

Butterflies in Normandy (BC)

Naturetrek Tour Report

9 - 13 July 2009



Berger's Clouded Yellow



Lesser Purple Emperor



Swallowtail

Report and images compiled by Tom Brereton and Nichola Davies



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Summary

Butterfly highlights: 40 species including Lesser Purple Emperor, Purple Emperor, Mallow Skipper, Swallowtail, Large Chequered Skipper, Weaver's Fritillary, Berger's Clouded Yellow and Map.

Other wildlife highlights: Summer Lady's Tresses, Heath Lobelia, Viper's Grass, chalkhill flowers; 102 species of bird including Great White Egret, Short-toed Eagle, Montague's Harrier, Hen Harrier, Melodious Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit, Fan-tailed Warbler and Cirl Bunting; and a good variety of moths (including Goat Moth, *Zygaena carniolica* and Faust's Burnet) dragonflies (including Dainty Damselfly) grasshoppers/crickets (including Large Marsh Grasshopper).

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

Day 1

Thursday 9th 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 previous trips, 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.

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 waders such as Oystercatcher and Redshank, 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 Kittiwake, Guillemot and about 30 Gannets. However the entrance to Cherbourg Harbour was noteworthy for a roosting/feeding flock of ~200 Shag, whilst several Mediterranean Gulls were in the inner harbour.

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 and a number of the group took a short walk to record the first butterflies of the trip including Peacock and Small White. Lunch was taken at a delightful little secluded and sheltered picnic spot near the shores of *Vauville Bay*. There was considerable excitement whilst the picnic was being prepared when a Short-tailed Eagle sailed over being mobbed by two tiny looking Common Buzzards. There was good deal of butterfly activity too that included our only sightings of Small Copper, Small Tortoiseshell and Speckled Wood on the trip.

We then made our way a short distance south to the main field destination of the day, *Vauville Nature Reserve*. This diverse habitat of sand dunes, marsh, scrub and a large freshwater pond is superb for wildlife and today's visit did not disappoint. With warm weather and sunny spells continuing, there were plenty of butterflies on the wing. The weedy pastures on the left at the entrance of the reserve held Brown Argus and Mallow Skipper, whilst rough grass on the other side of the road supported small numbers of Lulworth Skippers. On the reserve there were a good number of Gatekeepers and Meadow Browns plus smaller numbers of Common Blue, Marbled White, Small Heath, Large Skipper and Small Skipper. Moths included several 6-spot Burnets, whilst other wildlife included Muskrat, European Tree Frog and Ruddy Darter dragonflies. On and around the main pond, there was a fair amount of bird activity that included Hobby, Fan-tailed Warbler, Cetti's Warbler, Stonechat, Little Grebe 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 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 thoroughly French 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. Over dinner we had our first real opportunity to introduce ourselves 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.

Day 2

Friday 10th 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, Snipe, Little Egret, Mediterranean Gull and the pick of the bunch a ringtail Hen Harrier.

The weather forecast for this holiday was not great and this looked to be about the best day, so we decide to head south-east to the richest butterfly site on our itinerary, 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.

En-route we picked up Turtle Dove on telegraph wires, whilst a Serin was singing in Bayeux. At Falaise the group were dropped off along a favoured roadside, whilst Tom and Nichola bought lunch. At this site there was a nice selection of chalk grassland plants that included Lizard Orchid and Round Headed Rampion, whilst the butterfly highlight was undoubtedly Berger's Clouded Yellow.

In the morning we explored a 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 species was recorded including large numbers of Ringlet and 6-spot Burnet Moths, good numbers of Pearly Heaths, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Dingy Skipper, White Admiral and the stunning burnet moth *Zygaena carniolica*. Noteworthy plants present were Bee Orchid and Vincetoxicum.

After a huge picnic of fresh salads, local cheeses and meats washed down with wine, cider and beer at the edge of the forest, we decided to explore the forest ride and pylon line beyond the glade, which is one of the best butterfly habitats in the forest. This had been cut recently and was in good 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 species seen, highlights included large numbers of Painted Ladies and Ringlets, Map, Wood White, Silver washed Fritillary, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Dingy Skipper, White Admiral, Brown Argus, Purple Emperor and 3 Lesser Purple Emperors - the latter species giving some fabulous views to within a few feet as they basked along the trackway. Birds of note in this area included Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Tree Pipit, Crossbill, Turtle Dove and best of all, Honey Buzzard which gave superb views as it soared overhead.

Our final stop of the day was a lovely flower-rich glade surrounded by Oak trees and Willow bushes in the east of the forest. Again, this produced some excellent sightings including Large Chequered Skipper, White Admiral, Silver washed Fritillary and an uncharacteristically obliging Swallowtail, which allowed prolonged views at very close range. After a full days butterfly watching in good weather, we returned to the hotel feeling content with the impressive species tally (30!) and rather grateful that in the circumstances the weather had been kind to us.

Day 3

Saturday 11th July

Before breakfast, a small group of us headed out on a short walk to an area of cliff-top coastal grassland west of the harbour. In spite of the cold weather there was little butterfly activity with Marbled White, Red Admiral and Gatekeeper noted and a good variety of wildflowers were present including Pyramidal Orchid, Sulphur Clover, Dragon's Teeth and Spiny Restharrow. Bird interest included Serin, Spotted Flycatcher (an increasingly uncommon sight these days in the UK), Black Redstart and our only Fulmars of the trip.

The forecast for today was not promising - showery, largely dull and with no more than moderate temperatures. We decided to head west to *Lessay* in the south-west corner of the *Cotentin Peninsula* where the weather forecast predicted slightly sunnier/warmer conditions. En route, and with the weather remaining cool and heavily overcast we decided to break the journey up by stopping at Le Cap, a vast area of marshland and water meadows near Carentan. This proved worthwhile, particularly for birds with highlights including Marsh Harriers, Lapwing, and good views of Yellow Wagtail and Reed Bunting. A Quail and Cuckoo were heard but not seen. Plant life present included Frogbit, whilst several Marsh Frogs and an Emerald Damselfly were seen.

By late morning we had reached our main destination, the wet heathland and Pine forests of *Lessay* where weather conditions were overcast but warm enough for butterfly activity. Within a few minutes of leaving the car park we had recorded a number of Silver-studded Blues and Large Chequered Skipper butterflies amongst 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 orchid in full flower (*Lessay* is one of the most important localities in Europe to see this diminutive rare wildflower), a truly fabulous sight.

After lunch we returned to the large ride walking approximately one mile east to an intersection favoured by the rare Alcon Blue. In spite of the dull weather, there was plenty of butterfly activity along this ride, including a good number of Large Chequered Skipper and well in excess of two hundred Silver Studded Blues, plus Brown Argus and many common grassland butterflies. Plants of interest along the ride included various wet heathland specialists such as Marsh St John's-wort, Heath Spotted Orchid, Lesser Skullcap, Heath Lobelia, Meadow Thistle, Whorled Caraway and Oblong-leaved Sundew. There was plenty of dragonfly activity especially in proximity to a small boggy pool located at the ride junction in the core Alcon Blue area, including Dainty Damsel, Azure Damsel, Black-tailed Skimmer, Small Red Damsel, Ruddy Darter and Broad-bodied Chaser. Bird interest included Tree Pipit, Short-toed Treecreeper and Crested Tit. A Tawny Owl was heard but not seen.

We searched hard, but failed to locate any Alcon Blues – the marginal weather did not help matters, but in any case with the recent poor weather and it being early in the season, perhaps they had not emerged yet? We carried on past the Alcon Blue area to another favoured spot - a flower-rich dry glade at the far end of the site, where many butterflies were on the wing including White Admiral and our only Purple Hairstreaks of the holiday. We left a little early to give those in the group time to visit the war museum in Arranches. Pete, Andrew, Barbara and Roger opted for a short stroll west of the hotel and picked up a family party of Black Redstarts, which also gave excellent views for a number of the group after dinner.

Day 4

Sunday 12th July

With the groups thirst for full-day nature watching undiminished, we again headed out early morning returning to the marshes east of Arranches. This time we decided to follow the coastal path at the western end of the marshes. This proved productive for wetland warblers, with Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Cetti's Warbler and Fan-tailed Warbler all picked up. Reed Bunting and Turtle Dove were also recorded in the marshes, but the chief interest was good views of both Hen Harrier and Marsh Harrier quartering over the reedbed. On the beach we saw numerous White Wagtails, Mediterranean Gull and our only Common Gull of the trip.

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 south-east to *Les Monts d'Eraines* nature reserve, an area of chalk hills east of *Falaise* and about an hour's drive from Arranches, where we planned to spend the bulk of the day. Following early morning rain, it was a relief to arrive at the site in warm weather and sunshine!

The remainder of the morning was spent in a scrubby glade and surrounding grassland area in the north-west corner of the reserve. There were plenty of butterflies around, most noteworthy being good numbers of Weavers Fritillaries and Berger's Clouded Yellow, with both species seemingly having an excellent year.

After a hearty picnic, we spent the afternoon exploring the remainder of the reserve. In the warm sunshine, there was much butterfly activity, including large numbers of Meadow Brown, Marbled White and Berger's Clouded Yellow, plus Adonis Blue (the first for here several years), Mallow Skipper, Dingy Skipper, Brown Argus and more Weaver's Fritillaries, but surprisingly no Dark Green Fritillaries. The colonisation of the site by Weaver's Fritillary in 2007, seems to have coincided with a collapse in the Dark Green Fritillary population. Given that the habitat structure has changed little over the period and that the larval hostplant for both species are violets, it is tempting to speculate that this decline is due to competition between the species. On the moth front, there were plenty of 6-spot Burnet Moths and several Pyralid moths, 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 Round-headed Rampion, Sickle-leaved Globularia, Lizard Orchid, Hare's-ear, Vincetoxicum, Cypress Spurge, 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 and several Melodious Warblers, whilst another Quail was heard in the distance.

With the group keen for more butterfly watching, we decided to try a recently discovered area east of Falaise near Beaumais where Butterfly Conservation is involved in a research project studying the ecology of the Black-veined White. This is an area of scrubby woodland plots, bordered by herb-rich fallow grassland on former arable land. It was too late in the season for Black-veined White, but a good variety of butterflies were recorded including Berger's Clouded Yellow, Map and Wood White. A roosting Goat Moth was a good find, whilst other noteworthy sightings included large quantities of Crested Cow-wheat in flower, Broad-leaved Helleborine (seen by Dave and Joan) and a singing Cirl Bunting. Driving back towards Falaise through the flat, cereal fields we picked up some quality farmland birds, amongst them Montague's Harrier, Hen Harrier, Hobby and Corn Bunting.

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 13th July

The final morning and by 8:30 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 for Ilex Hairstreaks, but were out of luck. We had brief views of a possible in a glimmer of bright cloud, but the weather was just too overcast to encourage butterflies out in any quantity.

We arrived at the port of *Cherbourg*, and were soon safely on board and heading home across the English Channel. The offshore crossing was again quiet, save for a steady passage of Gannets and 5 Manx Shearwaters, but birdlife was again plentiful in Poole Harbour, especially on Brownsea lagoon and with a flurry of new wader species and a Mute Swan in the closing minutes of the ferry journey we manage to reach over 100 bird species for the holiday! At Poole we said our warm goodbyes and congratulated ourselves on what had been a superb trip, for butterflies and other wildlife, with surprisingly good weather and excellent company throughout.

Species Lists

Butterflies

	Common name	Scientific name	Family	July				
				9	10	11	12	13
1	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	Papilionidae		2			
2	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	Pieridae	1	6	5	10	
3	Small White	<i>Artogeia (Pieris) rapae</i>	Pieridae	6	50	10	50	
4	Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia (Pieris) napi</i>	Pieridae		3	2	6	
5	Clouded Yellow*	<i>Colias crocea</i>	Pieridae		1		6	
6	Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias australis</i>	Pieridae		1		100	
7	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	Pieridae		1	1	20	
8	Wood White	<i>Leptidea sinapis</i>	Pieridae		1		1	
9	Purple Hairstreak*	<i>Quercusia quercus</i>	Lycaenidae			2		
10	Ilex Hairstreak	<i>Satyrrium ilicis</i>	Lycaenidae					
11	Small Copper*	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>	Lycaenidae	1				
12	Sooty Copper*	<i>Heodes tityrus</i>	Lycaenidae					
13	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrinas argiolus</i>	Lycaenidae					
14	Alcon Blue	<i>Maculinea alcon</i>	Lycaenidae					
15	Silver-studded Blue	<i>Plebejus argus</i>	Lycaenidae			250		
16	Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>	Lycaenidae	3		1	1	
17	Mazarine Blue*	<i>Cyaniris semiargus</i>	Lycaenidae					
18	Chalkhill Blue*	<i>Lysandra coridon</i>	Lycaenidae					
19	Adonis Blue*	<i>Lysandra bellargus</i>	Lycaenidae				1	
20	Common Blue*	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>	Lycaenidae	5	1		3	
21	White Admiral	<i>Limentis camilla</i>	Nymphalidae		7	4		
22	Poplar Admiral*	<i>Limenitis populi</i>	Nymphalidae					
23	Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura iris</i>	Nymphalidae		1-2			
24	Lesser Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura ilia</i>	Nymphalidae		3+			
25	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>	Nymphalidae	2	5	5	20	
26	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	Nymphalidae	5	1		2	
27	Painted Lady*	<i>Cynthia cardui</i>	Nymphalidae	10	50	10	15	
28	Small Tortoiseshell*	<i>Aglais urticae</i>	Nymphalidae	1				
29	Large Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>	Nymphalidae					
30	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>	Nymphalidae		10	1	3	
31	Map	<i>Araschnia levana</i>	Nymphalidae		2		1	
32	Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>	Nymphalidae		3			
33	Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Mesoacidalia (Argyrinis) aglaia</i>	Nymphalidae					
34	Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>	Nymphalidae		3			
35	Heath Fritillary*	<i>Mellicta athalia</i>	Nymphalidae					
36	Weaver's Fritillary	<i>Clossiana dia</i>	Nymphalidae				18	
37	Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>	Satyridae	1	30	10	120	
38	Common Grayling*	<i>Hipparchia semele</i>	Satyridae					
39	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	Satyridae	30	40	50	100	
40	Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>	Satyridae		100	10	10	
41	Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>	Satyridae	50+	2	10	30	
42	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>	Satyridae	3	1		3	
43	Pearly Heath*	<i>Coenonympha arcania</i>	Satyridae		10			
44	Speckled Wood*	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	Satyridae	1		2	2	
45	Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>	Satyridae					
46	Mallow Skipper	<i>Carcharodus alceae</i>	Hesperiidae	2			2	
47	Dingy Skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>	Hesperiidae		2		6	

	Common name	Scientific name	Family	July				
				9	10	11	12	13
48	Large Chequered Skipper	<i>Heteropterus morpheus</i>	Hesperiidae		1	10		
49	Essex Skipper	<i>Thymelicus lineola</i>	Hesperiidae		10+	5		
50	Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris (flavus)</i>	Hesperiidae	1	50	15		
51	Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes venatus</i>	Hesperiidae	1	10	20	15	
52	Lulworth Skipper	<i>Thymelicus acteon</i>	Hesperiidae	20				
53	Red Underwing Skipper*	<i>Spialia sertorius</i>	Hesperiidae					

Moths

6-spot Burnet	Yellow-tail	6-spot Burnet
Oak Eggar	Common Heath	Latticed Heath
Common Silver Y	Grass Moth spp.	<i>Zygaena carnioloica</i>
Faust's Burnet	<i>Nematopogon sp.</i>	Cinnabar
Goat Moth		

Dragonflies

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

Crickets & 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	Large Marsh Grasshopper
Speckled Bush-cricket		

Mammals

Rabbit	Brown Hare	Pine/Beech Marten (dead)
Roe Deer	Muskrat	Red Fox

Birds

1 Little Grebe	52 Sand Martin
2 Manx Shearwater	53 Green Woodpecker
3 Fulmar	54 Great Spotted Woodpecker
4 Gannet	55 Skylark
5 Cormorant	56 Tree Pipit
6 Shag	57 Meadow Pipit
7 Grey Heron	58 White wagtail
8 Little Egret	59 Yellow Wagtail
9 Great White Egret	60 Wren
10 Canada Goose	61 Dunnock
11 Mute Swan	62 Robin
12 Mallard	63 Stonechat
13 Shelduck	64 Black Redstart
14 Pochard	65 Song Thrush

15	Hen Harrier	66	Blackbird
16	Montague's Harrier	67	Blackcap
17	Marsh Harrier	68	Garden Warbler
18	Short-toed Eagle	69	Whitethroat
19	Hobby	70	Sedge Warbler
20	Honey Buzzard	71	Fan-tailed Warbler
21	Buzzard	72	Reed Warbler
22	Kestrel	73	Cetti's Warbler
23	Sparrowhawk	74	Melodious Warbler
24	Tawny Owl	75	Chiffchaff
25	Quail	76	Spotted Flycatcher
26	Coot	77	Great Tit
27	Moorhen	78	Blue Tit
28	Lapwing	79	Long-tailed Tit
29	Oystercatcher	80	Marsh Tit
30	Curlew	81	Crested Tit
31	Greenshank	82	Short-toed Treecreeper
32	Redshank	83	Nuthatch
33	Black-tailed Godwit	84	Magpie
34	Black-headed Gull	85	Rook
35	Common Gull	86	Crow
36	Mediterranean Gull	87	Jay
37	Herring Gull	88	Jackdaw
38	Great Black Backed Gull	89	Starling
39	Lesser Black-backed Gull	90	House Sparrow
40	Kittiwake	91	Chaffinch
41	Common Tern	92	Bullfinch
42	Sandwich tern	93	Linnet
43	Guillemot	94	Greenfinch
44	Turtle Dove	95	Goldfinch
45	Wood Pigeon	96	Crossbill
46	Collared Dove	97	Serin
47	Feral Pigeon	98	Bullfinch
48	Cuckoo	99	Reed Bunting
49	Swift	100	Yellowhammer
50	Swallow	101	Cirl Bunting
51	House Martin	102	Corn Bunting

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