

# France - Butterflies in Normandy (BC)

Naturetrek Tour Report

9 - 13 July 2011



Mulberry Harbour at sunset



Large Tortoiseshell



Silver-studded Blue



Alcon Blue

Report and images compiled by Tom Brereton



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour leader:	Tom Brereton
Participants	Ann Rayner Ron Rayner Jill Bale Ronald de la Moussaye Peter Webster Judith Brown Christopher Bucke

## Summary

Butterfly highlights: 43 species including Lesser Marbled Fritillary, 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; 86 species of bird including Great White Egret, Melodious Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit and Fan-tailed Warbler; and a good variety of moths (including *Zygaena carniolica*) dragonflies (including Dainty Damselfly and Scarce Emerald Damselfly) and grasshoppers/crickets.

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

## Day 1

### Thursday 7th 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 spotted Oystercatcher, a Little Egret and moderate numbers of Sandwich and Common Terns. Once we passed Durlston Bay, sea conditions became rough with a good force 6 wind blowing, so we had to retreat indoors and postpone any potential sea watching. As the rain lashed against the windows, it was still possible to see that a steady passage of Gannets was ongoing, but nothing else of note. However the entrance to Cherbourg Harbour was of more interest with Shag and Mediterranean Gull seen.

After a little over two and a quarter hours, we arrived in Cherbourg. After picking up the minibus, we headed out towards the west coast of the Cherbourg Peninsula, stopping at Querqueville where Tom, the leader, bought lunch.

Our lunch was taken at a delightful little secluded and sheltered picnic spot near the shores of Vauville Bay. Here, we saw our first butterfly activity of the trip with sightings of Holly Blue, Gatekeeper, Marbled White and Speckled Wood. We then made our way a short distance south to Vauville Nature Reserve. This diverse habitat of sand dunes, marsh, scrub and a large freshwater pond is superb for wildlife. Unfortunately, we were hampered by heavy rain and our plans to fully explore the reserve had to be abandoned. As an alternative, we headed along a winding country road south along the edge of the reserve, where a brief stop gave equally brief views of a Muskrat foraging along the reedy edges of the pond.

At the village of Biville we headed east into the dunes. With light rain falling, several hardy members of the group ventured out of the minibus into the dunes, picking up an interesting variety of plant species amongst them; Thyme, Broomrape, Brookweed, Lesser Water Plantain, Sea Holly, Carline Thistle, Musk Mallow, large quantities of Burnet Rose, and a beautiful display of the rare Western Spiked Speedwell – an excellent year for this species.

After a somewhat makeshift but still productive afternoon, it was time to head east towards 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 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 – a pattern that was repeated throughout our stay. 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. The forecast for the next few days was for unsettled weather, so considerable juggling of the itinerary was going to be required to try to follow the best of the weather and maximise our chances of seeing butterflies. After dinner, Tom the leader made the first of many checks of the local weather forecast (!), thanks to the availability of free computer access and WiFi at this friendly hotel.

## Day 2

Friday 8th July

Before breakfast Tom and Judith headed out on a short walk to an area of cliff-top coastal grassland west of the harbour. Birds in the coastal scrub included Fan-tailed Warbler, together with several Whitethroats and Blackcaps. En-route we picked up Black Redstart and Serin in Arromanches. Wildflowers present along the coastal path included Pyramidal Orchid, Sulphur Clover, and Spiny Restharrow.

The forecast for the Calvados Region looked better than anywhere else in Normandy – sunny spells and quite warm (up to 22°C). Thus, the best option seemed to be to head south-east to spend a full day at Les Monts d'Eraines Nature Reserve, an area of chalk hills east of Falaise and about an hour's drive from Arromanches. Following a dull start to the morning, it was a relief to arrive at the site in warm weather and sunshine! The remainder of the morning was mostly spent in a scrubby glade and surrounding grassland areas in the north-west corner of the reserve. There were plenty of butterflies around, most noteworthy being several Weavers Fritillaries and Berger's Clouded Yellows. The airfield next to the reserve was also busy with butterflies, the highlight being brief views of a Mallow Skipper.

After a hearty picnic, we spent the afternoon exploring the remainder of the reserve. In the warm sunshine, there was much butterfly activity, with 23 species logged. Sightings included decent numbers of Marbled White and Berger's Clouded Yellow (having a good year), plus Dingy Skipper, Brown Argus, Weaver's Fritillary, and Wall and Dark Green Fritillary. Following a blank in 2009, it was welcome to log a couple of sightings of the latter species.

The ground was parched (with the many orchid species found here all well spent) and it had obviously been an early season. The almost drought-like conditions seemed to have impacted on the Brown family, with relatively small numbers of Meadow Brown, Ringlet and especially Gatekeeper encountered although Small Heaths were well represented.

On the moth front, numbers of Burnets were also well down with only a single 6-spot and no Faust Burnets. The windy conditions in the key area for the latter species undoubtedly hampered our chances of finding them. Compensation came in the form of over 20 Bright waves (a rare species in the UK), a Hummingbird Hawkmoth and several species of pretty Pyralids including *Pyrausta aurata* and *Pyrausta nigrata*.

In spite of the dry conditions, the slopes were rich in wildflowers and we recorded some very interesting species rare/absent from the UK, including Round-headed Rampion, Hare's-ear, Vincetoxicum, Bastard Toadflax, Lizard Orchid, Cypress Spurge, Meadow Clary, Mountain Germander, Wall Germander, Juniper, Dark Mullein, Cut-leaved Self-heal, Large Self-heal, and large quantities of the asphodel, *Anthericum ramosum*. The site was not without bird interest with the most noteworthy species being Melodious Warbler., though Cirl Buntings eluded us.

## Day 3

Saturday 9th 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 an interesting selection of birds that included Mediterranean Gull, Turtle Dove, a good count of 35 Little Egrets, and excellent views of a showy Grasshopper Warbler.

After breakfast, we decided to head west to Lessay in the south-west corner of the Cotentin Peninsula as the weather forecast predicted slightly sunnier/warmer conditions for La Manche region. 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 Blue 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), which was a truly fabulous sight. At the start of the ride an Ilex Hairstreak was a surprise but welcome pick up, as we do not see this butterfly every year on this holiday. With the weather brightening, we walked the length of the ride to a cross section which is a hotspot for the rare Alcon Blue – our most sought after butterfly of the holiday. Plenty of Silver-studded Blues and Large Chequered Skippers were seen en route, but sadly there were no Alcon Blues.

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. Tom walked briskly back to the minibus to prepare lunch, whilst the group took a more leisurely pace. Bird interest around our picnic spot included Tree Pipit, Short-toed Treecreeper and Crested Tit.

After lunch we returned to the ride intersection from a closer parking bay. It was a fabulous moment to quickly pick up the first of three Alcon Blues, within a minute or two of leaving the minibus, with excellent views obtained. After watching this species for a while, we continued past a pond and onto a network of rides bordered by mature broad-leaved woodland. The ride network proved to be a superb area for butterflies with sightings of Purple Hairstreak, White Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary amongst large numbers of Brimstones and common grassland butterflies. Best of all was a stunning Large Tortoiseshell, which gave great views whilst it basked on the ground right in front of us.

Over the day there was plenty of dragonfly activity especially in proximity to the small boggy pool located at the ride junction in the core Alcon Blue area, including Dainty Damselfly, Beautiful Demoiselle, Banded Agrion, Scarce Emerald, Black-tailed Skimmer, Small Red Damselfly, Ruddy Darter and Broad-bodied Chaser.

We made good progress on our way back to Arromanches from Lessay, allowing time to stop along the coast road to inspect a favoured area of rough grassland, a known haunt of Lulworth Skippers. This area did not disappoint with several individuals seen in the late afternoon sunshine.

## Day 4

Sunday 10th July

Our final early morning bird watch saw us returning to the marshes east of Arromanches. This time we decided to follow the coastal path at the western end of the marshes. This proved productive for wetland passerines, with Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Yellow Wagtail and Reed Bunting all picked up. On the beach we saw White Wagtail, Mediterranean Gull and Common Gull, whilst waders included Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit.

After breakfast, we made our customary trip to the beautiful and world-famous Bayeux Tapestry – which proved as popular as ever with this year's group. After the tapestry, we headed 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. In the morning we explored a large grassy glade at the entrance of the western section of the wood which supports a calcareous grassland flora. This is a superb butterfly habitat throughout the field season, and our visit today did not disappoint. A wide range of species was recorded as we enjoyed bright cloud from the last of the morning's sun. These included a couple of late Pearly Heaths, Dingy Skipper, Mallow Skipper, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Silver-washed Fritillary, Swallowtail and our first record of Mazarine Blue at this site (and the first record on these holidays since 2003!). Other highlights included the stunning burnet moth *Zygaena carniolica* and amongst a wide variety of chalk grassland plants, Vincetoxicum.

After a huge picnic lunch, we toasted seeing over 40 butterfly species on the holiday (an annual milestone) with a superlative bottle of Cremant de Loire. We then headed west along a pylon line, which is one of the best butterfly habitats in the forest. This had been cut recently and consequently 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 many species seen, highlights included large Map, Wood White, Silver washed Fritillary, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Dingy Skipper, White Admiral, Brown Argus, Swallowtail, Dark Green Fritillary and best of all Lesser Marbled Fritillary – a first record for the site. Rather surprisingly we did not see any Emperor butterflies, which had possibly had an early season and gone over. Migrants were also in short supply, in a poor year for this group, with no Painted Ladies or Clouded Yellows seen. Birding was quiet, although some Crossbills flew over.

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 Dingy Skipper, White Admiral, several Silver washed Fritillaries and frustratingly brief views of a fritillary species that may have been a late Small Pearl-bordered. This could have made it 44 species for the holiday, and with a good year for migrants and an Emperor or two, the species list could easily have been close to 50!

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 11th July

The final morning and by 8:30 am we had departed Arronanches towards Cherbourg allowing ample time to catch our 11:30 ferry to Poole. With characteristically quiet roads we made good progress. We had time for a quick stop at a coastal marsh east of Cherbourg, which has supported breeding Marsh Warbler in the past. The marsh was quiet, although we did see several species of butterfly including Small Tortoiseshell.

We arrived at the port of Cherbourg, and were soon safely on board and heading home across the English Channel. In stark contrast to our earlier crossing, the sea was smooth and the skies largely cloudless. The offshore crossing was again quiet, save for a few Gannets and Mediterranean Gulls. Birdlife was once again plentiful in Poole Harbour, especially on Brownsea lagoon, with numerous waders including Black-tailed Godwit. At Poole we said our warm goodbyes and congratulated ourselves on what had been a superb trip, for butterflies and other wildlife.

## Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) to sign up.

## Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!

## Species Lists

Butterflies (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific Name	July				
			7	8	9	10	11
1	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>				2	
2	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	1	1	20	30	✓
3	Small White	<i>Artogeia (Pieris) rapae</i>	1	30	50	20	✓
4	Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia (Pieris) napi</i>		1	2	6	
5	Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias australis</i>		50			
6	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>		3	20	3	
7	Wood White	<i>Leptidea sinapis</i>				2	
8	Purple Hairstreak*	<i>Quercusia quercus</i>			5		
9	Ilex Hairstreak	<i>Satyrium ilicis</i>			2		
10	Small Copper*	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		2		1	
11	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrinas argiolus</i>	1		1	4	
12	Alcon Blue	<i>Maculinea alcon</i>			3		
13	Silver-studded Blue	<i>Plebejus argus</i>			100		
14	Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>		1	3	15	
15	Mazarine Blue*	<i>Cyaniris semiargus</i>				3	
16	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		5	3	3	
17	White Admiral	<i>Limentis camilla</i>			5	5	
18	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>		3	3	15	
19	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		1	3	10	✓
20	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>		2		1	1
21	Large Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>			1		
22	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>		1	6	12	1
23	Map	<i>Araschnia levana</i>				1	
24	Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>				20	
25	Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Mesoacidalia (Argyrinis) aglaia</i>		2		1	
26	Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>				6	
27	Weaver's Fritillary	<i>Clossiana dia</i>		10			
28	Weaver's Fritillary	<i>Boloria dia</i>				1	
29	Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>	1	60	40	80	
30	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		20	150	70	✓
31	Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>		3	10	30	
32	Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>	1	5	15	10	
33	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		15		5	
34	Pearly Heath*	<i>Coenonympha arcania</i>				2	
35	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	1		5	5	
36	Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>		8			
37	Mallow Skipper	<i>Carcharodus alceae</i>		1		2	
38	Dingy Skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>		8		7	
39	Large Chequered Skipper	<i>Heteropterus morpheus</i>			15		
40	Essex Skipper	<i>Thymelicus lineola</i>			10	50	
41	Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris (flavus)</i>			1	10	
42	Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes venatus</i>		2	10	30	
43	Lulworth Skipper	<i>Thymelicus acteon</i>			3		

## Moths

- |                        |                  |                              |
|------------------------|------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. 6-spot Burnet       | 2. 5-spot Burnet | 3. <i>Zygaena carniolica</i> |
| 4. European Corn Borer | 5. Oak Eggar     | 6. Common Heath              |

- |                             |                                |                              |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 7. Burnet Companion         | 8. Common Silver Y             | 9. Grass Moth spp.           |
| 10. Scarlet Tiger           | 11. Treble Bar                 | 12. White-point              |
| 13. Hummingbird Hawkmoth    | 14. <i>Pyrausta purpuralis</i> | 15. <i>Nematopogodon</i> sp. |
| 16. <i>Pyrausta nigrata</i> |                                |                              |

### Dragonflies

- |                              |                           |                         |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Emperor Dragonfly         | 2. Black-tailed Skimmer   | 3. Broad-bodied Chaser  |
| 4. Common Darter             | 5. Ruddy Darter           | 6. Beautiful Demoiselle |
| 7. Banded Agrion             | 8. Common Blue Damselfly  | 9. Small Red Damselfly  |
| 10. Dainty Damselfly         | 11. Blue-tailed Damselfly | 12. Southern Hawker     |
| 13. Scarce Emerald Damselfly |                           |                         |

### Grasshoppers & Crickets

- |                             |                              |                          |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Great Green Bush-cricket | 2. Dark Bush-cricket         | 3. Roesel's Bush-cricket |
| 4. Long-winged Conehead     | 5. Field Grasshopper         | 6. Meadow Grasshopper    |
| 7. Com. Green Grasshopper   | 8. Stripe-winged Grasshopper | 9. Speckled Bush-cricket |

### Mammals

- |            |             |            |
|------------|-------------|------------|
| 1. Rabbit  | 2. Roe Deer | 3. Muskrat |
| 4. Red Fox |             |            |

### Birds

- |                              |                        |                             |
|------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Fulmar                    | 2. Gannet              | 3. Cormorant                |
| 4. Shag                      | 5. Grey Heron          | 6. Little Egret             |
| 7. Great White Egret         | 8. Mute Swan           | 9. Mallard                  |
| 10. Hobby                    | 11. Buzzard            | 12. Kestrel                 |
| 13. Hobby                    | 14. Sparrowhawk        | 15. Coot                    |
| 16. Moorhen                  | 17. Oystercatcher      | 18. Redshank                |
| 19. Black-tailed Godwit      | 20. Black-headed Gull  | 21. Common Gull             |
| 22. Mediterranean Gull       | 23. Herring Gull       | 24. Great Black Backed Gull |
| 25. Lesser Black-backed Gull | 26. Common Tern        | 27. Sandwich tern           |
| 28. Turtle Dove              | 29. Wood Pigeon        | 30. Collared Dove           |
| 31. Feral Pigeon             | 32. Swift              | 33. Swallow                 |
| 34. House Martin             | 35. Sand Martin        | 36. Green Woodpecker        |
| 37. Grt. Spotted Woodpecker  | 38. Skylark            | 39. Tree Pipit              |
| 40. Meadow Pipit             | 41. White wagtail      | 42. Yellow Wagtail          |
| 43. Wren                     | 44. Dunnock            | 45. Robin                   |
| 46. Stonechat                | 47. Black Redstart     | 48. Song Thrush             |
| 49. Mistle Thrush            | 50. Blackbird          | 51. Blackcap                |
| 52. Grasshopper Warbler      | 53. Garden Warbler     | 54. Whitethroat             |
| 55. Sedge Warbler            | 56. Fan-tailed Warbler | 57. Reed Warbler            |
| 58. Melodious Warbler        | 59. Chiffchaff         | 60. Goldcrest               |
| 61. Spotted Flycatcher       | 62. Great Tit          | 63. Blue Tit                |
| 64. Long-tailed Tit          | 65. Marsh Tit          | 66. Crested Tit             |

67. Short-toed Treecreeper

70. Rook

73. Jackdaw

76. Chaffinch

79. Greenfinch

82. Serin

85. Yellowhammer

68. Nuthatch

71. Crow

74. Starling

77. Bullfinch

80. Goldfinch

83. Bullfinch

86. Tree Sparrow

69. Magpie

72. Jay

75. House Sparrow

78. Linnet

81. Crossbill

84. Reed Bunting