blues and Lang's Short-tailed Blues, both Damon and Oberthur's Anomalous Blues and several Silver-spotted Skipper. Highlight of this locality, I then bumped into a real classic - feeding on flowers hanging over a several metre high waterfall, two very nice Spanish Purple Hairstreaks, a new species for me! Had visions of plunging into the depths of the water photographing these, somehow avoided it. For good measure, one Ilex Hairstreak here too.

Then for the finale of the day, I drove a few kilometres more to El Vallecillo. Initial exploration one side of the village added little, but the other side of the village was simply fantastic. Here, arid agricultural terraces gave way to a fairly lush valley bottom, this choc-a-bloc with butterflies - again hundreds of Azure Chalkhill Blues and other assorted blues, including my first Silver-studded Blue of the trip, plus an abundance of big fritillaries (30 Cardinals most notable), my first Large Tortoiseshells and Grizzled Skippers of the trip and other notables such as Mallow Skipper, Bath White and Oriental Meadow Brown. More or less concluding the afternoon, a dripping irrigation pipe added one more spectacle - no new species, but a highly concentrated gathering of puddling butterflies with about 25 Iberian Scarce Swallowtails, up

to 40 Clouded Yellows, dozens and dozens of Azure Chalkhill Blues, about 60 Cinquefoil Skippers and a whole host of other species in varying numbers, these including Wood Whites, mixed blues, Iberian Marbled Whites, Tree Graylings and Silver-spotted Skippers.

A very nice day it had been, 60 species of butterfly in all, spectacular numbers of many.

8 August. Albarracin.

Barrancos east of Albarracin again, attempt number two on Southern Hermit. An excellent day all in all, but not a hint of a Southern Hermit, I guess I confirmed my earlier suspicion that their flight season had already concluded.

Pretty much similar butterflies to my visit a couple of days earlier - hundreds of Spanish Chalkhill Blues most prominent, along with dozens of Long-tailed Blues, Southern Brown Arguses et al, plus a nice scattering of added extras such as Oberthur's Anomalous Blues and Turquoise Blues, both Bluespot and Ilex Hairstreak, 15 or so Striped Graylings, at least 40 Tree Graylings and all three gatekeepers (abundant Southern Gatekeepers, about 15 Gatekeepers and three Spanish Gatekeepers, the latter faded and near the end of flight season). Also of note, both Spotted and Lesser Spotted Fritillaries and five species of skipper - abundant Cinquefoil Skippers, reasonably common Sage Skippers, at least 20 Silver-spotted Skippers and singles of both Grizzled Skipper and Southern Marbled Skipper.

Dragging my eyes from the butterflies, a few typical Mediterranean birds this day too - Dartford Warblers, Black-eared Wheatears and Rock Sparrows on the hillsides, one Western Orphean Warbler too, plus Spotless Starlings in an adjacent settlement and both Booted Eagle and flocks of Bee-eaters overhead.

By mid-afternoon however, with the temperatures edging towards 40 C, bird and butterfly action was subsiding quite considerably, so I departed and drove the short distance to Torres de Albarracin, another quaint town and base for the next couple of nights. Other than the pretty amazing view from the window of my accommodation, the highlight here was a dead cow just outside the village. Or rather what was attracted to it - a sky full of Griffon Vultures, magnificent birds as they gathered, circled and eventually dropped down to begin their meal.

9 August. Noguera.

Second visit to Noguera, this barranco again proving most excellent - increase in Iberian Sooty Coppers, now a total of eight in the damp meadows, plus 15 Cardinal Fritillaries (none on the first visit) and five Chapman's Blues (absent or overlooked on first visit). Only one new species for the trip, two fresh Green-veined Whites, but plenty to entertain - still the hordes of Azure Chalkhill Blues, umpteen graylings of five different species and added extras such as Mother-of-Pearl Blue, Ilex Hairstreak and one fairly fresh Spanish Gatekeeper (heavily outnumbered by abundant Gatekeepers).

Exceptionally hot on this day, but I decided to once again try to reach the summit at Sierra Alta - now knowing the sign didn't prohibit access, I drove a little closer to the summit and hiked the last section. On route up, Great Banded Graylings and Rock Graylings abundant in the open pine, plus a few Wall Browns, then at the summit itself, a small open rocky plateau, a mixed bunch of Swallowtails and Iberian Scarce Swallowtails 'mountain-topping', the practice of some butterflies to congregate at the peaks of hills. Also here, Silver-spotted Skippers, Clouded Yellows and several Graylings, but as for Mountain Argus, not a single one. Departing however, I immediately found three *Aricia* sp. in an open area just below the tree line. 'Well that was good', thought I, 'Mountain Argus'. Try as I might however, I could not see any reason why these were not Southern Brown Arguses - well-developed orange markings on the upper wings, no appreciable differences to the fairly common Southern Brown Arguses I had been encountering everyday in the barrancos. Alas, I had to concede that I was not looking at Mountain Argus.

With that, I returned to Torres de Albarracin, still Griffon Vultures stacking the air, Spotless Starlings in the village and Booted Eagle again overhead.

10 August. Tragacete (Puerto de la Portillo & Río Júcar)

Although I had planned to spend the entire trip in the Montes Universales, my early success now left me with the possibility to add extensions - time to head for the coast! Before departing however, I decided I would explore the Tragacete area on the eastern edge of the Montes Universales, an area that I had chalked up as a potential back-up site for Zapater's Ringlet had I not already seen them (though I didn't actually have a concrete site for them at this locality).

My first stop of the morning was at Puerto de la Portillo, a rocky ridge sitting at 1790 metres and the only known site for Spanish Argus in the region. I arrived pretty early, the sun just beginning to drench the open rockland, but no butterflies on the wing as yet. On the bird front, Rock Thrushes, Black Redstarts and Black-eared Wheatears flitted across the rocks, flocks of Swifts hurtled overhead. Scrambling up the edge of the escarpment, I first kicked up a Rock Grayling, then a Spanish Chalkhill Blue and then, no less than 10 minutes after arriving, a miniscule butterfly lifted into the air from a sheltered gully - I had found a Spanish Argus! With a near total lack of orange markings on the uppers and a

large round forewing cell spot on the underwing, this was a distinctive butterfly. As it warmed, so more and more Spanish Arguses appeared, all preferring the very lip of the slope or gulleys on the steep downward side. Highly active, but pausing to nectar on dwarf flowers or take in the sun on south-facing rocks, these were very nice butterflies indeed, rather easier to separate than their Southern Brown Argus/Mountain Argus brethren! Also saw several Wall Browns and Silver-spotted Skippers here.

After a while, I continued a few kilometres and explored the Río Júcar valley north of Tragacete. This was superb! After passing through a relatively narrow section of valley, I encountered a set of meadows bordering a stream and rich in thistle patches. And what a delight those thistles were - butterflies galore, literally hundreds of butterflies. As in many localities, super abundant Gatekeepers, Great Banded Graylings and Rock Graylings, plus too many Graylings, several Tree Graylings and at least 50 Iberian Marbled Whites. In amongst this soup, an impressive showing of about 40 Cardinal Fritillaries, ten Iberian Scarce Swallowtails and four False Graylings, plus plenty of other butterflies, such as Clouded Yellows, Painted Lady, Small Tortoiseshell, Comma and Dusky Meadow Browns. Short turf and assorted flowers added yet more, Azure Chalkhill Blues and Common Blues heading their family, Long-tailed Blue, Lang's Short-tailed Blue and Turquoise Blue also seen.

Moving back towards Tragacete, I then took a short walk in the steep-sided gorge of the Río Júcar. This truly proved to be an excellent finale to the Montes Universales - not only a Zapater's Ringlet in a small fragment of meadow aside the stream and a Spanish Purple Hairstreak on flowers next to the road, but one special bonus in an area of rocky scree. In the space of a hundred metres, two superb male Hermits and two females, the latter far more cryptic below. I was very happy with these, a dramatic species that I had only ever seen once before, in Greece in June 2018. I decided this very much compensated for not seeing Southern Hermit.

And with that, I turned eastbound, a drive of several hours to Valencia on the Mediterranean coast. Early evening when I arrived and a bit of high cloud. No butterflies, loads of Glossy Ibises to the north of the city, a few Night Herons too.

11 August. Albufera, Valencia.

Jeepers, hot and sweaty in Valencia, the sun beating down on the wetlands to concoct sauna-like conditions. Despite greenery around water areas, Albufera is pretty much devoid of butterflies in the heat of summer, but in that vacuum there do exist two species that I sought - hot country specialists, African Grass Blue and Mediterranean Skipper. I didn't have any specific locations for either, but used Google satellite maps to pinpoint localities that looked promising - in a landscape of endless rice paddies, a small raised 'island' at Ermita dels Benissants de la Pedra seemed to offer a bit of rough grassland and some rocky slopes ... perfect to my way of thinking for both species. Failing that, I would simply tour the embankments between the paddies for the Grass Blue and head to the coastal sand dunes for Mediterranean Skipper. Turned out my hunch was not bad - only three species of butterflies at Ermita dels Benissants de la Pedra, but fortunately the most abundant of these was indeed Mediterranean Skipper. Around the rough grass and lower rocky area, at least 15 Mediterranean Skippers were found ...and quite sweat-inducing it was to lie on the ground to photograph them! Alongside, four Mallow Skippers and a couple of Lang's Short-tailed Blues. I added African Grass Blues on an embankment less than a kilometre away - highly active, and in company with Lang's Short-tailed Blues, these tiny little butterflies sapped yet more energy as I pursued them back and fro. Finally got photographs, happy with that.

By the end of the day, though the two targets had both been seen, the day tally reflected the severe lack of butterflies in the general area - a mere eight species recorded (the above, plus Small White, Clouded Yellow, Striped Grayling and Sage Skipper).

Pretty good for birds however - I didn't go out of my way to look for them, but abundant Glossy Ibises in the paddies, along with Night Herons and Squacco Herons, plentiful Little Egrets and quite a few Whiskered Terns and Gull-billed Terns. In drier areas, Woodchat Shrike, Hoopoes and Sardinian Warblers, plus one Orphean Warbler. Also saw Red-rumped Swallow.

Retired relatively early this day, staying overnight on the edge of Valencia.

12 August. To the Pyrenees.

35 C and exceptionally humid in Valencia. With the temperature set to soar into the middle 40s in the coming days, I decided it would be a wise move to shift 500 km to the north and venture into the Pyrenees, cooler perhaps and certainly without the humidity. So it was, largely a travel day - temperature hit 41 C as I skirted inland of Barcelona, a brief stop there adding Short-tailed Blue, Dusky Heath and both Spanish and Southern Gatekeepers. Got to the equally hot foothills just south of Ripoll in the late afternoon and, glutton for punishment, took a detour to some random stops in the wooded valleys near the village of Sora. Despite the heat, amazingly productive, even more so as evening approached - Short-tailed Blue, Provençal Short-tailed Blue and Lang's Short-tailed Blues all active together, along with Long-tailed Blues, Holly Blues, Common Blues, Turquoise Blue and two Provence Chalkhill Blues. Equally good, Weaver's Fritillary and Knapweed Fritillary, both new for the trip, and a variety of others, including Mallow Skippers,

Spanish Gatekeepers and both Swallowtail and Iberian Scarce Swallowtail. Surprise of the day however, just as the sun began to set over the mountain peaks, two very stunning Brown Hairstreaks, always fantastic butterflies.

So there it was, largely a day of travel, but this unexpectedly good stop took the day's butterfly tally to 36 species. Drove a few kilometres more and stopped the night aside the river in the picturesque town of San Jose de les Abadesses.

13 August. Vallter 2000.

I hadn't done any research for the Pyrenees prior to my trip, so I selected this locality simply by its location - a ski resort at 2000 metres, offering easy hiking to slopes at 2500 metres right on the French border. Not a bad choice it turned out - in the early morning sunshine, the first butterfly of the day was a Spanish Brassy Ringlet, a new species for me. As it warmed, it turned out that this species was abundant - many hundreds on the grazed Alpine meadows right up to my maximum altitude. Spectacular landscapes, but surprisingly devoid of other butterfly species - just two more: several Silver-spotted Skippers and three Small Tortoiseshells. Huge numbers of Citril Finches however, all rather tame and feeding on dwarf thistles. Alpine Choughs and Alpine Marmots too.

Cracking stuff lower down, first one Mountain Small White and several Large Grizzled Skippers, then at about 1850 metres the butterfly action really started - among many others, I was soon encountering new species for the trip - Scarce Coppers, Sooty Coppers, Ringlets, Large Ringlet, Pearly Heaths, Lulworth Skippers. It was then non-stop top class action all the way down, hundreds of Gatekeepers, fairly common Iberian Marbled Whites, a scattering of Common Blues, one Mountain Argus, one Spanish Chestnut Heath and a bonanza of fritillaries - Queen of Spain, Silver-washed, High Brown, Knapweed, Spotted, Heath and, requiring careful perusal, Provençal Fritillaries.

Descending yet further, the temperature beginning its relentless climb into the high 30s, abundant Province Chalkhill Blues began to appear, along several Provençal Short-tailed Blues, one Turquoise Blue, both Lang's Short-tailed Blues and Long-tailed Blues and the only White-letter Hairstreak of the trip. Concluding the day, with an eye out for Purple Hairstreak, I then decided to explore a series of sunny woodland tracks alongside the river near San Jose de les Abadesses. Success - not only one Purple Hairstreak, albeit typically uncooperative for photographs, but also at least eight White Admirals, one Lesser Purple Emperor and about eight Woodland Graylings, all of which were new for the trip. Speckled Wood, Red Admiral, Comma and Painted Lady here too.

And so ended the day, even at this elevation a hot 35 C, but highly productive it had been - 55 species, 15 of which were new for the trip.

14 August. Nuria (Fontalba).

A similar elevation and only a dozen or so kilometres west of Vallter 2000, but quite notably a different butterfly selection. Arrived as the sun began to hit the slopes, already over 20 C, and immediately ran into new butterflies - in quite some abundance, flying primarily just below the tree line, Piedmont Ringlets drifting back and fro, very nice. One Lesser Purple Emperor too, plus the first Spotted Fritillaries of the day.

A little higher, with two Pyrenean Chamois standing sentinel on a rock top and several Alpine Marmots scampering off, I decided first to explore the open slopes above the tree line - plenty of Spanish Brassy Ringlets again, but actively hill-topping were also another two new species for the trip - at least six Purple-shot Coppers and a few Large Wall Browns. Large Grizzled Skippers, Small Coppers and Wall Browns also hill-topping. A little unexpected, four Chalkhill Blues also here - the 2000 metre elevation effectively ruling out Province Chalkhill and thus adding another new species for the trip. Further up, still plenty of Spanish Brassy Ringlets, but not many additional species, the main attraction here being a recently dead calf - as upward of 25 Griffon Vultures dropped onto the turf, mama cow cast a sorry figure as she repeatedly tried to drive the vultures off. She would not win and a half hour later, mooing in despondency, she headed up the slope to other cows, the Griffons beginning a noisy free for all at the carcass.

Temperature climbing, I decided to spend the rest of the morning slowly descending beneath the tree line through a series of excellent mixed meadows and forest edges. Many butterflies, not least lots of Piedmont Ringlets, one late Apollo, Queen of Spain Fritillaries and Knapweed Fritillaries, three Mountain Arguses and several Rock Graylings. Lower down, Gatekeepers again in abundance, a couple of Scarce Coppers, a Swallowtail and increasing numbers of common lowland species (Silver-washed Fritillaries, Meadow Browns, mixed whites, etc). Below 1000 metres, Province Chalkhill Blues began to appear, a shade paler and greyer than the Chalkhill Blues earlier, plus what I presume were Woodland Graylings (appearing larger than Rock Graylings and inhabiting bushy meadow areas). Also here, Short-tailed Blues, White Admirals, Cleopatra and, puddling aside a stream, a mix of Large Grizzled Skippers and Oberthur's Grizzled Skippers.

By now, early afternoon and stonking hot, it was time to quit the mountains and head back to Barcelona, the trip nearing its end. A warm 40 C on the lowland plains, stops were pretty unproductive, but I did manage one final addition - after dropping off the car at the airport, one very nice Geranium Bronze flitting around in a bit of urban parkland in the nearby

town area of El Prat. And so it was, the final species and final butterfly of the trip.

15 August. Departure.

An hour before sunrise, I flew out from Barcelona, destination the rather less hot Lithuania. Trip over, I had seen a total of 112 species, this breaking down to 81 in the Montes Universales, 74 in the Pyrenees and eight on the Mediterranean Coast. Of the targets, all were seen, except Southern Hermit, which had probably finished its flight season. Full Species List Old World Swallowtail. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Iberian Scarce Swallowtail. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Apollo. Pyrenees.

Large White. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Small White. Montes Universales, Mediterranean Coast. Pyrenees.

Southern Small White. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Mountain Small White. Pyrenees.

Green-veined White. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Bath White. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Clouded Yellow. Montes Universales, Mediterranean Coast. Pyrenees.

Berger's Clouded Yellow. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Brimstone. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Cleopatra. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Wood White. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Spanish Purple Hairstreak. Montes Universales,

Purple Hairstreak. Pyrenees.

Sloe Hairstreak. Montes Universales.

Ilex Hairstreak. Montes Universales.

False Ilex Hairstreak. Montes Universales.

White-letter Hairstreak. Pyrenees.

Blue-spot Hairstreak. Montes Universales.

Brown Hairstreak. Pyrenees.

Small Copper. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Scarce Copper. Pyrenees.

Sooty Copper. Pyrenees.

Iberian Sooty Copper. Montes Universales.

Purple-shot Copper. Pyrenees.

Geranium Bronze. Mediterranean Coast.

Long-tailed Blue. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Lang's Short-tailed Blue. Montes Universales, Mediterranean Coast. Pyrenees.

Short-tailed Blue. Pyrenees.

Provinçal Short-tailed Blue. Pyrenees.

Holly Blue. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

African Grass Blue. Mediterranean Coast.

Silver-studded Blue. Montes Universales.

Southern Brown Argus. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Spanish Argus. Montes Universales.

Mountain Argus. Pyrenees.

Damon Blue. Montes Universales.

Oberthur's Anomalous Blue. Montes Universales.

Turquoise Blue. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Mother-of-Pearl Blue. Montes Universales.

Azure Chalkhill Blue. Montes Universales.

Spanish Chalkhill Blue. Montes Universales.

Province Chalkhill Blue. Pyrenees.

Chalkhill Blue. Pyrenees.

Adonis Blue. Montes Universales.

Chapman's Blue. Montes Universales.

Common Blue. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Peacock. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Lesser Purple Emperor. Pyrenees.

White Admiral. Pyrenees.

Southern White Admiral. Montes Universales.

Red Admiral. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Large Tortoiseshell. Montes Universales,

Small Tortoiseshell. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Painted Lady. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Comma. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Cardinal Fritillary. Montes Universales,

Silver-washed Fritillary. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Dark Green Fritillary. Montes Universales.

High Brown Fritillary. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Queen of Spain Fritillary. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Twinspot Fritillary. Montes Universales.

Lesser Marbled Fritillary. Montes Universales.

Spotted Fritillary. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Lesser Spotted Fritillary. Montes Universales.

Weaver's Fritillary. Pyrenees.

Knapweed Fritillary. Pyrenees.

Heath Fritillary. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Provinçal Fritillary. Pyrenees.

Iberian Marbled White. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Esper's Marbled White. Montes Universales.

Woodland Grayling. Pyrenees.

Rock Grayling. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Grayling. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Tree Grayling. Montes Universales.

Striped Grayling. Montes Universales, Mediterranean Coast.

False Grayling. Montes Universales.

Black Satyr. Montes Universales.

Great Branded Grayling. Montes Universales.

Hermit. Montes Universales.

Large Ringlet. Pyrenees.

Zapater's Ringlet. Montes Universales.

Piedmont Ringlet. Pyrenees.

Spanish Brassy Ringlet. Pyrenees.

Ringlet. Pyrenees.

Meadow Brown. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Dusky Meadow Brown. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Oriental Meadow Brown. Montes Universales.

Gatekeeper. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Southern Gatekeeper. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Spanish Gatekeeper. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Small Heath. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Spanish Chestnut Heath. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Pearly Heath. Pyrenees.

Dusky Heath. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Speckled Wood. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Wall Brown. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Large Wall Brown. Pyrenees.

Grizzled Skipper. Montes Universales.

Large Grizzled Skipper. Pyrenees.

Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Cinquefoil Skipper. Montes Universales.

Sage Skipper. Montes Universales, Mediterranean Coast.

Mallow Skipper. Mediterranean Coast, Pyrenees.

Mediterranean Skipper. Mediterranean Coast.

Essex Skipper. Montes Universales.

Small Skipper. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Lulworth Skipper. Pyrenees.

Silver-spotted Skipper. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.

Large Skipper. Montes Universales, Pyrenees.