

France - Butterflies in Normandy

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 11 July 2016

Report and images by Tom Brereton



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Summary

Butterfly highlights: 37 species including Large Chequered Skipper, Ilex Hairstreak, Lesser Purple Emperor, Purple Emperor, Lesser Marbled Fritillary and Pearly Heath.

Other wildlife highlights: Summer Lady's Tresses, Heath Lobelia, chalk-hill flowers; 97 species of bird including Great Egret, White Stork, Honey Buzzard, Melodious Warbler, Fan-tailed Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit and Cirl Bunting; a good variety of moths and dragonflies (including Scarce Emerald Damselfly).

Cultural Highlights: The Bayeux Tapestry, Sainte-Mère-Église and regional gourmet cuisine in the Hotel Restaurant.

Day 1

Thursday 7th July

After meeting the group by the ferry terminal, we departed from Poole at 8.30am on the ferry for our four-and-a-half hour journey across the western English Channel on the Brittany Ferries Barfleur.

Soon after leaving we passed Brownsea Lagoon in Poole Harbour, where we saw a good number of Little Egrets and Sandwich Terns together with a few waders and two Mediterranean Gulls. The sea crossing was smooth, and the weather warm and sunny. Though we did not see any cetaceans, a light passage of Gannets was evident, whilst other seabirds recorded included Fulmar and Guillemot. As we approached Cherbourg, large numbers of Shag were seen in the harbour. Disembarkation just after lunchtime was rapid and we were soon on our way south, travelling through the Cotentin (Cherbourg) Peninsula.

Our butterfly site for the afternoon was a chalk hill near Trevieres, midway between Carentan and Bayeux. We walked the sheltered minor road below the chalk hill, which is lined with trees and shrubs. Here, three White-letter Hairstreaks were seen flitting around Elms, whilst White-legged Damselfly and Banded Agrion were also perched up in the trees. As the road opened out onto farmland, several Peacock, Red Admiral and Painted Lady were seen.

The scrubby slopes of the chalk hill supported nine species of butterfly including lots of Marbled Whites. Bird highlights in the area were five fly-over White Storks, a singing Serin, Spotted Flycatcher, Melodious Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper and a purring Turtle Dove.

After an enjoyable afternoon we headed north-east to our base for the holiday, Port-en-Bessin, 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 our accommodation for the holiday, the charming and friendly Hotel de la Marine, with a commanding position by the sea overlooking the harbour. This was a new venue for this tour, and turned out to be an ideal choice. For what was to be the pattern over the next few evenings, we ran through the sightings of the day then had a lovely three-course meal in the hotel restaurant, at our table overlooking the coast.

Day 2

Friday 8th July

Before breakfast Tom and a small number of the group took a short walk to an area of cliff-top coastal grassland east of the harbour, where the bird highlights were Fan-tailed Warbler, Black Redstart, Spotted Flycatcher and Peregrine. The grassland was a blaze of colour with many Pyramidal Orchids in flower.

After breakfast, we headed south-east for an hour or so to Falaise, where the group spent time around the Château de Falaise, the birthplace of William the Conqueror, whilst Tom went to a nearby supermarket to buy lunch.

The rest of the day was spent at Les Monts d'Eraines nature reserve, a chalk hill beside Falaise aerodrome, a few kilometres east of Falaise. Before lunch we searched a scrubby glade and surrounding chalk grassland at the western end of the reserve. In hot and sunny weather, butterflies seen included Dark Green Fritillary, Silver-washed Fritillary, Common Blue (a species not seen every year on this holiday), Weaver's Fritillary and our only Clouded Yellow of the holiday. It was pleasing to find Weaver's Fritillary in reasonable numbers, as last year we did not see any and feared this recent colonist to the site may have become extinct. Noteworthy moths included Humming-bird Hawk-moth and several Bright Wave, the latter of which is a rare species in the UK, being restricted to a small number of sites in south-east England.

A picnic lunch was taken at the aerodrome. After lunch, we explored the remainder of the reserve, adding Berger's Clouded Yellow, Adonis Blue and Pearly Heath and bringing the total to a respectable 20 butterfly species for the day. With lush grass growth this year, the slopes were in excellent condition with for plants, highlights including Lizard Orchid, Man Orchid, Branched St. Bernard's Lily (*Anthericum ramosum*), Meadow Clary, Cut-leaved and Wall Germander, Cypress Spurge and Large Self-heal. Adjacent arable field margins supported several uncommon weeds, amongst them Large Venus's Looking-glass.

The area was not without bird interest with excellent views obtained of Honey Buzzard, together with sightings of Cirl Bunting, Tree Pipit, Turtle Dove, Melodious Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher; encouragingly, the latter of these seemed to be having a good year locally.

That evening there was a great atmosphere in Port-en-Bessin, with a large, bustling street market, followed by a spectacular firework display at 11 pm.

Day 3

Saturday 9th July

Our pre-breakfast walk took us west of the hotel, taking in the western outskirts of town and surrounding coastal grassland. Common Tern and Mediterranean Gull were off the harbour; Fan-tailed Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher and Black Redstart were seen on land, whilst a Great Crested Grebe on the sea was an oddity for this time of year.

After breakfast we drove south-east for an hour and a quarter to the Forêt de Gouffern, located just east of Argentan. We stopped briefly in Argentan to source goods for a picnic lunch. The Forêt de Gouffern is a large, mixed forest and is always one of the highlights of the tour as it supports a superb variety of butterflies due to the variety of habitats created by private forestry practices, which can be less intensive than state-owned ones.

In the morning it was overcast but warm, and we explored a glade near the entrance of the western section of the wood. Although becoming overgrown, there were some fine specimens of Common Twayblade and Bee Orchid in full flower, the former perhaps a metre or tall! Given yesterday's tally, we were not surprised to see plenty of fresh-looking Pearly Heaths flying, highlighting the lateness of the season (for some species). Three species of 'golden' skipper were on the wing including Essex Skipper, whilst Six-spot Burnet moths were numerous and a bright female Common Blue was seen.

After an early picnic lunch, we walked slowly east along a woodland track, adjacent to a way leave. The track was waterlogged in places and highly attractive to mud-puddling butterflies, with fantastic views obtained of Purple Emperor, Lesser Purple Emperor and Large Chequered Skipper. Along the ride we also saw our only Comma and Brimstone butterflies of the holiday, together with White Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary and a very late Orange Tip. This was the first time we had seen Orange Tip on these long weekend holidays; which have now recorded 56 species since starting in 2003 – just three less species than regularly occur across the whole of Britain and Ireland! The pylon line had been cut recently and consequently was in good condition for grassland butterflies, with sightings including unusually large numbers of Large Chequered Skipper and several Lesser Marbled Fritillaries.

Our final stop of the day was a glade surrounded by Oak trees and Willow bushes in the eastern part of the forest. Again, this produced some excellent sightings, amongst them White Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary and a Broad-bodied Chaser dragonfly. Late afternoon was hot and sunny, and chilled water and cake was consumed to sustain us for the journey back.

Back at Port-en-Bessin, Tom spotted several Lulworth Skipper in cliff top grassland, just a few minutes' walk from the hotel, with several seen going to roost.

Day 4

Sunday 10th July

Before breakfast several of the group went to see the Lulworth Skippers Tom had found the previous evening. After breakfast, we made our customary and ever-popular trip to the world-famous Bayeux tapestry. After the tapestry, we headed west to Lessay, located in the south-west corner of the Cotentin Peninsula. We spent the day exploring the wide ride network composed of wet heathland vegetation, which cuts through open boggy Scots Pine forest and smaller stands of Oak woodland. Along the rides, large numbers of Silver-studded Blue butterflies were present, together with Large Chequered Skipper and a flighty Ilex Hairstreak.

Along one section of ride, there were hundreds of spikes of the rare Summer Lady's Tresses orchid in full flower, it being a very good year for this species. Other wet heathland plants of interest along the ride included Marsh St John's-wort, Heath Spotted Orchid, Lesser Skullcap, Heath Lobelia, Meadow Thistle, Whorled Caraway and three species of Sundew. Nearby and rather out of the blue, we were lucky to spot a striking Purple Hairstreak that was basking on low vegetation close to the woodland edge.

We paid special attention to a ride intersection which is a hotspot for the rare Alcon Blue, though alas none were seen - most likely because it had not emerged yet in this late season. At this intersection, a small pond supported Marsh Frog and several species of dragonfly including Small Red Damselfly, Scarce Emerald Damselfly, Ruddy

Darter and Keeled Skimmer. A picnic lunch was taken at a picnic spot on the forest edge, where Tree Pipit, Short-toed Treecreeper and Crested Tit were present.

Our final site of the day was an area of roadside and secondary woodland, near to some gravel workings, which produced several common grassland butterflies and a Garden Warbler. En route to this spot, we were stunned to see a Pine Marten cross the road in front of us giving excellent views!

In the evening there was a real buzz around Port-en-Bessin, with all bars with TV's completely packed out, as it was the European Championship final. By the final whistle, the atmosphere became subdued as hot favourites France were beaten by Portugal in a penalty shoot-out. By 11.30 the streets were eerily quiet, allowing all the potential for a good night's sleep in the absence of any celebrations!

Day 5

Monday 11th July

By 9am we had departed Arromanches for our final day of wildlife watching in Normandy. Our first stop was in the village of La Planque south of Carentan, where we watched a pair of adult White Storks with two well-grown chicks on the nest. Fantastic views of these birds were obtained through the telescope. We drove a little further west to Le Cap, which offers panoramic views over the vast marshes of the Cotentin and Bessin Regional Nature Park. This turned out to be a superb stop for birds with sightings of Garganey, Montagu's Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Lapwing, Great White Egret, Yellow Wagtail and Whinchat, whilst a Quail was calling.

From Le Cap, we headed north towards the northern end of the Cotentin Peninsula, making a short detour to the pretty town of Sainte-Mère-Église. Here we visited an iconic D-Day site – the town's main church, where a dummy paratrooper hangs from the spire to commemorate the story of John Steele whose parachute got tangled up on the church on D-Day 6th June 1944.

Lunch today was taken at a lovely sheltered spot by a small stream near the shores of Vauville Bay, on the west coast of the Cotentin Peninsula. Here we saw our 37th butterfly species of the holiday – Gatekeeper, which had been surprisingly absent on previous days.

After lunch we visited Vauville Nature Reserve which comprises sand dunes, marsh, scrub and a large freshwater pond. It was overcast with some spots of rain, but there was still plenty of butterfly activity along the pathway through the coastal dunes, with sightings of Lulworth Skipper, Common Blue and some more Gatekeepers. Other wildlife seen included Tree Frog, Muskrat, Black-tailed Skimmer dragonfly and Little Grebe. The dune flora was stunning this year, with a strong showing of the rare Western Spiked Speedwell providing a blaze of blue, together with Sea Holly, Carline Thistle and large quantities of Burnet Rose.

Our final wildlife stop was a coastal marsh east of Cherbourg, where brief views of a Marsh Warbler were obtained. We arrived at the port of Cherbourg, and boarded the fastcat ferry to Portsmouth. The crossing was rapid and we were soon back at port, saying our goodbyes from what had been a most enjoyable holiday, with a great group and a superb variety of butterflies and other wildlife.

Species Lists

Butterflies (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	July				
			7	8	9	10	11
1	Orange Tip	<i>Anthocaris cardamines</i>			1		
2	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		2	5	3	
3	Small White	<i>Pieris (Artogeia) rapae</i>	5	10	20	10	6
4	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris (Artogeia) napi</i>	10	1	10	5	1
5	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>		1			
6	Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias australis</i>		1			
7	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>			1		
8	Purple Hairstreak	<i>Quercusia quercus</i>				1	
9	Ilex Hairstreak	<i>Satyrium ilicis</i>				1	
10	White-letter Hairstreak	<i>Satyrium w-album</i>	3				
11	Silver-studded Blue	<i>Plebejus argus</i>				80	
12	Adonis Blue	<i>Polyommatus (Lysandra) bellargus</i>		3			
13	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		3	3		
14	White Admiral	<i>Limentis camilla</i>			3	3	
15	Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura iris</i>			5		
16	Lesser Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura ilia</i>			3		
17	Peacock	<i>Aglais (Inachis) io</i>	5	1	5		
18	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	3	1	5	2	1
19	Painted Lady	<i>Cynthia cardui</i>		3	4		
20	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>	8	2	15		
21	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>			4		
22	Lesser Marbled Fritillary	<i>Brenthis ino</i>			4		
23	Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>		1	3		
24	Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Argynnis aglaja</i>		2			
25	Weaver's Fritillary*	<i>Clossiana dia</i>		25			
26	Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>	50	350	150	20	1
27	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	30	300	100	15	8
28	Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>		20	250	15	1
29	Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>					10
30	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		20	10		1
31	Pearly Heath*	<i>Coenonympha arcania</i>	1				
32	Speckled Wood*	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	1				
33	Large Chequered Skipper	<i>Heteropterus morpheus</i>			10	3	
34	Essex Skipper	<i>Thymelicus lineola</i>			2	2	
35	Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris (flavus)</i>			15	10	
36	Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes venatus</i>	1	4	10	5	
37	Lulworth Skipper	<i>Thymelicus acteon</i>			4	1	3

Moths

1	6-spot Burnet			4	10		
2	Common carpet		1				
3	Chalk Carpet			1			
4	Oak Eggar			1			
5	Common Heath				20	5	
6	Common Silver Y		✓	8	10	2	
7	Grass Moth spp.						✓
8	Bright Wave			2			
9	Humming-bird Hawk-moth			2	2	2	

	Common name	Scientific name	July				
			7	8	9	10	11
10	Nematopogon sp.				1		
11	Single-dotted Wave			1			

Dragonflies

1	Black-tailed Skimmer						1
2	Common Darter		1		5		2
3	Beautiful Demoiselle		✓	2			
4	Azure Damselfly					5	
5	Blue-tailed Damselfly					3	
6	Scarce Emerald Damselfly					2	
7	Keeled Skimmer					1	
8	Broad-bodied Chaser				1		
9	Ruddy Darter					2	1
10	Common Blue Damselfly						✓
11	Banded Agrion		20				
12	White-legged Damselfly		5				
13	Southern Hawker		1	1	1		
14	Small Red Damselfly					3	

Crickets & Grasshoppers

1	Great Green Bush-cricket		✓	✓			
2	Roesel's Bush-cricket				✓		
3	Field Grasshopper						✓
4	Dark Bush-cricket			✓			
5	Long-winged Conehead			✓			
6	Meadow Grasshopper		✓	✓	✓		
7	Field Cricket		✓	✓	✓	✓	

Birds

1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	2				
2	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	15	1			5
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	30			10	✓
4	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	10				✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	25	6	5	1	2
6	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>					3
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	3				
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	5	2		1	6
9	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>					3
10	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			1		
11	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	10				
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			1	1	☞
13	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>					7
14	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>					2
15	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	6				
16	(Greater) Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	30				
17	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>					3
18	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>					1
19	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	5	2	1	2	3
20	Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		2			
21	Common Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				1	
22	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falcon subbuteo</i>				1	
23	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				1	2
24	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>					1

	Common name	Scientific name	July				
			7	8	9	10	11
25	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					3
26	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					70
27	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>					1
28	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	3				
29	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		1			
30	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓				
31	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	2		10	15	✓
32	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>	3	1	4		
33	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	100	50	50	✓	✓
34	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	50	40	50	✓	✓
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1	1			1
36	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	10		1		
37	Sandwich tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	5				
38	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	3				
39	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	10	10	20	10	10
40	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	2	2			
41	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		2	2	1	3
42	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		30	50	✓	✓
43	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>				2	
44	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1			
45	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		7	1	2	
46	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	15	20	20	30	20
47	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>					10
48	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	10	30	20	✓	✓
49	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	2	3	2	1	1
50	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				1	1
51	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>					3
52	European Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	2	1	1	2	
53	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		3	2	2	
54	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	2	1	5	4	
55	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		2	1	1	1
56	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		2	1	3	1
57	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>					3
58	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		1		2	
59	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		6			5
60	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		2	1	3	1
61	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1		1	2
62	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	1	5	4	
63	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	2	2	10	2	1
64	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>		3		1	
65	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	1	2	2		1
66	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>					3
67	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>					5
68	Marsh warbler	<i>Acrocephalus palustris</i>					1
69	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		3	1	1	
70	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>	1	3			
71	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	2	1	3	5	2
72	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				1	1
73	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>					1
74	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>				1	
75	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>				1	

	Common name	Scientific name	July				
			7	8	9	10	11
76	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			1	3	
77	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	1				✓
78	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			2		✓
79	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				2	
80	European Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	2	1		1	2
81	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>					1
82	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>					1
83	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	2	2	5	1	
84	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		100+		2	
85	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	1	5	10	20	✓
86	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		3	2	2	
87	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	10	✓	✓	✓
88	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	10	5	10	10	✓
90	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	1		1	4	
91	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	1				
92	Common Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	2	5	2	5	
93	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	3		2	1	
94	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	10	10	5	20	
95	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	1	3	5	3	
96	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1			
97	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				2	

Mammals

1	Rabbit			✓	✓	✓	
2	Brown Hare		✓		5	1	
3	Brown Rat				1		
4	Muskrat						3
5	Hedgehog				2		
6	Pine Marten					1	
7	Shrew sp.				1		

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