

Butterflies in Normandy

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 - 16 July 2007



Lesser Purple Emperor



Faust's Burnet



Alcon Blue

Report and photos compiled by Tom Brereton



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Butterfly highlights: 37 species including Lesser Purple Emperor, Purple Emperor, Mallow Skipper, Swallowtail, Large Chequered Skipper, Weaver's Fritillary, Large Tortoiseshell, Berger's Clouded Yellow and Map.

Other wildlife highlights: Summer Lady's Tresses, Heath Lobelia, Viper's Grass, chalkhill flowers; 100 species of bird including Great White Egret, Savi's Warbler, Melodious Warbler, Fan-tailed Warbler and Cirl Bunting; and a good variety of moths (including Bright Wave, *Zygaena carniolica* and Faust's Burnet) dragonflies (including Dainty Damsel) grasshoppers/crickets (including Blue-winged Grasshopper).

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

Day 1

Thursday 12th 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. 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 such as Black-tailed Godwit, several Little Egrets and large numbers of breeding Sandwich and Common Terns. Few birds were recorded on the crossing through the English Channel, the highlights being some Razorbills and Gannets.

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. With poor visibility and rain threatening lunch was taken early at a delightful little secluded and sheltered picnic spot near the shores of Vauville Bay.

After lunch and with no sign of the weather picking up, we made a short journey to Cap de la Hague at the far north-west tip of the Cherbourg Peninsula to look for birds rather than sun-loving insects. Cap de la Hague is a great seawatching spot and large numbers of Gannets were passing through, making feeding trips to and from

their Alderney breeding grounds. Other birds recorded included an obliging Fan-tailed Warbler, a Little Egret and a Ringed Plover.

We then made our way a short distance south to the main destination of the day, Vauville Nature Reserve. This diverse habitat of sand dunes, marsh, scrub and ponds is a superb wildlife habitat and today's visit did not disappoint, even though conditions were extremely unsuitable for butterfly activity! In spite of the weather some butterflies were on the wing including Red Admiral, Small Heath, Small White and several hardy Gatekeepers. Moths included several 6-spot Burnets, and a Bright Wave (a rare species in the UK restricted to south-east England), whilst other wildlife included Muskrat, European Tree Frog and Common Darter dragonflies.

On and around the main pond, there was a fair amount of bird activity that included Cetti's Warbler and Pochard. Plant life was impressive with some quality species recorded including Thyme Broomrape, Sea Holly, Carline Thistle, Musk Mallow, Tree Mallow, Yellow Bartsia, 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. After dinner, one final bonus outside the hotel was a noisy family party of Black Redstarts on the adjacent shop roof.

Day 2

Friday 13th July

We awoke to beautiful calm, clear and sunny weather providing a much welcome contrast to the previous day! Before breakfast, a small party headed out on a short walk to an area of cliff-top coastal grassland west of the harbour. Reassuringly in the early morning sun, there was already plenty of butterfly activity including Marbled White, Meadow Brown, Red Admiral and Gatekeeper and a good variety of wildflowers including Pyramidal Orchid, Sulphur Clover, Dragon's Teeth and Spiny Restharrow. Bird interest included Spotted Flycatcher (an increasingly uncommon sight these days in the UK) and Black Redstart.

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. With cloudless skies continuing, the remainder of the morning was spent in a scrubby glade and surrounding grassland areas in the north-west corner of the reserve.

Butterfly abundance was low no doubt due to the bad weather of late though we recorded an excellent variety of species, amongst them Purple Emperor, Mallow Skipper, Dingy Skipper, Wall, Silver Washed Fritillary, Dark Green Fritillary, Swallowtail, several Berger's Clouded Yellow, and best of all Weaver's Fritillary, a Naturetrek

first for the site. Moths seen included Treble Bar, *Pyrausta purpuralis*, *P. aurata* and Hummingbird Hawkmoth. Whilst Tom purchased then prepared the lunch, the group wandered down the aerodrome road, passing weedy arable fields, and noting a range of interesting wildlife that included a Swallowtail caterpillar, Honey Buzzard, Turtle Dove and the arable weed, Large Venus's-looking-glass.

At lunchtime we were joined by renowned local naturalist Peter Stalleger, who has carried out a number of ecological studies on the reserve. After a hearty picnic, enhanced by a pear brandy aperitif brought by Peter from his own orchard, we spent the afternoon exploring the remainder of the reserve. In the baking heat, there was much butterfly activity, including Berger's Clouded Yellow, Dark Green Fritillary, Swallowtail, Purple Emperor, Silver Washed Fritillary, Dingy Skipper and another Naturetrek first for the site – Large Tortoiseshell.

On the moth front, there were plenty of 6-spot Burnet Moths and several Pyralid moth species, but the undoubted highlight was seeing several stunning Faust Burnets. Several other interesting insects were seen including Blue-winged Grasshopper, Field Cricket, the Cuckoo Bee *Nomada fulvicornis*, the beetle *Rhagium mordax*, and the Longhorn Beetle *Strangalia maculata*.

The slopes were rich in wildflowers and we recorded some very interesting species rare/absent from the UK, with the help of Peter, including Round-headed Rampion, Bastard Toadflax, Sickle-leaved Globularia, Lizard Orchid, Hare's-ear, Vincetoxicum, Cypress Spurge, Mountain Germander, Wall Germander, Juniper, Cut-leaved Self-heal, Large Self-heal, *Carex humilis*, Ground-pine and the asphodel, *Anthericum ramosum*. The site was not without bird interest with the most noteworthy species being Cirl Bunting and several more Melodious Warblers.

After extending our gratitude and saying our goodbyes to Peter we returned content to Arromanches, where a lovely sunset and a fantastic meal were awaiting us.

Day 3

Saturday 14th 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. By scanning the marshes and shooting pools and walking a short way along the beach, we were able to pick up a good selection of birds that included Fan-tailed Warbler, Serin, Curlew, Whimbrel, Green Sandpiper and the pick of the bunch Great White Egret. A Brown Hare was also spotted in a field on the edge of the marsh.

After breakfast, with the weather unsettled, but forecast better to the east, we headed south-east to our destination today, the 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. As we arrived at the forest, conditions were still overcast and there was a light drizzle, and a first visit to a favoured glade was relatively unproductive, bar numerous Marbled White and 6-spot Burnet Moths which gently fluttered from their roosting perches. However, we could see a brighter area to the south. We looked on the map and noticed this was near another area of forest "de Petite Gouffern", south of Silly-en-Gouffern, so we headed over there.

Following our noses, we stopped at a little scrubby glade with adjacent woodland ride habitat that looked promising. The drizzle stopped and sun appeared briefly and on cue butterflies became active, with no less than seven Silver-washed Fritillaries, two Map and a White Admiral putting in an appearance.

With some nice woodland butterflies under our belt we headed back north to the main forest area, stopping en route at a promising little meadow near Le Bourg St Leonard that held Essex Skipper, Dingy Skipper and Silver washed Fritillary. Lunch was taken in a lovely flower-rich glade surrounded by Oak trees and Willow bushes in the east of the forest, which produced some excellent sightings including Large Tortoiseshell, Lesser Purple Emperor, Purple Emperor, Dingy Skipper, Wood White, White Admiral and Silver washed Fritillary.

With conditions improving further we returned to a favoured area – a glade/pylon line complex in the west of the forest. Here the sun was shining and insect activity was high. First we retraced our steps over the scrubby glade near the start of the pylon line, that we had been to first thing, picking up Queen of Spain Fritillary, Dingy Skipper, White Admiral and a stunning burnet moth *Zygaena carniolica*.

Then we made our way to the pylon line, one of the best butterfly habitats in the forest. The pylon line had been cut three 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 10 Map, 2 Wood White, 4 Silver washed Fritillary, 2 Dingy Skipper, Swallowtail, 3 White Admiral, Brown Argus and 3 Lesser Purple Emperors, the latter of which gave some brilliant views. There was plenty of other insect interest including Scarlet Tiger, Beautiful Demoiselle, White-legged Damselfly and Musk Beetle. Bird of note over the day included Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Tree Pipit and Turtle Dove

After another superb dinner, Arromanches was fun that evening, due to it being Bastille Day, with a spectacular firework display in the little square by our hotel.

Day 4

Sunday 15th July

Our pre-breakfast nature walk today took us again to the marshes east of Arromanches, this time to the eastern end. The early morning was cold with a fresh north-east wind and we were caught in a ferocious thunderstorm. After drying off in the minibus, we were close to returning for an early breakfast, when suddenly the weather brightened. Our patience paid off. Exploration of the marshes from the coastal path was very rewarding, providing excellent views of three Hen Harriers and a Marsh Harrier. A Savi's Warbler was singing in the reeds whilst Serin, Reed Bunting, Reed Warbler and Sedge Warbler all gave excellent views. There was a passage of waders going on with Greenshank, Whimbrel, Curlew and Oystercatcher all noted going west.

After breakfast, we made our customary trip to the beautiful and world-famous must-see Bayeux tapestry – 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 predicted sunnier conditions. By late morning we had reached the wet heathland and Pine forests of Lessay in increasingly hot and humid weather.

Today's visit certainly put the wet in wet heathland (!) and this normally dry ride though the forest was extensively waterlogged. What is normally a gentle stroll over baked earth, became a damp slog over some rather uncomfortable terrain, which brought out the pioneering and valiant spirit in the group. Thankfully the

butterflies, made up for the wet conditions, with plenty of activity, including 30 Large Chequered Skipper and 50 Silver Studded Blues, plus a good number of common grassland butterflies.

After about half a mile, we were into the most important area for our target species, the Alcon Blue. In 2005, we were dismayed to see that here and all around, the habitat had been burnt and we failed to locate any Marsh Gentians (the butterfly's foodplant) or Alcon Blues fearing local extinction. To our great relief the Alcon Blues were back and we recorded at least seven individuals giving many excellent views. We carried on past the Alcon Blue area to a flower-rich dry glade at the far end of the site, where many butterflies were on the wing including Lesser Purple Emperor, Ilex Hairstreak and Swallowtail.

Unsurprisingly, this was turning out to be a good year at the site for wetland plants(!), including 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), plus Heath Spotted Orchid, Heath Lobelia, Meadow Thistle, Viper's Grass, Lesser Skullcap, Whorled Caraway and Oblong-leaved Sundew.

There was plenty of dragonfly activity especially in proximity to a small boggy pool located at a ride junction in the core Alcon Blue area, including Dainty Damselfly, Azure Damselfly, Black-tailed Skimmer, Small Red Damselfly, Keeled Skimmer, Ruddy Darter and Broad-bodied Chaser. Bird interest included Tree Pipit, Short-toed Treecreeper and Crested Tit.

A late and suitably hearty lunch was devoured by the group at a pleasant picnic spot on the edge of the heathy forest, where we discussed options for the remainder of the day. We decided to try a new site, following a tip-off from Peter – an area of coastal grassland near Omaha Beach. The coast was busy with many French holidaymakers on the beach, but this proved a productive spot for butterflies none the less, with good numbers of Lulworth Skippers recorded, amongst a wide variety of common species. Later we had our final fantastic meal in the La Marine hotel restaurant, where we were able to relax and reflect on another excellent day for butterflies.

Day 5

Monday 16th July

The final morning, gave opportunity for one last visit to the marshes east of Arromanches, where a varied selection of birds included a Ruddy Shelduck (that was being chased by a dog on the beach) Common Scoter, 9 Whimbrel, Cetti's Warbler (seen well briefly), 2 Hen Harrier, Turtle Dove and Fan-tailed warbler. By 8:45 am 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 Glacerie, we looked in vain for Ilex Hairstreaks, but saw Marsh Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker. 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 Melodious Warbler (a target bird for Michael) and 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 Gannets but birdlife was again plentiful in Poole Harbour, especially on Brownsea lagoon. 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

Butterflies

Common Name	Scientific Name	Family	July				
			12	13	14	15	16
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	Papilionidae		1	1	1	
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	Pieridae		10	45	10	
Small White	<i>Artogeia (Pieris) rapae</i>	Pieridae	1	30+	220	80	
Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia (Pieris) napi</i>	Pieridae		1	1		
Clouded Yellow*	<i>Colias crocea</i>	Pieridae					
Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias australis</i>	Pieridae		18			
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	Pieridae		12	10	15	
Wood White	<i>Leptidea sinapis</i>	Pieridae			3		
Purple Hairstreak*	<i>Quercusia quercus</i>	Lycaenidae					
Ilex Hairstreak	<i>Satyrium ilicis</i>	Lycaenidae				2	
Small Copper*	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>	Lycaenidae					
Sooty Copper*	<i>Heodes tityrus</i>	Lycaenidae					
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrinas argiolus</i>	Lycaenidae		3	1		
Alcon Blue	<i>Maculinea alcon</i>	Lycaenidae				7	
Silver-studded Blue	<i>Plebejus argus</i>	Lycaenidae				50	
Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>	Lycaenidae		2	3		
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					
White Admiral	<i>Limentis camilla</i>	Nymphalidae			6		
Poplar Admiral*	<i>Limenitis populi</i>	Nymphalidae					
Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura iris</i>	Nymphalidae		1	1		
Lesser Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura ilia</i>	Nymphalidae			40	1	
Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>	Nymphalidae		30	60	25	
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	Nymphalidae	1	3	15		
Painted Lady*	<i>Cynthia cardui</i>	Nymphalidae					
Small Tortoiseshell*	<i>Aglais urticae</i>	Nymphalidae					
Large Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>	Nymphalidae		1	1		
Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>	Nymphalidae			25		
Map	<i>Araschnia levana</i>	Nymphalidae			15		
Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>	Nymphalidae	1	3	15		
Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Mesoacidalia (Argyrinnis) aglaia</i>	Nymphalidae		4			
Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>	Nymphalidae			1		
Heath Fritillary*	<i>Mellicta athalia</i>	Nymphalidae					
Weaver's Fritillary	<i>Clossiana dia</i>	Nymphalidae			1		
Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>	Satyridae		30+	50	32	
Common Grayling*	<i>Hipparchia semele</i>	Satyridae					
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	Satyridae		50	30	30	
Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>	Satyridae		1	50	30	
Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>	Satyridae	30	10	5	22	
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>	Satyridae		1			
Pearly Heath*	<i>Coenonympha arcania</i>	Satyridae					
Speckled Wood*	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	Satyridae					
Wall Brown	<i>Lasioommata megera</i>	Satyridae		20	6		
Mallow Skipper	<i>Carcharodus alceae</i>	Hesperiidae		6			
Dingy Skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>	Hesperiidae		2	5		
Large Chequered Skipper	<i>Heteropterus morpheus</i>	Hesperiidae				30	
Essex Skipper	<i>Thymelicus lineola</i>	Hesperiidae			1		
Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris (flavus)</i>	Hesperiidae			40	50	
Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes venatus</i>	Hesperiidae		2	10	20	
Lulworth Skipper	<i>Thymelicus acteon</i>	Hesperiidae				10	
Red Underwing Skipper*	<i>Spialia sertorius</i>	Hesperiidae					

*=recorded in other years

Moths

6-spot Burnet	Yellow-tail
European Corn Borer	6-spot Burnet
Oak Eggar	Large Yellow Underwing
Common Heath	Latticed Heath
Common Silver Y	Bright Wave
Grass Moth spp.	<i>Zygaena carnioloica</i>
Faust's Burnet	Hummingbird Hawkmoth
Scarlet Tiger	<i>Nematopogon</i> sp.
Vapourer	Cinnabar
<i>Pyrausta aurata</i>	<i>Pyrausta purpuralis</i>
Treble Bar	Shaded Broad-bar
Common Footman	<i>Agapeta hamana</i>
<i>Synaphe punctalis</i>	

Dragonflies

Emperor Dragonfly	Keeled Skimmer
Black-tailed Skimmer	Broad-bodied Chaser
Common Darter	Ruddy Darter
Beautiful Demoiselle	Common Blue Damselfly
Azure Damselfly	Dainty Damselfly
Blue-tailed Damselfly	Southern Hawker
Emerald Damselfly	Banded Agrion

Crickets and grasshoppers

Great Green Bush-cricket	Dark Bush-cricket
Roesel's Bush-cricket	Long-winged Conehead
Field Grasshopper	Meadow Grasshopper
Common Green Grasshopper	Stripe-winged Grasshopper
Blue-winged Grasshopper	Speckled Bush-cricket

Mammals

Rabbit	Brown Hare
Roe Deer	Muskrat
Red Fox	

Birds

1	Gannet	51	Great Spotted Woodpecker
2	Cormorant	52	Skylark
3	Shag	53	Tree Pipit
4	Grey Heron	54	Meadow Pipit
5	Little Egret	55	White wagtail
6	Great White Egret	56	Wren
7	Canada Goose	57	Dunnock
8	Mallard	58	Robin
9	Shoveler	59	Stonechat
10	Shelduck	60	Black Redstart
11	Ruddy Shelduck	61	Mistle Thrush
12	Mute Swan	62	Song Thrush
13	Common Scoter	63	Blackbird
14	Pochard	64	Blackcap
15	Hen Harrier	65	Garden Warbler
16	Marsh Harrier	66	Whitethroat
17	Honey Buzzard	67	Sedge Warbler
18	Buzzard	68	Fan-tailed Warbler
19	Kestrel	69	Reed Warbler
20	Sparrowhawk	70	Savi's Warbler
21	Coot	71	Cetti's Warbler
22	Moorhen	72	Melodious Warbler
23	Oystercatcher	73	Cetti's warbler
24	Curlew	74	Chiffchaff
25	Ringed Plover	75	Goldcrest
26	Little Ringed Plover	76	Spotted Flycatcher
27	Lapwing	77	Great Tit
28	Green Sandpiper	78	Blue Tit
29	Redshank	79	Long-tailed Tit
30	Greenshank	80	Marsh Tit
31	Whimbrel	81	Crested Tit
32	Black-tailed Godwit	82	Short-toed Treecreeper
33	Black-headed Gull	83	Nuthatch
34	Common Gull	84	Maggie
35	Herring Gull	85	Rook
36	Great Black Backed Gull	86	Crow
37	Lesser Black-backed Gull	87	Jay
38	Common Tern	88	Jackdaw
39	Sandwich tern	89	Starling
40	Razorbill	90	House Sparrow
41	Turtle Dove	91	Chaffinch
42	Wood Pigeon	92	Bullfinch
43	Stock Dove	93	Linnet
44	Collared Dove	94	Greenfinch
45	Feral Pigeon	95	Goldfinch
46	Swift	96	Serin
47	Swallow	97	Bullfinch
48	House Martin	98	Reed Bunting
49	Sand Martin	99	Yellowhammer
50	Green Woodpecker	100	Cirl Bunting

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