

# Butterflies in Normandy

Naturetrek Tour Report

13-17 July 2006



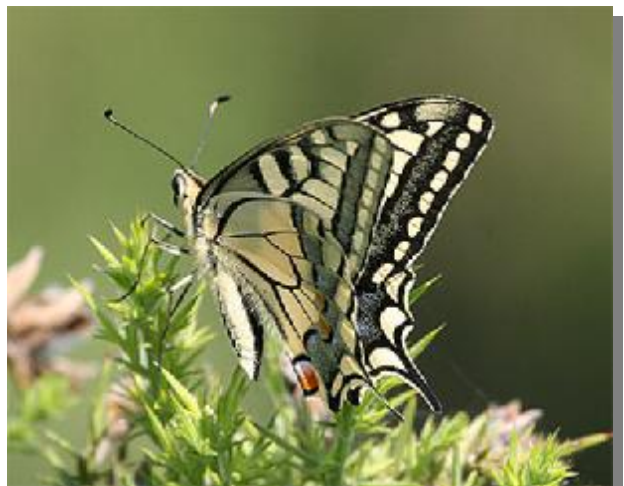
Photographing a Purple Emperor at Lessay



Large Chequered Skipper



Map



Swallowtail

Images and report compiled by Tom Brereton



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## Summary

**Butterfly highlights:** 41 species including Lesser Purple Emperor, Purple Emperor, Mallow Skipper, Large Chequered Skipper, Pearly Heath, Berger's Clouded Yellow and Map.

**Other wildlife highlights:** Summer Lady's Tresses, Heath Lobelia, chalkhill flowers; ca100 species of bird including Montague's Harrier, Melodious Warbler, Fan-tailed Warbler and Cirl Bunting; and a good variety of moths (including Bright Wave and Faust's Burnet) dragonflies (including Scarlet Darter and Dainty Damselflies) grasshoppers/crickets (including Large Marsh, Rufous and Blue-winged Grasshoppers); Amphibians (including Edible Frog).

**Cultural Highlights:** The Bayeux Tapestry, the historic Mulberry harbour in Arromanches and gourmet cuisine in the Hotel Restaurant.

**Weather:** Glorious throughout.

## Day 1

Thursday 13 July

After meeting the group by the ferry terminal, we departed Poole at 07:30 on the Brittany Ferries Fastcraft for our journey across the western English Channel. As in 2005, our tactic for this early start was so that we could get to France by lunchtime and thus have at least half a day of natural history observation rather than a day remembered only for the travelling undertaken. At the ferry terminal there was ample time for introductions and to indicate key species that each wanted to see over the course of this short break. A general mix of butterflies and other wildlife featured highly on everyone's itinerary.

The start of our journey saw us navigating through Poole Harbour, one of the largest and most unspoilt natural harbours in England. The ferry passes close to a brackish lagoon on the eastern side of Brownsea, an Island managed by the National Trust and famed for Red Squirrels and Britain's biggest Little Egret breeding colony. On and around the lagoon we observed a good variety of birds including common migrant waders and large numbers of breeding Sandwich and Common Terns. With calm seas, few birds were recorded on the crossing through the English Channel, the highlight being about 20 Gannets, some of which gave excellent views.

After a little over two and a quarter hours we arrived in Cherbourg. Soon after, we headed out towards the west coast of the Cherbourg Peninsula, stopping at Querqueville where Tom, the leader, bought lunch. This gave opportunity for the group to stretch their legs on French soil and scan the outer reaches of Cherbourg Harbour for coastal birds. Here, there were a number of worthwhile sightings including Yellow-legged Gull, Eider, Mediterranean Gull and curiously several circus animals grazing on the grass nearby, with Dromedary and Lion

amongst them! Lunch was taken at a delightful little secluded picnic spot on the shores of Vauville Bay. Over lunch, the butterfly highlight was our only Speckled Wood of the trip.

After lunch we headed a short distance south to Vauville Nature Reserve located on the north-west coast of the Cotentin. This diverse habitat of sand dunes, marsh, scrub and ponds is a superb wildlife habitat and today's visit did not disappoint. With the cloud burning off and fabulous sunny weather coming through, there was plenty of butterfly activity along the pathway through the coastal dunes. Of particular interest, were large numbers of Lulworth Skipper. Amongst fourteen other species of butterfly, there were more than 70 Gatekeepers, together with Wall Brown, several Clouded Yellows and Red-underwing Skipper; the latter species being a Naturetrek first record at the site.

Moths included a good number of 6-spot Burnets, Pinion-streaked Snout and a Hummingbird Hawkmoth, whilst dragonflies included Emperor Dragonfly, Common Darter and another Naturetrek first for the site – a Scarlet Darter. On and around the main pond, there was a lot of bird activity that included 3 Hobby's, Marsh Harrier and best of all a superb adult male Montague's Harrier. Plant life was impressive with some quality species recorded including Nottingham Catchfly, Sea Holly, Carline Thistle, large quantities of Burnet Rose, and the rare Western Spiked Speedwell.

After an excellent afternoon, it was time to head across to our base for the holiday, Arromanches, located along the north coast of Normandy close to Bayeux and in the Department of Calvados. After driving for about an hour and a quarter we arrived at our base for the holiday, the charming and friendly Hotel de la marine, spectacularly located right by the sea overlooking the historic Mulberry harbour ruins.

In the evening we were treated to a beautiful prepared gourmet meal in the bustling hotel restaurant, with our table overlooking the sea. What was particularly impressive was that in spite of the hotel being incredibly busy, the service was outstanding.

## Day 2

Friday 14 July

We awoke to brisk north-westerly winds. Before breakfast, a small party headed out on a short walk to an area of cliff-top coastal grassland west of the harbour. Though it was too windy for butterflies, we picked up a good variety of wildflowers including Pyramidal Orchid. Bird interest included Spotted Flycatcher (an increasingly uncommon sight these days in the UK) and Black Redstart. With the morning weather conditions inimical to butterfly watching, we decided to make our customary trip to the beautiful and world-famous must-see Bayeux tapestry, this time earlier rather than later in the holiday – which proved as popular as ever with this year's group.

After the Tapestry, we headed west towards our main destination of the day, Lessay in the south-west corner of the Cotentin Peninsula where the weather forecast had predicted sunnier conditions. By late morning we had reached the wet heathland and Pine forests of Lessay in warm but cloudy and windy weather. Within a few minutes of leaving the car park we recorded a number of Silver-studded Blues and a Large Chequered Skipper amongst the boggy open pine woodland. Beyond the woodland, we reached a large ride through the forest comprised of wet heathland vegetation and supporting large numbers of Summer Lady's Tresses orchids in full flower (Lessay is one of the most important localities in Europe to see this diminutive rare wildflower) - this

proving the highlight of the holiday for Peter. Other special plants along the ride included Heath Spotted Orchid, Heath Lobelia, Meadow Thistle, Whorled Caraway and Oblong-leaved Sundew.

There was plenty of butterfly activity along this wide ride, including a good number of Large Chequered Skipper and Silver Studded Blues, plus many common grassland butterflies. After about half a mile, we were into the most important area for our target species, the Alcon Blue. However, we were dismayed to see that here and all around, the habitat had been burnt since our visit in 2005, and we failed to locate any Marsh Gentians (the butterfly's foodplant) grow amongst the wet heathland vegetation. Despite an extensive search in windy but increasingly sunny weather, we did not locate any Alcon Blues. There was plenty of other activity though including a number of dragonflies, especially in proximity to a small boggy pool located at a ride junction in the core Alcon Blue area. These included Dainty Damselfly, Azure Damselfly, Large Red Damselfly, Black-tailed Skimmer, Keeled Skimmer, Common Darter and Broad-bodied Chaser. Bird interest included Tree Pipit, Short-toed Treecreeper and Crested Tit.

After lunch at a pleasant picnic spot on the edge of the forest, we returned to the heathland, this time exploring beyond the small pond, to where species-rich broad-leaved forest bordered each side of the ride. With extra shelter, bright sunshine appearing and a higher diversity of wildflowers along the ride (due to less acidic soil conditions), conditions were good for butterflies and there was a mass of activity. Amongst the common species, we recorded 2 Map, White Admiral, 30 Brimstone, Purple Hairstreak and two Purple Emperors, which gave fantastic views as they circled the forest edge.

All too soon, it was time to leave the site and head back east to Arromanches. To break the journey up, we stopped half way back at Les Ponts d'Ouves, the visitor centre for the Cotentin and Basin Regional Nature Park. The visitor centre provides a panoramic view over part of this vast wetland, one of the most important in France, and was an ideal place to scan the skyline - though alas hoped for White Storks did not materialise. After another superb dinner, Arromanches was fun that evening, due to it being Bastille Day, with a carnival procession (a dancing troupe) and fireworks illuminating the sky.

## Day 3

Saturday 15 July

Pre-breakfast and with some members of the group keen to do some bird watching we made a short drive to the Natura-2000 designated marshes east of Arromanches. Hoped for waders were in short supply, but a good variety of other birds were evident including Marsh Harrier, Fan-tailed Warbler and Turtle Dove. On the beach, we obtained good views of Common and Mediterranean Gulls. A further highlight was a juvenile Serin feeding amongst a flock of Linnets in a weedy area near the beach.

Following breakfast, we headed south-east to Les Monts d'Eraines nature reserve, an area of chalk hills east of Falaise and about an hours drive from Arromanches, where we planned to spend a full day. As we arrived at les Monts d'Eraines in glorious sunny weather, we made a quick stop along the roadside, to search for orchids and other plants. Noteworthy species here included Lizard Orchid and Round-headed Rampion. Soon after, we stop in an area of arable farmland on the edge of the aerodrome, where there was a colourful display of arable weeds in and around a bee forage crop dominated by *Phacelia tanacetifolia*. Here, we picked up Brown Argus amongst more common butterflies.

With cloudless skies continuing, for the remainder of the morning we covered the scrubby glade in the north-west corner of the reserve, where it was possible to get some welcome partial shade from the sun. In spite of hundreds of spider webs (insect traps) covering the ground, there was still plenty of butterfly activity; highlights of which included Silver Washed Fritillary, Small Copper, Dark Green Fritillary and best of all several Berger's Clouded Yellow. Other noteworthy wildlife sightings in and around the glade included Melodious Warbler and Broad-leaved Helleborine.

A typically diverse picnic was taken under the shade cast by a large tree in peaceful surroundings on the edge of the aerodrome. Today the dining emphasis was on seafood, with Smoked Salmon and Smoked Trout, cream cheese, lemon, fresh herbs, and salads on offer, amongst the usual local cheeses and meats, and accompanied by fruit juice, red wine and chilled Normandy cider. Lepidoptera highlight over our lengthy lunch break was up to 10 Hummingbird Hawkmoths feeding on Lavender beside our picnic spot.

In the afternoon, we made a more extensive walk around the open chalk slopes of the reserve, and associated scrubby woodland edges. In the baking heat, there was much butterfly activity, with nearly 30 species recorded. Species present in quantity included Meadow Brown (200), Small White (100), Large White (50), Berger's Clouded Yellow (40), Dark Green Fritillary (30), Gatekeeper (30) and Marbled White (30), whilst quality was provided by 2 photogenic Swallowtails, Purple Emperor, 2 Silver Washed Fritillaries, 3 Queen of Spain Fritillaries, 7 Mallow Skippers and 2 Dingy Skippers. On the moth front, there were large numbers of 6-spot Burnet Moths, 50+ Bright Wave's (a rare species in the UK restricted to south-east England), but the undoubted highlight was seeing several stunning Faust Burnets.

The slopes were rich in wildflowers and we recorded some very interesting species rare/absent from the UK including Mountain Germander, Wall Germander, Juniper, Cut-leaved Self-heal, Large Self-heal and the asphodel, *Anthericum ramosum*. The site was not without bird interest with the most noteworthy species being Cirl Bunting (heard singing) and several more Melodious Warblers. Grasshoppers and crickets were much in evidence with sightings of Field Grasshopper, Meadow Grasshopper, Great Green Bush Cricket, Long-winged Conehead and Blue-winged Grasshopper.

With a full day of butterfly watching in fantastic weather completed we headed back to Arromanches, on a more leisurely and less direct course today, travelling through the highly scenic Swiss-Normandie, an area of fast flowing rivers, cliffs, crags and wooded hills.

## Day 4

Sunday 16 July

Our pre-breakfast today took us again to the marshes east of Arromanches. This time we walked the coastal path from the eastern end, which proved productive with excellent views of a number of wetland warblers, plus Mediterranean Gull, Greenshank (heard only), Marsh Harrier, Bearded Tit (a Naturetrek first), Turtle Dove and Yellow Wagtail.

After breakfast, with the promise of another glorious summer's day, we headed south-east to our destination today, the rather wonderful Forêt de Gouffern. This large, mixed forest east of Argentan supports an excellent variety of wildlife, in part due to the varied geology and the private forestry practices, which are less uniform than those adopted in state-owned French forests. In the morning we explored the large grassy glade which

supports a calcareous grassland flora, located at the entrance of the western section of the wood. This is a superb butterfly habitat throughout the field season, and our visit today did not disappoint. A wide range of quality species was recorded including Mallow Skipper, Pearly Heath, Large Chequered Skipper, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Dingy Skipper, White Admiral and Silver washed Fritillary.

After a huge picnic of fresh salads, local cheeses and meats washed down with wine, cider and beer in the welcome shade provided by the forest canopy, we decided to explore the forest ride and pylon line beyond the glade.

The pylon line had been cut two winters ago and was still in superb condition for butterflies. The combination of woodland edge and adjacent open sunny flower-ridge glade habitat, proved extremely attractive to both woodland and grassland butterflies. Amongst the large number of species seen, in hot and sunny weather, highlights included 15 Map, 12 Clouded Yellow, 4 Wood White, Ilex Hairstreak, Purple Hairstreak, 15 Queen of Spain Fritillary, 12 Silver washed Fritillary, 5 Dingy Skipper, 7 Mallow Skipper, 15 White Admiral, 1 Large Chequered Skipper, Brown Argus, 2 Purple Emperors and 2 Lesser Purple Emperors. There were many common butterflies too, including for example 60 Small Skippers, 50+ Peacocks, 150 Meadow Browns and 70 Marbled Whites. In total 35 species were seen, a remarkable tally for a 1-mile narrow stretch of forest in northern Europe.

The damp pylon line was not without dragonfly interest, with Brown Hawker, Beautiful Demoiselle, and Golden-ringed Dragonfly all picked up. There were not many moths seen, but the list did include 50+ Silver Y and 4 Scarlet Tigers. Bird interest included Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Garden Warbler and Tree Pipit, whilst John was very lucky to see a Red Squirrel all by himself. By late afternoon, we were all fairly burnt out by the sun and heat, and overdosing on the superb diversity of butterflies seen. It was time to head back to Arromanches, with a little time to explore this charming resort (some picking up Common Sandpiper on the beach). Later we had another fantastic meal in the La Marine hotel restaurant, where we able to relax and reflect on a truly wonderful day for butterflies.

## Day 5

Monday 18 July

The final morning, gave opportunity for one last walk up the west cliff coastal path at Arromanches, where Yellow Wagtail, Whimbrel and 2 Serin's were seen. By 9am we had departed Arromanches towards Cherbourg allowing ample time to catch our 11:30 ferry to Poole. With characteristically quiet roads we made good progress. We had time to make a couple of final stops on the edge of Cherbourg. At La Glacierie, we looked in vain for Ilex Hairstreaks, but picked up several Purple Hairstreaks instead. At the small marsh on the eastern fringe of town, we failed to locate any Marsh Warblers in the limited time available, but did pick up yet another Fan-tailed Warbler – how long before this ubiquitous warbler, which has spread rapidly across northern France, invades Britain?

We arrived at the port of Cherbourg, and were soon safely on board and heading home across the English Channel. The offshore crossing was quiet, save for a steady passage of around 70 Gannets but birdlife was again plentiful in Poole Harbour, especially on Brownsea lagoon, where waders included 2 Greenshank. At Poole we said our warm goodbyes and congratulated ourselves on what had been a superb trip, for butterflies and other wildlife, with great weather and company throughout.

## Species lists

Common name	Scientific name	Family	July 2006				
			13	14	15	16	17
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	Papilionidae			2		
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	Pieridae	12	5	50	30	1
Small White	<i>Artogeia (Pieris) rapae</i>	Pieridae	60	10	250	200	10
Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia (Pieris) napi</i>	Pieridae					
Clouded Yellow*	<i>Colias crocea</i>	Pieridae	6		10	12	
Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias australis</i>	Pieridae			40		
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	Pieridae		15	40	25	
Wood White	<i>Leptidea sinapis</i>	Pieridae				4	
Purple Hairstreak	<i>Quercusia quercus</i>	Lycaenidae		3		1	3
Ilex Hairstreak	<i>Satyrium ilicis</i>	Lycaenidae				1	
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>	Lycaenidae			2	1	
Sooty Copper	<i>Heodes tityrus</i>	Lycaenidae					
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrinas argiolus</i>	Lycaenidae				1	
Alcon Blue	<i>Maculinea alcon</i>	Lycaenidae					
Silver-studded Blue	<i>Plebejus argus</i>	Lycaenidae		70			
Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>	Lycaenidae			5	1	
Mazarine Blue	<i>Cyaniris semiargus</i>	Lycaenidae					
Chalkhill Blue	<i>Lysandra coridon</i>	Lycaenidae					
Adonis Blue	<i>Lysandra bellargus</i>	Lycaenidae					
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>	Lycaenidae			6		
White Admiral	<i>Limentis camilla</i>	Nymphalidae		3		15	
Poplar Admiral	<i>Limenitis populi</i>	Nymphalidae					
Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura iris</i>	Nymphalidae		2	2	2	
Lesser Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura ilia</i>	Nymphalidae				2	
Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>	Nymphalidae	5	2	10	50+	
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	Nymphalidae	2	5	20	20	
Painted Lady	<i>Cynthia cardui</i>	Nymphalidae		2	5	10	
Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>	Nymphalidae	1		1	1	
Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>	Nymphalidae		3	2	2	
Map	<i>Araschnia levana</i>	Nymphalidae		2	1	15	
Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>	Nymphalidae			5	12	
Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Mesoacidalia (Argyrrinnis) aglaia</i>	Nymphalidae			30		
Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>	Nymphalidae			3	15	
Heath Fritillary	<i>Mellicta athalia</i>	Nymphalidae					
Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>	Satyridae	4	2	30	70	
Common Grayling	<i>Hipparchia semele</i>	Satyridae					
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	Satyridae	20	20	200	150	
Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>	Satyridae		3		30	
Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>	Satyridae	70	60	30	30	
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>	Satyridae	10	1	2	1	
Pearly Heath	<i>Coenonympha arcania</i>	Satyridae				1	
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	Satyridae	1		1		
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>	Satyridae			8	2	
Mallow Skipper	<i>Carcharodus alceae</i>	Hesperiidae			7	4	
Dingy Skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>	Hesperiidae			2	5	
Large Chequered Skipper	<i>Heteropterus morpheus</i>	Hesperiidae		10		2	
Essex Skipper	<i>Thymelicus lineola</i>	Hesperiidae				2	
Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris (flavus)</i>	Hesperiidae	2	30	2	60	
Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes venatus</i>	Hesperiidae	2	20	5	20	
Lulworth Skipper	<i>Thymelicus acteon</i>	Hesperiidae	35			2	
Red Underwing Skipper	<i>Spialia sertorius</i>	Hesperiidae	4				

## Moths

1. 6-spot Burnet
2. 5-spot Burnet
3. Oak Eggar
4. Large Yellow Underwing
5. Common Heath
6. Common Silver Y
7. Common Footman
8. Bright Wave
9. Grass Moth spp.
10. Zygaena fausta
11. Hummingbird Hawkmoth
12. Pinion-streaked Snout
13. Scarlet Tiger
14. Nematopogon sp.
15. Vapourer
16. Cinnabar
17. Pyrausta aurata

## Dragonflies

1. Emperor Dragonfly
2. Keeled Skimmer
3. Black-tailed Skimmer
4. Broad-bodied Chaser
5. Common Darter
6. Scarlet Darter
7. Beautiful Demoiselle
8. Common Blue Damselfly
9. Azure Damselfly
10. Dainty Damselfly
11. Blue-tailed Damselfly
12. Golden-ringed Dragonfly
13. Southern Hawker
14. Brown Hawker

## Grasshoppers & Crickets

1. Great Green Bush-cricket
2. Dark Bush-cricket
3. Roesel's Bush-cricket
4. Long-winged Conehead
5. Large Marsh Grasshopper

6. Rufous Grasshopper
7. Field Grasshopper
8. Meadow Grasshopper
9. Common Green Grasshopper
10. Stripe-winged Grasshopper
11. Blue-winged Grasshopper
12. Speckled Bush-cricket

## Mammals

1. Rabbit
2. Hare
3. Roe Deer
4. Red Squirrel

## Birds

1. Fulmar
2. Gannet
3. Cormorant
4. Shag
5. Grey Heron
6. Little Egret
7. Canada Goose
8. Mallard
9. Shoveler
10. Shelduck
11. Eider
12. Marsh Harrier
13. Montague's Harrier
14. Buzzard
15. Kestrel
16. Hobby
17. Sparrowhawk
18. Peregrine Falcon
19. Coot
20. Oystercatcher
21. Dunlin
22. Ringed Plover
23. Lapwing
24. Common Sandpiper
25. Redshank
26. Greenshank
27. Whimbrel



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- |     |                          |     |                        |
|-----|--------------------------|-----|------------------------|
| 28. | Black-headed Gull        | 72. | Blue Tit               |
| 29. | Common Gull              | 73. | Long-tailed Tit        |
| 30. | Mediterranean Gull       | 74. | Marsh Tit              |
| 31. | Herring Gull             | 75. | Crested Tit            |
| 32. | Yellow-legged Gull       | 76. | Bearded Tit            |
| 33. | Great Black Backed Gull  | 77. | Coal Tit               |
| 34. | Lesser Black-backed Gull | 78. | Short-toed Treecreeper |
| 35. | Common Tern              | 79. | Nuthatch               |
| 36. | Sandwich tern            | 80. | Magpie                 |
| 37. | Turtle Dove              | 81. | Rook                   |
| 38. | Wood Pigeon              | 82. | Crow                   |
| 39. | Collared Dove            | 83. | Jay                    |
| 40. | Feral Pigeon             | 84. | Jackdaw                |
| 41. | Swift                    | 85. | Starling               |
| 42. | Swallow                  | 86. | House Sparrow          |
| 43. | House Martin             | 87. | Chaffinch              |
| 44. | Sand Martin              | 88. | Bullfinch              |
| 45. | Great Spotted Woodpecker | 89. | Linnet                 |
| 46. | Skylark                  | 90. | Greenfinch             |
| 47. | Tree Pipit               | 91. | Goldfinch              |
| 48. | Meadow Pipit             | 92. | Serin                  |
| 49. | White wagtail            | 93. | Bullfinch              |
| 50. | Yellow Wagtail           | 94. | Crossbill              |
| 51. | Wren                     | 95. | Reed Bunting           |
| 52. | Dunnock                  | 96. | Yellowhammer           |
| 53. | Robin                    | 97. | Cirl Bunting           |
| 54. | Stonechat                |     |                        |
| 55. | Black Redstart           |     |                        |
| 56. | Mistle Thrush            |     |                        |
| 57. | Song Thrush              |     |                        |
| 58. | Blackbird                |     |                        |
| 59. | Blackcap                 |     |                        |
| 60. | Garden Warbler           |     |                        |
| 61. | Whitethroat              |     |                        |
| 62. | Sedge Warbler            |     |                        |
| 63. | Fan-tailed Warbler       |     |                        |
| 64. | Reed Warbler             |     |                        |
| 65. | Cetti's Warbler          |     |                        |
| 66. | Melodious Warbler        |     |                        |
| 67. | Cetti's warbler          |     |                        |
| 68. | Chiffchaff               |     |                        |
| 69. | Goldcrest                |     |                        |
| 70. | Spotted Flycatcher       |     |                        |
| 71. | Great Tit                |     |                        |