

France - Butterflies in Normandy

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 15 July 2013



Faust's Burnet



Ilex Hairstreak



Weaver's Fritillary



Lesser Marbled Fritillary

Report & images compiled by Tom Brereton



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Summary

Butterfly highlights: 37 species including Red Underwing Skipper, Large Chequered Skipper, Ilex Hairstreak, Large Tortoiseshell, Lesser Purple Emperor, Lesser Marbled Fritillary, Weaver's Fritillary and Berger's Clouded Yellow.

Other wildlife highlights: Summer Lady's Tresses, Heath Lobelia, chalkhill flowers; 94 species of bird including Montagu's Harrier, Honey Buzzard, Melodious Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper, Red-backed Shrike, Crested Tit and Fan-tailed Warbler; a good variety of moths (including Faustus's Burnet, *Zygaena carniolica* and Cistus Forester) and 19 species of dragonfly (including Scarlet Darter, Small Pincertail, Dainty Damselfly and Scarce Emerald Damselfly).

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

Day 1

Thursday 11th July

After meeting the group by the ferry terminal, we departed Poole at 08:30 on the ferry for our journey across the western English Channel. With the Fastcraft not available we took the more leisurely voyage on the Brittany Ferries *Barfleur*, a journey of some four and a half hours. 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 largest Little Egret breeding colony. A good variety of waders were on and around the lagoon including Greenshank, Whimbrel, Spotted Redshank, Black-tailed Godwit and Oystercatcher, with variety added by several Mediterranean Gulls, Little Egret and moderate numbers of Sandwich and Common Terns.

Once we passed Durlston Bay, sea conditions were bumpy (sea state 5-6 with a brisk NE wind), so there was little chance of picking up any cetaceans. Seabirds were in evidence though, with a trickle of Gannets and smaller numbers of Fulmar. As we approached Cherbourg, large numbers of Shag were seen in the harbour. Disembarkation was rapid, and we were soon on our way south travelling through the Cotentin Peninsula.

We made a five minute driving detour for our first stop, in the attractive small town of Sainte-Mère-Église to view the dummy paratrooper which hangs from the spire, commemorating the story of John Steele whose parachute got tangled up on the church on D-Day 6th June 1944. We also saw our first butterfly of the holiday here – a Small Tortoiseshell. Continuing south, a White Stork was seen circling above the marshes north of Carentan.

Our main stop of the afternoon was another key D-Day location, Omaha Beach. Here, we explored the dune grasslands behind the beach, searching out butterflies in areas sheltered from the stiff NE wind. This proved a productive spot for butterflies with Marbled White, Gatekeeper, Ringlet, Wall Brown and best of all Lulworth Skippers all seen well. Other insects included Blue-tail Damselfly and 5-spot Burnet whilst plants of note included a spectacular Lizard Orchid spike. Bird highlights were Spotted Flycatcher and our only Black Redstart of the trip, seen briefly by Tom.

After an enjoyable session 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 a further 30 minutes or so 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 hotel restaurant, with our table overlooking the sea.

Day 2

Friday 12th July

Before breakfast a small number of us took a short walk to an area of cliff-top coastal grassland west of the harbour. Birds in the coastal scrub included several Whitethroats, Yellowhammers and Blackcaps, whilst wildflowers present along the coastal path included Pyramidal Orchid, Sulphur Clover and Spiny Restharrow.

After breakfast, we headed south-east for an hour or so to Les Monts d'Eraines nature reserve, an area of chalk hills east of Falaise, where we were to spend the day. Our first stop was along the road near to the reserve, where several noteworthy plants were present including Lizard Orchid and Round-headed Rampion. The remainder of the morning was spent in a scrubby glade and surrounding grassland areas in the north-west corner of the reserve. There were plenty of butterflies present including large numbers of Weavers Fritillaries, plus Clouded Yellow, Adonis Blue, Silver-washed Fritillary and Dark Green Fritillary. Birds were good too with cracking views of Montagu's Harrier, Melodious Warbler, Turtle Dove and a site first with a breeding pair of Red-backed Shrikes seen well.

After a hearty picnic, we spent the afternoon exploring the remainder of the reserve. In the hot and sunny weather, large numbers of Marbled White and Weaver's Fritillaries (having an excellent year) were evident, whilst new additions included Berger's Clouded Yellow (having a poor year), Brown Argus and Small Heath, the latter bringing the day total to just under 20 species. On the moth front, numbers of Bright Wave and Burnets were well down on previous years, but compensation came in the form of Hummingbird Hawk-moth, Cistus Forester and several specimens of our target species, the stunning Faust's Burnet. The grassland slopes were in superb condition, supporting a colourful display of wildflowers. We recorded some very interesting species rare/absent from the UK, including Hare's-ear, Cypress Spurge, Meadow Clary, Mountain Germander, Wall Germander, Juniper, Cut-leaved Self-heal, Large Self-heal and large quantities of the asphodel, *Anthericum ramosum*.

Day 3

Saturday 13th July

For the pre-breakfast period, a bird watching excursion was organised 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, Whinchat, Fan-tailed Warbler, Corn Bunting and a flock of nine Little Egrets.

After breakfast, we headed west to the wet heathland and Pine forests in the south-west corner of the Cotentin Peninsula. By late morning we had reached Lessay, where weather conditions were ideal for butterfly watching, with lots more warm, sunny and calmer weather. First we explored a wide ride composed of wet heathland vegetation which cuts through open boggy Scots Pine forest. Along the ride, large numbers of Silver-studded Blue butterflies were present, together with moderate numbers of Meadow Brown and Marbled White and the first of several Large Chequered Skippers seen over the day. The ride was noteworthy for the presence of hundreds of spikes 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. Other 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.

Before lunch, we walked the length of the ride to a cross section which is a hotspot for the rare Alcon Blue. An Ilex Hairstreak was a welcome pick up, as we do not see this butterfly every year on this holiday, though sadly Alcon Blue eluded us. Tom walked briskly back to the minibus to prepare lunch, whilst the group took a more leisurely pace. Birds of interest along the ride during and around our picnic spot included Tree Pipit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit and Honey Buzzard.

After lunch we returned to the ride intersection from a closer parking bay, though again failed to locate any Alcon Blues, the most likely reason due to it being a late season. At the intersection, a small pond supported a remarkable variety of dragonflies due to the presence of both acidic and base-rich water sources in the vicinity. Amongst 16 species recorded (with special thanks to Jeff), highlights included Small Pincertail (a first record for these trips), Scarce Chaser, Downy Emerald, Small Red Damselfly, Scarce Emerald and Dainty Damselfly.

After a fascinating spell of dragonfly watching, we explored further along one of the rides to an area bordered by mature broad-leaved woodland. This proved to be a good area for both woodland and grassland species with sightings of Purple Hairstreak, White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary being of particular interest. We left Lessay a little early, allowing the group ample time to explore the D-Day museum and attractions of pretty Arromanches.

Day 4

Sunday 14th 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 and Reed Bunting all being picked up, whilst a Savi's Warbler was singing a good distance away. A distant Marsh Harrier was also seen, whilst roadside trees held Serin and Turtle Dove and a nearby chalk bank held numerous spikes of flowering Fragrant Orchids and Pyramidal Orchids.

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.

Once again, the weather was fabulous with hot and sunny conditions which remained over the whole day. First we explored a large and increasingly scrubby 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 including several late, but surprisingly fresh Pearly Heaths, Silver-washed Fritillary, Weaver's Fritillary (a site first), the stunning burnet moth *Zygaena carniolica* and amongst a wide variety of chalk grassland plants, Vincetoxicum. Nearby there was a pretty display of wildflowers in a fallow arable field, attracting a number of Small Tortoiseshells and Peacocks.

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 Tortoiseshell, Lesser Marbled Fritillary, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (the first time this species has been recorded on these trips) and our target species, both Purple Emperor and Lesser Purple Emperor. Open areas supported large numbers of common grassland butterflies, especially Large Skipper, Marbled White and Ringlet, bringing the day tally to 24 species. Migrants were in short supply, in a poor year for this group, with no Painted Ladies or Clouded Yellows seen. Birding was quiet, although a party of Crossbills flew over. Moth highlights were Hummingbird Hawk-moth and a beautiful Scarlet Tiger.

After lunch, our final stop of the day was a lovely flower-rich glade surrounded by Oak trees and Willow bushes in the eastern part of the forest. Again, this produced some excellent sightings, including Small Skipper, White Admiral and several Silver washed Fritillaries.

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. In the evening, Arromanches was bustling, with a spectacular Bastille Day firework display the cultural highlight. In addition, several Hummingbird Hawkmoths were seen by Bob and Rosalind.

Day 5

Monday 15th July

The final morning and by 09:00 am we had departed Arromanches. Though the Normandy butterflies tour has run for over 10 years, this was the first time that we had the best part of a full day to enjoy butterfly watching on the final day, due to the later ferry departure. The extra time gave opportunity to visit Le Cap in the Carentan Marshes Regional Nature Park located at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. This vast marsh is rich in wildlife and our visit today did not disappoint. Birds hunting over the marshes included Hobby, Montague's Harrier and Marsh Harrier, whilst in the meadows we saw White Stork, Whinchat, Lapwing, Yellow Wagtail and many Skylarks. In a nearby village we had fantastic views of two more White Storks.

We then headed across country to Vauville Nature Reserve situated on the north-west coast of the Cotentin Peninsula. This diverse habitat comprised of sand dunes, marsh, scrub and a large freshwater pond is superb for wildlife. There was plenty of butterfly activity along the pathway through the coastal dunes, including good numbers of Lulworth Skipper. Amongst fourteen other species of butterfly, there a highlight was Red-underwing Skipper spotted late on by Jeff - our 37th species of the trip. Moths included 6-spot Burnets and Silver Y, whilst dragonflies included a dazzling Scarlet Darter, seen briefly by Tom. On and around the main pond, there was a lot of bird activity that included Hobby, Hen Harrier and Pochard. 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. Other noteworthy wildlife includes Tree Frog and Muskrat.

Lunch was taken at a delightful little secluded and sheltered picnic spot near the shores of Vauville Bay. Here, Tom spotted the only Speckled Wood of the trip whilst making lunch. After another huge picnic lunch, we toasted seeing an excellent variety butterfly species on the holiday with a superlative bottle of Cremant de Loire. The species tally was all the more satisfying given how poor the year had been prior to the trip, both in terms of butterflies and weather conditions for watching them.

Our final French wildlife site was a coastal marsh east of Cherbourg, which has supported breeding Marsh Warbler in the past, but sadly is now overgrown and the subject of a development proposal. The marsh was quiet for birds, although we did see several species of butterfly including Small Tortoiseshell and a notable pick up was Dainty Damsel fly

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 outbound crossing, the sea was smooth and the skies largely cloudless. The crossing was quiet, save for a regular sightings of Gannets, smaller numbers of Guillemots and Mediterranean Gulls and a Razorbill. At Poole we said our warm goodbyes and congratulated ourselves on what had been a superb trip, for butterflies and other wildlife!

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Species List

Butterflies

	Common name	Scientific name	July				
			11	12	13	14	15
1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		6	10	5	10
2	Small White	<i>Artogeia (Pieris) rapae</i>	1	2	10	10	20
3	Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia (Pieris) napi</i>		1	1	2	
4	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>		1			1
5	Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias australis</i>		2			
6	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>			2	2	1
7	Purple Hairstreak	<i>Quercusia quercus</i>			1		
8	Ilex Hairstreak	<i>Satyrium ilicis</i>			3		
9	Silver-studded Blue	<i>Plebejus argus</i>			150		
10	Adonis Blue	<i>Lysandra bellargus</i>		1			
11	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		1		3	5
12	White Admiral	<i>Limentis camilla</i>			1	6	
13	Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura iris</i>				6	
14	Lesser Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura ilia</i>				2	
15	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>		1		10	
16	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		1	1	8	4
17	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>	1	1		10	5
18	Large Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>				1	
19	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>		1		5	
20	Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>		1		5	
21	Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Mesoacidalia (Argyrinis) aglaia</i>		6			
22	Weaver's Fritillary	<i>Boloria dia</i>		100		3	
23	Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>	20	250	30	30	5
24	Lesser Marbled Fritillary	<i>Brenthis ino</i>				3	
25	Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary	<i>Boloria selene</i>				5	
26	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	5	50	40	80	20
27	Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>	20	20	5	120	
28	Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>			2		5
29	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		10		3	1
30	Pearly Heath	<i>Coenonympha arcania</i>				10	
31	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>					1
32	Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>	1				
33	Large Chequered Skipper	<i>Heteropterus morpheus</i>			6		
34	Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris (flavus)</i>				5	
35	Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes venatus</i>	2	10	20	50	2
36	Lulworth Skipper	<i>Thymelicus acteon</i>	1				15
37	Red Underwing Skipper	<i>Spialia sertorius</i>					1

Species not recorded this year but have been in previous years:

Swallowtail	Wood White	Small Copper	Sooty Copper
Holly Blue	Alcon Blue	Brown Argus	Mazarine Blue
Chalkhill Blue	Poplar Admiral	Painted Lady	Map
Queen of Spain Fritillary	Heath Fritillary	Common Grayling	Mallow Skipper
Dingy Skipper	Essex Skipper		

Moths

6-spot Burnet
 Faust's Burnet
 Common Silver Y
 Hummingbird Hawk-moth
Pyrausta nigrata
 Bright Wave
 Annulet
 Clouded Buff

5-spot Burnet
 Common Heath
 Grass Moth spp.
Pyrausta purpuralis
 Yellow-tail
 Oak Eggar
 Yellow Shell
 Knotgrass Dagger

Zygaena carnioloica
 Burnet Companion
 Scarlet Tiger
Nematopogodon sp.
 Latticed Heath
 Heart & Dart
 Cistus Forester

Dragonflies

Azure Damselfly
 Black-tailed Skimmer
 Common Darter
 Emperor Dragonfly
 Keeled Skimmer
 Scarlet Darter
 Small Pincertail

Banded Agrion
 Blue-tailed Damselfly
 Dainty Damselfly
 Four-spotted Chaser
 Large Red Damselfly
 Small Red Damselfly
 White-legged Damselfly

Beautiful Demoiselle
 Broad-bodied Chaser
 Downy Emerald
 Golden-ringed Dragonfly
 Scarce Emerald Damselfly
 Scarce Chaser

Grasshoppers & Crickets

Great Green Bush-cricket
 Long-winged Conehead
 Common Green Grasshopper
 Field Cricket

Dark Bush-cricket
 Field Grasshopper
 Stripe-winged Grasshopper

Roesel's Bush-cricket
 Meadow Grasshopper
 Speckled Bush-cricket

Mammals

Rabbit
 Red Fox

Roe Deer
 Brown Hare

Muskrat

Birds

Gannet
 Hite Stork
 Mute Swan
 Teal
 Buzzard
 Montagu's Harrier
 Sparrowhawk
 Lapwing
 Spotted Redshank
 Black-headed Gull
 Great Black Backed Gull
 Guillemot
 Wood Pigeon
 Swift
 Swallow
 Skylark
 White wagtail
 Dunnock

Cormorant
 Grey Heron
 Shelduck
 Pochard
 Marsh Harrier
 Kestrel
 Coot
 Oystercatcher
 Black-tailed Godwit
 Mediterranean Gull
 Common Tern
 Razorbill
 Collared Dove
 Green Woodpecker
 House Martin
 Tree Pipit
 Yellow Wagtail
 Robin

Shag
 Little Egret
 Mallard
 Hobby
 Hen Harrier
 Hobby
 Moorhen
 Redshank
 Whimbrel
 Herring Gull
 Sandwich tern
 Turtle Dove
 Feral Pigeon
 Great Spotted Woodpecker
 Sand Martin
 Meadow Pipit
 Wren
 Stonechat

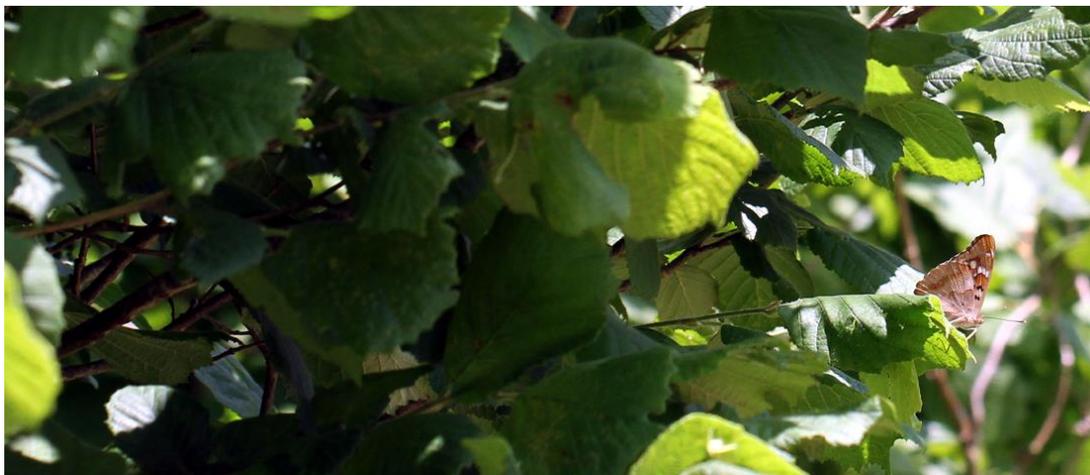
Whinchat
 Mistle Thrush
 Savi's Warbler
 Sedge Warbler
 Melodious Warbler
 Great Tit
 Long-tailed Tit
 Short-toed Treecreeper
 Rook
 Starling
 Bullfinch
 Goldfinch
 Bullfinch
 Yellowhammer

Black Redstart
 Blackbird
 Garden Warbler
 Fan-tailed Warbler
 Chiffchaff
 Blue Tit
 Marsh Tit
 Nuthatch
 Crow
 House Sparrow
 Linnet
 Crossbill
 Reed Bunting

Song Thrush
 Blackcap
 Whitethroat
 Reed Warbler
 Spotted Flycatcher
 Coal Tit
 Crested Tit
 Magpie
 Jackdaw
 Chaffinch
 Greenfinch
 Serin
 Corn Bunting



Purple Emperor



Lesser Purple Emperor