



Greece 2020



Greece - Mani Peninsula – September 2020

When our early July trip to Bulgaria fell victim to the Covid travel restrictions, my wife and I decided that rather than cancel, we would move our easyJet flights to September and take a late summer holiday in Greece instead. We had enjoyed some great holidays in Greece in the past, but hadn't visited for a few years, and we just wanted to experience that famous Greek hospitality, food, weather and beautiful scenery again. As our departure date approached, Coronavirus cases had begun to increase rapidly once again across parts of Europe, and there were a couple of tense weeks of waiting where we were unsure whether this trip would go ahead, or if travel restrictions would be re-imposed. Fortunately all went well, and we flew out from Manchester to Kalamata on Saturday 12th September, arriving at our small studio apartment in Kardhamili in late afternoon. This wasn't a butterflying trip by any means, but nevertheless butterflies inevitably crept into our schedule... Having visited this area several times before, I certainly wasn't expecting to see anything new, but I was hoping to at least find and photograph a Plain Tiger, a species that I had only ever seen once previously.

Our home for the week was a studio apartment in a small family-run complex surrounded by olive groves. Earlier in the spring, these same olive groves are full of wild flowers, but by September the fierce sun and summer heat has turned everything brown and arid, and butterflies are very thin on the ground. That is, unless you manage to find a patch of nectar, or a damp area, in which case it is possible to find them, sometimes in numbers.

There was a small bramble patch just outside our home base, and this was buzzing with activity as we arrived. **Pygmy Skipper** and **Lang's Short-tailed Blue** were abundant here, with occasional **Geranium Bronze**, **Brown Argus**, **Long-tailed Blue** and **Small Copper**. These made a nice welcoming committee.



L.pirithous

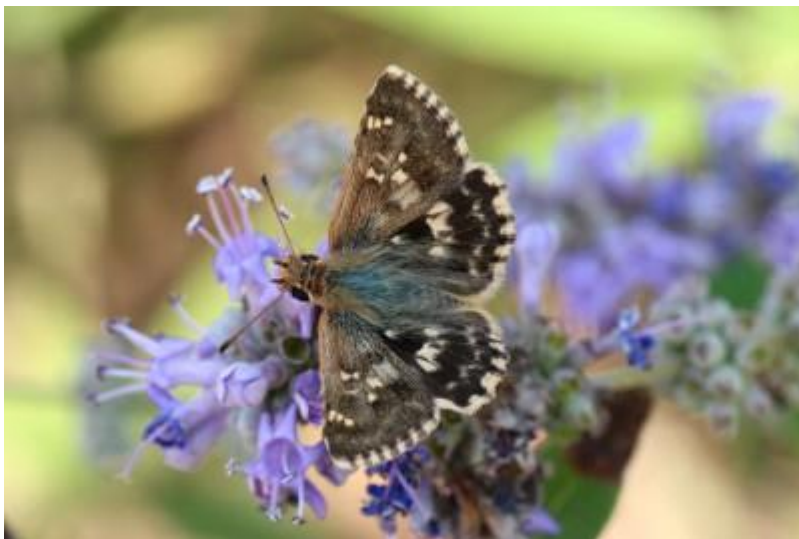


G.pumilio



C.marshalli

On Sunday we stayed local, walking up the Vyros gorge from the coast at Kardhamili. It was very dry here, and rather quiet on the butterfly front, with just a few **Sage** and **Pygmy Skipper**, **Wall Brown**, **Brown Argus** and occasional **Cleopatra** seen.



M.proto

Monday found us on a long drive north, to the archaeological site of Mystras, near Sparti, with its fascinating and beautiful medieval ruins, fortress and churches. Again, there were very few

butterflies here, other than **Woodland** and **Great-banded Grayling**, a few **Sage Skipper**, and a possible glimpse of a **Two-tailed Pasha**.

On Tuesday we revisited the Vyros gorge, this time approaching it from higher up, past the village of Exochori. We followed the track along the side of the gorge for about a kilometre. **Wall** and **Large Wall Brown**, **Cardinal**, **Silver-washed Fritillary**, **Sage Skipper** and the ubiquitous **Lang's Short-tailed Blue** all put in appearances, but things got more interesting as we came to a damp patch running down the path from a spring. Here, the butterfly activity was much more intense. My wife called out that she had a Map Butterfly in front of her. Of course, *levana* doesn't occur in the Peloponnese, being confined in Greece to the far north of the country, but I could fully understand her error, as in front of her was flying the tiniest **Southern White Admiral** that I have ever seen, presumably malnourished as a larva as a result of foodplant desiccation. It certainly had the appearance of a Map in flight. A **Nettle-tree Butterfly** put in a brief appearance but didn't hang around for long, or pose anywhere close by.



L.reducta



L.celtis

Oriental Marbled Skippers were also on the wing here, along with several species of Grayling, including Balkan Grayling.



H.sentes



C.orientalis

However, it was a trio of “small white” butterflies that was setting off alarm bells in my head. They were mud-puddling and nectaring in between brief bouts of flying low down to the ground, with a weak, slow, quite floppy flight. This flight pattern was distinctively different enough for me to spend some effort in obtaining photographs. I am so glad that I made the effort, as these turned out to be **Mountain Small Whites**, a big and unexpected life-tick! The lack of underside forewing spot and the square-ish forewing apical grey patch are diagnostic. I was particularly pleased to find this species as it is vanishingly rare in France, and highly localised in Spain.



P.ergane



A late and tatty **Purple Hairstreak** dropped down out of the canopy, and a courting pair of **Wood Whites** added to the species list for this site, along with singletons of **Speckled Wood**, **Meadow Brown**, **Brown Argus** and **Common Blue**.

On the drive back from the upper gorge, our satnav, having first attempted to take us down a narrow unpaved no entry track, then took us on a rather random meander east on a very long route back towards our apartment, along the road that time forgot, where roadside vegetation was in places encroaching half way across the carriageway. We scarcely saw another vehicle, but the prolific yellow flowers along the roadside prompted a stop-off, and we found dozens of **Clouded Yellow** and **Sage Skipper** here, plus **Small Copper** and **Long-tailed Blue**.



C.crocea



C.crocea f.helice



L.phlaeas



An obligatory bottle of fine Greek red wine went down very nicely that evening in celebration of the Mountain Small White lifer!



On Wednesday we had another “tourist day”, driving south down the Mani peninsula to Diros and taking a boat trip underground into the famous Diros caves, which were full of impressive stalactites and stalagmites, and somewhat other-worldly. I had seen one or two **Plain Tigers** flying past near the coast as we had been driving around, but was still waiting for my photography opportunity; they didn’t seem to be stopping still. On exiting the caves, we took a short walk along the coast and a **Plain Tiger** took to the wing right beside us and landed close by, posing nicely for the camera!



D.chrysippus male

On Thursday we approached the Vyros gorge from yet another direction, driving up past Tseria and through a very narrow ancient village. I was rather optimistically hoping for a late Freyer’s Grayling up here, but all that we found was **Tree Grayling** and **Sage Skipper**.



H.statilinus

Heading back down, we drove towards Santova beach where we stopped off to have a look at the bottom of the Ridomo gorge. Here we found a couple more **Plain Tigers**, along with **Swallowtail**, **Bath White**, **Mallow**, **Sage** and **Pygmy Skippers**.



D.chrysippus female



P.machaon



C.alceae

Arriving back at the apartment late Thursday afternoon, we were approached by the proprietress, who asked if we had seen the weather forecast. We knew that there was a storm on the way, but apparently it was going to be “severe”, and she warned us in no uncertain terms that we were not to go out walking on Friday, but were to stay inside! Half an hour later, my wife’s phone let out a sound not unlike the old four-minute warning siren, and an urgent weather alert flashed up on her screen for local disruption and damage from the incoming storm Ianos. From Thursday night until bedtime on Friday we sat and watched as wave after wave of torrential rain swept in across the sea, accompanied by strong winds, thunder and lightning. It was pretty relentless. Fortunately we had sufficient wine and food and reading material to keep us going, and the storm centre caused most of its damage further to the North-west of us. Even so, it was quite a dramatic end to the holiday. Saturday morning arrived and it was time to pack up and head back to the airport. One final **Plain Tiger** gave us a slow fly-past as we sat outside Kalamata airport waiting for the check-in desks to open.

All in all a lovely end of summer trip, with some fine butterflies. It was great to finally get shots of fresh male and female Plain Tigers, and the Mountain Small White was a tremendous bonus, my only 2020 life-tick at the end of a most bizarre year for European butterflying. Let’s hope 2021 is a little more predictable and user-friendly!