

Trip to butterfly paradise in  
the Hautes Alpes - July 2012



# Trip to butterfly paradise in the Hautes Alpes, France 2012

Shortly after 9am on Friday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2012, Bob and I set off towards Liverpool airport at the beginning of our third pilgrimage to the French Alps, in search of major butterfly action. Back in 2005 we had a great holiday in the mountains of the Haute Savoie in France, with plenty of excellent butterflies, and last year we spent an amazing week in the Maritime Alps, where we found 84 species of butterfly, including tremendous numbers of Apollos, Coppers and Fritillaries, in amongst beautiful scenery and habitat. The Maritime Alps trip was the best butterfly holiday we had ever had, and we swore that we would return to the area again at some point in the future.

Thanks to an unexpected twist of fate, resulting in me accepting a voluntary redundancy package back in March, we were presented with the opportunity to return to the region sooner than anticipated! Some rapid research and planning ensued, and soon, flights, car hire and accommodation had been booked. This year we decided to venture further north than last year to search for some of the high altitude specialist species that had so far eluded us. Our ultimate destination was to be our home base in Molines-en-Queyras, in the *parc naturel regional du Queyras*, but we had some travelling to do first...

We arrived at Liverpool airport, eventually parked the car (the "automatic" number plate recognition system was apparently in manual mode!) and unloaded our luggage, just as the heavens opened. So we hurried towards the terminal building in torrential rain, arriving out of breath and soaked to the skin like the proverbial drowned rodents. Never before had it seemed like such a good idea to leave the British "summer" behind us for a week.

The flight out to Nice was straightforward, and we arrived a little ahead of schedule in much warmer conditions, picked up the hire car (a Citroen C3 picasso) and headed for the Campanile hotel where we were staying for the night. The hotel was situated very close to the airport on the *Promenade des*

*Anglais*, and was easy to find. Well, it was according to the website on which I booked it...

20 minutes later, having driven over, under, across, and up and down the promenade several times, I finally spotted the Campanile hotel sign. The next challenge was working out how the hell to get into their car park! But finally we were in, settled down with a couple of bottles of wine, relaxing before an early night. Tomorrow we had a long drive through the mountains ahead of us, into new territory...

### Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> July

We got up early and were ready to leave the hotel shortly after 8am. Anticipation was mounting, but first we needed to hit the supermarket on the way out of Nice to stock up on supplies. Here we hit a slight delay, as the supermarkets did not open until 9am, but by 9:30 we were *en route* complete with wine, water, bread, croissants and sandwiches. Our route was to take us via the *Col de la Bonette* (along the highest asphalted route in Europe) and the *Col de Vars*, up and down some crazy mountain roads, with many hairpin bends, sheer drops, tunnels and rock faces. Bob once again did a sterling job of holding on to the contents of his stomach. I love driving on these roads, but it must be terrifying being a passenger. The RAC route planner gave us an estimated time of 3 hours and 21 minutes for the 130 mile trip from Nice to Molines-en-Queyras. There must be a Top Gear challenge here for Clarkson and co. I would love to see anyone make the journey in that time! It took us well over 8 hours and much of that time was spent in second gear. However, to be fair, we did make several stops on the way to check out the local habitat and butterflies, and here began the most incredible week of lepidoptery.

Our first stop was on the D2205 just north of St.Sauveur-sur-Tinée, where we found **Scarce Swallowtail**, **Black-veined White** and **High Brown Fritillary** on the roadside, along with **Clouded Yellow**, **Brown Argus** and a few



other species. Conscious of the long drive ahead, we didn't stop for long and pressed onwards. The next stop was on the D64, just south of the Col de la Bonette. By now we were at a considerable altitude, and we parked up and walked off the road onto some sparse alpine grassland, where we found several **Mountain Fritillaries** on the wing. A little further from the road on an area of damp mud we had the first major excitement of the week as we came across good numbers of male **Glandon Blues** drinking moisture from the ground. This was a new species for both of us. These are delightful blues, with prominent discal spots on the upperside and a lovely white heart-shaped mark in the centre of the underside hindwing. We spent a good 15 minutes watching them, took some photographs, then reluctantly dragged ourselves away to continue our journey.



*Glandon Blue upperside*



*Glandon Blue underside*

We only got a couple of miles down the road before a promising looking flowery track leading off from the road forced us into another stop. As soon as we got out of the car we almost trod on half a dozen **Spotted Fritillaries**, and along the track good numbers of Blues were flying. They looked like Common Blues on the underside, but when they opened their wings they were a totally different shade of bright sky blue, with a different border to the Common Blue. These were **Eros Blues**, another new species for both of us; stunning creatures! Further down the track several **Apollos** were flying up and down the hillside, and we also found **Turquoise Blue** and **Small Skipper** here.

*Spotted Fritillaries*



*Turquoise Blue*



We got back on the road and resisted the temptation to stop again for a while, in spite of some gorgeous scenery and great looking hillsides. Descending via a long series of hairpin bends down from the dizzy heights of the Col de la Bonette into Jausiers, we made gradual progress onwards towards our destination, but eventually Bob's travel nausea got the better of him, and the need for a cigarette stopped us again on the D902 just south of the Col de Vars. Here we pulled up alongside a fantastic flower-rich hillside. I wandered up the slopes, while Bob stayed lower down and had a smoke. Lost in my own little world, I was meandering and enjoying the flowers and butterflies when suddenly a **Large Blue** appeared out of nowhere. This is one of Bob's favourite species and I knew he was desperate to see some this year, so I shouted to him, but unfortunately the hilly terrain and wind direction meant he couldn't hear me, so he missed out on this one. However, he was having a great moment of his own, as he had found a large clump of *Geranium* and was patiently staking it out in the hope of finding another of our target species. Sure enough, by the time I had climbed back down the hill, an immaculate fresh female **Geranium Argus** was sat

right in front of him; another new species, and a real gem! **Silver-studded Blues** and **Chestnut Heaths** were also on the wing, and in amongst the "grizzled skippers" we found **Foulquier's Grizzled Skipper**, yet another life list first for us both. The various *Pyrgus* species would prove to be very challenging to identify over the coming week...



*Geranium Argus habitat*

*Geranium Argus*



With time pressing, and the need to reach our destination by 5pm, we made no more stops apart from a quick supermarket run at Guillestre to pick up ham, cheese, milk, pizza and sausages. We arrived at Molines-en Queyras just before 5, and called in on Madame Monique Duval to pick up the keys to our apartment. She lead us up the road to our apartment and showed us around, speaking in rapid French, which I understood less than half of, but I bluffed my way through and all was well. Madame then departed and we off-loaded the

luggage and got onto the important business of choosing a bottle of wine. A Beaumes de Venise was duly un-corked, and we fetched a couple of garden chairs from the garage and sat outside to admire a truly stunning view across the mountains. The distant peaks still had patches of snow on them, and as we sipped our wines, a couple of **Apollos** drifted lazily down the hill literally ten feet away from us. Our back garden was full of hundreds of **Idas Blues**, many of which were just settling down to roost for the night, and a **Damon Blue** also put in an appearance. Once again we seemed to have picked a fabulous base for the week ahead. We cooked a pizza, opened another bottle (Cahors this time), and reflected on the long but highly rewarding trip of the day - already we had picked up 4 new species, and we had high hopes of more great things to follow.

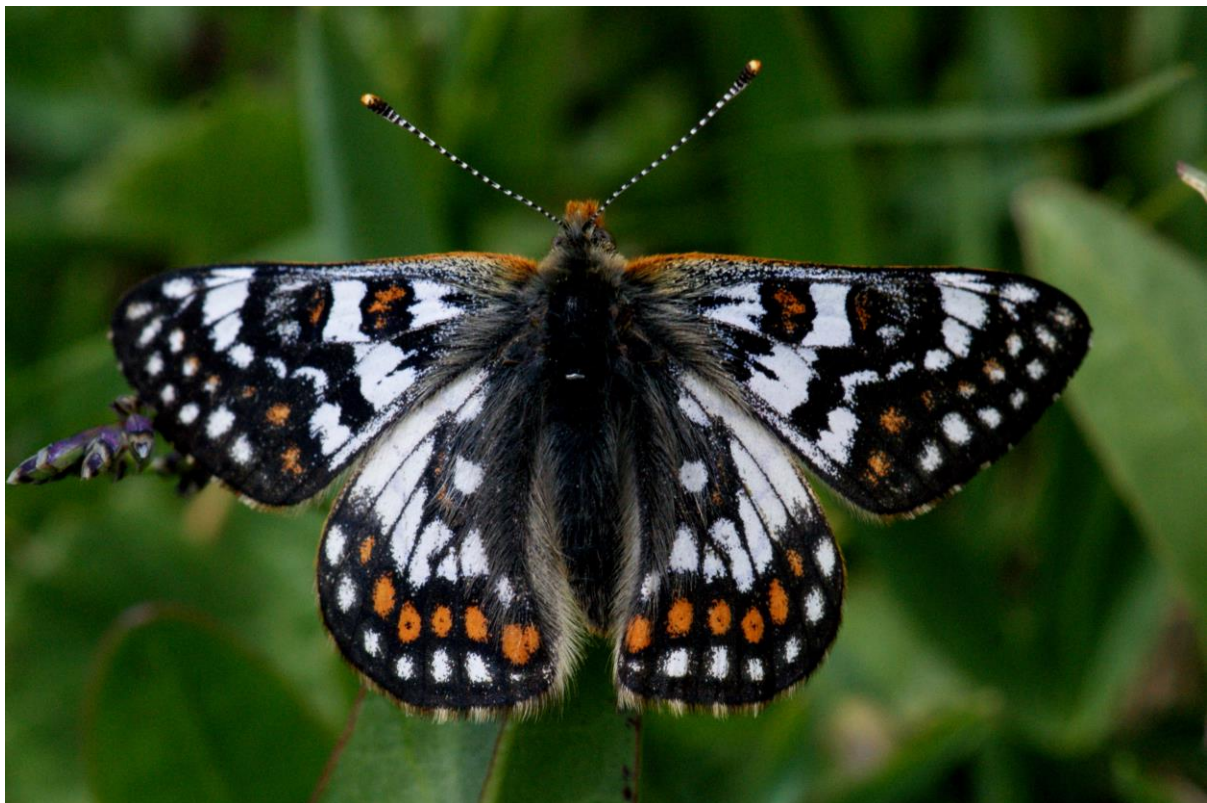
### Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> July

We awoke to the splendid views across the valley, and to broken cloud and patchy blue skies. Our plan today was to follow the road from the village up towards the Italian border. The D205 from Molines-en-Queyras towards the Col d'Agnel is a beautiful road. On the south side, the *torrent de l'Aigue Agnelle* flows gently over white rocks and stream beds adorned with yellow saxifrage, while on the north side, alpine grasslands full of flowers of every hue extend up to the scree line. The road is very popular with cyclists, all struggling against the gradient as the road climbs from around 1900m at Molines up to the Col d'Agnel at 2740m.

Ever since I acquired my first book on European butterflies more than 30 years ago, I have longed to see a Cynthia's Fritillary, and this was without doubt my number one target species for the holiday. We looked for it last year at a couple of potential sites in the Mercantour National Park without success, and today we were heading for the area around the Refuge d'Agnel, just below the Col, where we hoped to find it. We parked up and walked south of the refuge. The air was very thin up there and the lower levels of oxygen were immediately apparent as we struggled for breath! At this altitude the temperature was quite low still at 10am, and there was a cool breeze blowing, but we slowly began to get some butterfly sightings. **Mountain Fritillaries** and **Common Brassy Ringlets**



were soon found, and an *Erebia* species was flying around in reasonable numbers. Bob got close enough to identify this as the **Dewy Ringlet**, yet another new species. We separated slightly so as to cover more ground, and after about ten minutes of meandering, a butterfly flew past me in a blur of black and white, and landed close to my feet. It was my first sighting of a male **Cynthia's Fritillary** and it didn't disappoint! I drank in the sight of this beautiful creature for about 4 seconds, before it flew off - I was in such shock that I hadn't even reached for my camera. Shouting to Bob to come over, we walked onwards searching for more Cynthia's, but nothing appeared. Another ten minutes later and I had a second male land close to me. This time, my camera was ready for action - I finally had a shot of a species that I had lusted after for decades! Bob still hadn't seen one, so we walked on up and began to climb towards a patch of snow on the scree, hoping to find other new species, but it was quiet up there apart from the occasional **Mountain Fritillary** and **Dewy Ringlet**.



*Cynthia's Fritillary male*



We walked back down from the scree towards a series of hillocks, and noticed several white butterflies flying from peak to peak at great speed. We had an idea what they might be from their behaviour, and as one passed close to us in flight we got a glimpse of pattern which only heightened our suspicions. Finally one landed and we were able to see clearly the subtly beautiful wing markings of the **Peak White**, another first for both of us. Eventually I got close enough to get a reasonable photo. The underside pattern is delightful.



*Peak White male, finally sat still!*

Heading back towards the car, we decided to investigate the north side of the road, and panted away as we climbed up to a height of around 2700m above sea level. In stark contrast to the relatively low numbers of butterflies on the south side of the road, the grassland to the north was alive with butterflies. We soon found more **Cynthia's Fritillaries**; five males were fighting over territory in one small patch alone, and blues began to appear in good numbers. **Gandon**, **Mazarine**, **Small** and **Alpine Blues** were identified, along with the fabulous **Silvery Argus**. Also on the wing here were **Mountain Clouded Yellow**, **Alpine Heath** and **Sooty Copper**. We arrived at a trickling stream in a sheltered hollow running down the hillside, and here we had dozens of Apollos flying up and down. Or did we? They were reluctant to stop, and eventually Bob resorted to netting one briefly (highly illegal as the species is fully protected by European law). A quick examination revealed that this was in fact the **Small Apollo**, another new species and number 2 on my most-wanted list! As the day wore on, we found more and more **Small Apollos** along the stream. In fact, every one that we were able to identify was *phoebus*, and we didn't see a regular Apollo up there at all. The higher up the slope we went, the more **Cynthia's** we seemed to find, with a total count of more than 50 males, but just a couple of

females. Then out of nowhere a very orangey coloured *Satyrid* dropped onto a rock in front of us, and we were looking at the distinctive underside of the **Alpine Grayling**, a localised high altitude specialist, and another of our target species. **Queen of Spain Fritillary**, **Mountain Ringlet** and **Alpine Grizzled Skipper** also appeared, along with yet another new species, the **Dusky Grizzled Skipper**.



*Small Apollos showing characteristic red spots on forewings and ringed antennae*

*Below - the Alpine Grayling - a local high altitude specialist species*



What a superb day! We had 6 new life-list species from this stunning location close to the French/Italian border and returned back to base very happy indeed. Bob set to work cooking us a superb dinner of local sausages, with mushrooms, savoury rice and courgettes a la provencal. Of course, we washed

that all down with some fine red wine - Ventoux to start with, followed by an excellent Rioja (the only non-French bottle to make it into our wine selection), while we checked out our photographs and wrote our species list for the day. Bob also wrote a postcard to his mother. Sitting out on the patio, we watched the sun begin to drift downwards over the mountain tops, opened another bottle of wine and enjoyed the birdlife flying around us - Serin and Crag Martin in particular - before retiring to bed, me to the comfort of my double, and Bob to the uncomfortable bunk bed. Bless him for letting me have the best bedroom; the poor lad didn't sleep well in his room all week.

### Monday 9<sup>th</sup> July

Well I am not sure whether it was the third bottle of wine last night, or a lack of sleep, or maybe it was National Alzheimers day in France, but whatever the cause, Bob was definitely not firing on all cylinders this morning! Our plan today was to head back up the road towards the Col d'Agnel, this time stopping off lower down along the river bed to see what was flying. But first we needed to drive down into the village to get bread at the boulangerie, pick up some cigarettes for Bob, and post his postcard home to his mother. As we got to the village the air was turning blue as Bob cursed and began tossing the contents of his rucksack out all over the car. There was much gnashing of teeth going on. We needed to talk...

Me: "What's up?"

Bob: "I can't find the \*\*\*\*ing postcard!"

Me: "It's not in your rucksack then?"

Bob: "No."

Me: "Have you left it at the apartment?"

Bob: "Yes, I must have done. B\*ll\*cks!"

Me: "Never mind, we can post it tomorrow. Have you got the map?"

Bob: "What map?"



Oh dear, things were not going well. Fortunately the map wasn't essential today, as we knew where we were going. Or at least that was the theory. We got bread and croissants at the boulangerie and enquired as to where the tabac was, only to be told that there was no tabac in Molines-en-Queyras, and we would have to "descendre" - i.e. go back down the mountain - to the next village down at Ville-Vieille. With Bob's cigarette supply at critical low level, we set off in the opposite direction to our planned destination and arrived at Ville-Vieille. The bar-tabac was elusive, but when we eventually found it, it proved to be even more closed than it was elusive! Not good. It was 10:30am by now and we decided to hang around for half an hour and see if it opened at 11:00. We took a brief stroll down by the riverside and found **Dark Green, Heath, Queen of Spain** and **Niobe Fritillaries**. Then back to the bar-tabac, which was still closed at 11:10. So we descended further down the valley to the village of Chateau Queyras, where in typical French style there was a dramatic castle atop a precipitous rocky outcrop. There was also a bar selling cigarettes. Crisis resolved we now headed back up the mountain to the site along the river bed.

What a site this turned out to be. On the damp river bed on the mud patches were large groups of blues mud-puddling. **Eros, Glandon, Mazarine, Damon, Small, Common and Alpine Blues** were there by the dozens, along with groups of **Safflower Skipper**, occasional **Almond-eyed Ringlet, Glanville, Knapweed** and **Heath Fritillaries** and plenty of **Small Apollo**. Seeing dozens and dozens of blues in just one square foot of mud is a stunning experience! Grassland and scrubby patches near the river produced **Dark Green Fritillary, Titania's Fritillary** and **Alpine Heath**.

We moved on up the road, and stopped at around 2300m above sea level, where we found a similar mix of species, plus one of the rarest skippers in France. This was **Warren's Skipper**, one of our target species, but one that we had held out little hope of finding. Another one to add to our life list! Also present was a **Marsh Fritillary**, somewhat different in appearance to those to be found in England. This was sub-species *debilis*, a smaller and darker form than ours, typical of higher alpine grasslands in the central Alps.



*Marsh Fritillary sub-species debilis, found in a damp alpine meadow at 2300 metres above sea level*

Next, we drove on right up to the Col, at 2740m above sea level, and crossed the border into Italy. This was my first time in Italy, and I am not sure exactly what I expected. What I certainly didn't expect was to walk up a hillside and to be accosted by a group of 4 nuns! Whilst my French is not particularly extensive or fluent, my Italian is totally non-existent, other than a few musical terms learned from my piano teacher when I was about 5 years old, but saying "adagio", "rallentissimo", or "forte" to a random nun on a remote hillside seemed unlikely to help communication. We have no idea why these nuns were so interested in us, or why they were keeping such a close eye on us, but as we searched for butterflies and sat down to eat our sandwiches, they watched us like hawks. Maybe a lifetime of celibacy was taking its toll, and the site of two red-blooded Englishmen was tempting them to stray from their vows? Or perhaps a more realistic explanation is that, as they were keenly examining and photographing the flora, they were concerned that we were going to pick and steal the Edelweiss flowers that were growing in abundance on the hillside. Either way, they stayed close by, and watched us all the way as we descended back to the car and returned across the border to France. Very bizarre!

Another great day of entomology concluded, we headed back to base and enjoyed a tremendous dinner of sausages, dauphinoise potatoes au gratin, carrots and peas, and took an evening stroll around the garden, marvelling at the sheer number of roosting Idas Blues. Tonight's wine comprised an excellent Cotes du Rhone and a local award winning blended red, both of which went down very nicely.

### *Our first selection of wines*



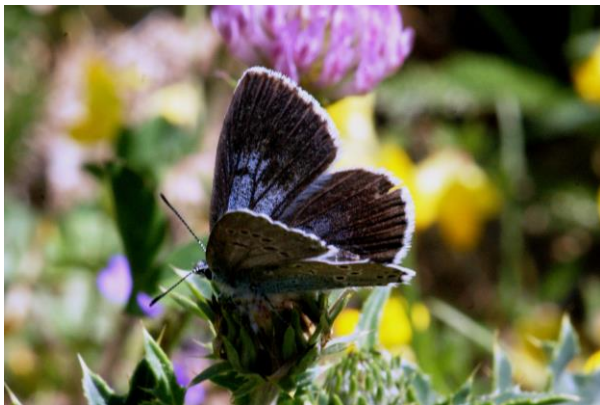
I retired early, while Bob stayed up to enjoy the setting sun.

### **Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> July**

Today was market day in our local village of Mollines-en-Queyras, so we took a stroll around the village to take in the atmosphere, and of course we just had to purchase some cheese from the extensive selection on offer. We opted for a chunk of the local blue cheese (*bleu du Queyras*), and also a sample of the subtle but tasty *Tomme aux Herbes*. Heading back to the apartment I put a couple of sandwiches together for later and we set off down the road in the opposite direction. Bob had identified another high altitude col to the north-west that he thought may be worth a visit, so we took the road towards the Col d'Izoard, stopping off at a small woodland clearing just north of Brunissard on the D902. This didn't look particularly promising, but it turned out to be a cracking site, not least because much to Bob's delight several **Large Blues** appeared and gave us a great display. Also in this clearing were **Pearl-bordered**



and Titania's Fritillaries, False Heath Fritillary, Wood White, Large Ringlet and Almond-eyed Ringlet, Mallow and Dingy Skipper, and Apollo. Our identification skills have been honed over recent years, and it was gratifying to find that we could confidently identify many of the species quickly and easily. However, there were still occasional blues and fritillaries that challenged us, and didn't fit into any obvious pattern. "It's an aberrant" became a bit of a catch phrase in these situations, and was often used in the course of the week to answer the question of "What's that there?" Joking aside, we genuinely did find a few aberrations, including Safflower Skippers with very heavy white markings, a smallish fritillary with excessively heavy black forewing markings, a Mountain Fritillary with one forewing orange and the other forewing silvery-grey, and of course several local forms such as Large Blue *f.obscura*, and Sooty Copper sub-species *subalpinus*.



*Large Blue f.obscura*



*Sooty Copper sub-species subalpinus*

Onwards towards the Col d'Izoard, we next stopped at a pull-in just south of the Col at La Casse Deserte, and climbed up into some remarkable high altitude habitat. This was an almost alien landscape, dominated by sheer scree

slopes, with bizarre jagged upright rock formations and very little vegetation, possibly the most unusual site I have ever been to in search of butterflies.



*Dramatic scree slopes near the Col d'Izoard, one of the most remarkable sites I have visited in the pursuit of butterflies.*

*Bob is sat near the bottom of the picture, adding a sense of scale to the photo.*

We sat on the slope for a while and started to see some *Erebias* on the wing. They seemed to be flying up and down, zig-zagging across the scree slopes and avoiding the more vegetated areas. It became apparent that they had tremendous aerial skills, as they hung in the air on their descent with half opened wings, gliding and drifting on the currents, before flying back up the slopes. Bob sat and watched them through binoculars, while I got stuck into some extreme sport entomology, engaging in suicidal forays up and down the scree, desperately trying to get close enough to photograph and identify these



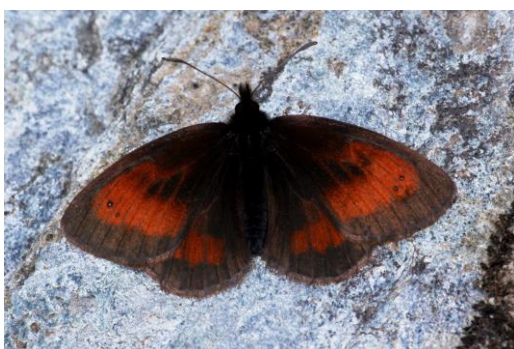
creatures. Climbing up these slopes was like trying to run up the down escalator, walking sideways was asking for big trouble, and running down was completely uncontrollable. This butterfly was without doubt one of the hardest I have ever tried to photograph! Eventually I got close enough. This was the **Sooty Ringlet**, and I will never forget seeing it in this most dramatic of landscapes, as a Golden Eagle soared in the air high above us. The male Sooty Ringlets are very dark and almost devoid of markings. The females in this part of the world are supposed to be of the form *Erebia pluto pluto*, and similarly devoid of markings. However, it seems that they don't read Tolman and Lewington, for here they are very much of the form *Erebia pluto oreos*, which is supposed to occur further north in the Haute Savioe. (**\*see footnote**). The females of this form have orange post-discal markings on fore-wings and hind-wings. Never believe what you read in books! Needless to say, this was another lifetime first on the species list. After extreme exertion on the slopes, we climbed back down to the road, where a **Blind Ringlet** added itself to our species list.



*Sooty Ringlet female, a hard won photo.*

***\*See footnote***

A little further up the road towards the Col d'Izoard we stopped for a wander, and found more Edelweiss. Bob spotted a group of Frog Orchids, and more importantly we found our first example of **False Mnestra Ringlet**, an extremely local insect and one that was high up on our hit list.



*False Mnestra Ringlet, a true rarity*



We then drove up to the Col itself, where a small wooden hut offered the prospect of ice creams. We were very much ready for one, but sadly they were teasing us, as the freezer was out of action and no ice creams were available. Disappointed at the lack of refreshment, we headed back down the mountain and onwards towards our home base. On the way back, on the road between Chateau Queyras and Molines, was a notable stone formation rising out from between the trees, in a rather phallic shape and style. In their eloquence, the French had named this *la demoiselle coiffée*, which translates roughly as "the maidens hair-do". It was perhaps inevitable that we would give it a slightly less sophisticated alternative name, and it soon became known as "cock rock" and proved to be a useful navigational tool during the week! For example, whilst writing up the day's sightings of an evening, one might be party to a conversation along the following lines;

*"I say old boy...do you recall where it was that we saw that Southern White Admiral this afternoon?"*

*"Well... if I remember correctly my dear fellow, I do believe it was in the wood beside that meadow just south of cock rock."*

*"Ah yes indeed my good man. So it was, so it was."*

Or something along those lines...

Back to home base again, and an evening stroll through the garden resulted in Bob finding a cross-leaved gentian with some **Mountain Alcon Blue** eggs on it. **Marbled White**, **Chalkhill Blue** and **Chestnut Heath** were also evident in our garden. The **Chestnut Heaths** in this part of the world are once again of a different form to that illustrated in Tolman and Lewington, as they lack the ocelli on the underside hindwing, being marked very subtly with just white fleck marks. This is known as *f.bertolis*, and seems to be the predominant form in the Maritime and Haute Alps from our experience. More wine, and some fantastic very large, fat and slowly roasted sausages made for a delicious supper. The skies were beginning to look angry and we had a few light spots of rain, but the threatened storms never reached us and we retired with full bellies and great memories of two of the hardest-earned new species yet!

## Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> July

Bob had a bad night last night, thanks to a dose of Delhi Belly which kept him up, so we decided to stay fairly local today. We drove down into Guillestre to stock up on food, wine and diesel, and stopped briefly on the roadside in the Combe du Queyras, where we found the first **Great Sooty Satyr** and **Purple-shot Copper** of the holiday. After off-loading the shopping at the apartment, we set off once again along the road towards the Col d'Agnel, this time crossing the torrent via a bridge and walking through a meadow south of the river. At first the habitat didn't appear particularly rich, but soon we were hitting patches of excellent flora and, as the sun appeared, so too did hundreds of fritillaries. We had **Dark Green**, **High Brown** and **Niobe Fritillaries** nectaring together on a single patch of wild thyme, **Queen of Spain** and **Spotted Fritillaries** were on the wing, and further up the meadow on a large thistle patch we found dozens and dozens of **Titania's Fritillary**. My previous experience with Titania's Fritillary has been that it is usually found in ones and twos, and it was tremendous to be surrounded by dozens of this lovely butterfly. They have the most exquisite underside markings and were providing plenty of photo opportunities! We also found a couple of English entomologists who were, like us, in pursuit of butterflies. In particular, one of them was seeking Glandon Blue and Silvery Argus, so we pointed the good man in the direction of the stream bed where we had seen plenty previously. We caught up with him later in the afternoon and he was very happy to have found them! The "fritillary meadow" also produced large numbers of **Mountain Clouded Yellow**, as well as plenty of blues, another **Geranium Argus**, **Almond-eyed**, **Common Brassy** and **Lesser Mountain Ringlets**. Closer to the river bed we also found **Mountain Dappled White**.

Bob was feeling better now, so we went on up the road to re-visit the hillside near the Refuge d'Agnel. The Dewy Ringlets that had been so common there just a few days back had completely disappeared, but in their place we found dozens of fresh **False Mnestrá Ringlets** along the stream running down the hillside. It was great to see this rarity in significant numbers. The Cynthia's Fritillaries had almost gone too; we only found a couple of tatty males and a

beaten up female with half of her forewing missing. It really is noticeable how quickly species appear and disappear in habitats like these. Just a couple of days can be the difference between success and failure in finding target species at this high altitude...

Back to base for another fine meal, but tonight Bob decided to have a night off the alcohol, so I worked alone on the red wine supply...



*A hearty dinner after a hard day of entomology!*

### Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> July

After a good night's sleep, we woke up early and decided to head off in a different direction to St. Veran, from where we planned to take a minor road right up into the high mountains. St. Veran is the highest occupied village in France, and the third highest in Europe. It is also apparently very pretty. We were not to find out, for as we approached the entrance to the village we were flagged down by an officious woman who asked us where we were going. I explained in my best French that we were driving through the village, and showed her on the map where we were heading. She said no, we couldn't drive through the village, but we could pay 6 Euro's to park in the car park, then catch a bus (fee not disclosed) to travel through the village and down to the road we wished to travel along. It seems that St. Veran has been turned into a tourist attraction, and whilst I have no objection to supporting the local economy, we didn't wish to be confined to bus times etc, so we turned round and headed back down the mountain. This turned out to be a great decision, as Bob, with his



intuitive skill at picking great areas to visit on the map (when he remembers to bring it!), was about to navigate us to an absolute belter of a location.

But before that, we drove a little way up the road to revisit the *torrent de l'Aigue Agnelle*.



*The torrent de l'Aigue d'Agnelle, home of the Small Apollo, Mountain Dappled White, and many blues, fritillaries and satyrids.*

A couple of days earlier we thought we might have seen Mountain Green-veined White here, but we didn't manage to confirm it. As we walked down from the roadside, a possible candidate flew right past us, and now it was Bob's turn to attempt a suicidal chase across rocky terrain as he tried to catch the creature in his net. Watching him desperately run around, lunging wildly and acrobatically at the white, arms flailing in all directions, I felt sure we were heading for a trip to the fracture clinic at the local hospital at any minute, but it seems that a passing cyclist was in even more danger. The cyclist was looking on in amazement at this mad Englishman running about like a lunatic chasing this butterfly, to such an extent that, as he craned his neck around in astonishment,

he very nearly cycled clean off the road into the river! No doubt he would be telling the story of *l'homme Anglais* over a couple of beers, in a bar somewhere later that evening. Meanwhile, Bob sadly failed to capture the butterfly, despite a hugely valiant effort.

Then it was onwards to Bob's inspired choice of alternative destination for the day. We followed the D947 through Aiguilles and Ristolas, until we reached l'Echalp, where the road degenerated into a rough track. A little way south on this track we stopped off to have a look at the habitat. **Orange Tip** and **Brimstone** appeared by the track-side, along with **Titania's**, **Dark Green**, **Knapweed** and **Spotted Fritillaries**, **Black-veined White** and **Small Skipper**. We then took a stroll down to the river-bed, where we stumbled across the most incredible sight I have ever seen in the world of butterflies...

We thought we had seen some impressive mud-puddling aggregations of blues earlier in the week, but that was nothing to what we found here. Dozens and dozens of **Large Ringlets** were sucking up salts and moisture from the mud patches, and alongside them, literally hundreds and hundreds of blues were doing the same, in such a concentration that it was just mind-blowing. Have a look at the photo, and imagine multiplying it several times over!





Amongst the blues we identified **Escher's**, **Mazarine**, **Damon**, **Chalkhill**, **Eros**, **Idas** and **Glandon**. As well as the hundreds of butterflies occupying just a couple of square feet of ground, the air was also alive with movement. This really was extreme mud-puddling. We couldn't believe what we were seeing; the sheer numbers were incredible. (You should see the video footage!) Eventually we managed to drag ourselves away from the amazing spectacle on the river bed, and returned to the car for sandwiches (the usual French bread with ham and camembert). As we sat there, **Large Ringlets** landed on us and sucked sweat from our arms, legs, hands, camera etc. At one point Bob had 5 on his leg. They were everywhere.

After lunch we drove on down the track to a very large car park by La Roche Ecroulee. This was the end of the road as far as travelling by car went, as we were just on the border of the *Reserve Naturelle Nationale de Ristolas - Mont Viso*. From here on in it was strictly a *pied*, and we walked up a steeply rising track, either side of which flew many **Dark Green Fritillaries**. We also found **Tufted Marbled Skipper**, **False Heath Fritillary**, **Northern Brown Argus** and **Silver-studded Blue**, and much to Bob's delight, another **Large Blue** appeared by a thyme patch. The track wound up through some woodland, and then opened out into some very tall un-grazed meadowland, where **Apollos**, **Black-veined Whites**, **Mountain Clouded Yellows** and yet more fritillaries were flying. After a long walk we joined a rough track leading back down towards where we had parked the car. More and more **Apollos** were appearing, and I was pursuing a smallish fritillary when Bob suddenly called out with a note of urgency in his voice. He had spotted a very darkly marked green-veined white nectaring in a damp and slightly shady clearing alongside the track. Unfortunately it was up a steep bank, but Bob had it sighted through his binoculars and I rapidly scrambled up, oblivious to brambles, large rocks and damp puddles as I homed in on the creature. As I focussed in with my camera I found myself looking at the underside of a **Mountain Green-veined White**. At last we had this new species on our list.

What a tremendous day. Back at base camp we celebrated this in style with Cahors, Ventoux and Beames de Venise aplenty! Bob was still not sleeping well at night on his bunk bed, and while I was sleeping fine, I did have some particularly vivid, psychedelic dreams most nights. I blame the cheese! When not sleeping at night, Bob would sometimes venture out onto the patio in the



dark, and in the morning I would hear fisherman's tales of giant bats with the wingspan of an albatross flying around outside the apartment. I tried waking up several nights to see these mythical beasts, but the exercise, mountain air and plentiful food and wine conspired against me, and tragically I missed out on this element of our holiday...

### Friday 13<sup>th</sup> July

Our last full day in the mountains dawned dark, overcast and menacing, as befitting the date. We planned one last visit up to the col d'Agnel, but on arrival the sun was nowhere to be seen and the air temperature was barely into double figures. So we drove on over the border further into Italy and descended along a series of hairpin bends, when suddenly the car in front braked abruptly, right on a sharp corner. We were forced to stop, and looking out the window we saw the cause of the braking - a Marmot was sat right beside the road, and the occupants of the car in front were busy snapping photos on mobile phones and cameras. We had seen and heard plenty of Marmots on the hillsides over the past week; their piercing cries had become very familiar, as well as the sight of them atop a rock, or running for the cover of their homes. Marmot burrows and latrines were in evidence all over the place, but this was certainly the closest we had been to one. More cars stopped, and the creature is now a minor celebrity, immortalised in pictures!

We drove further into Italy, but the majority of the grassland there was either heavily grazed or had been bailed for hay, so we turned around and headed back up to the border, just as the sun began to appear. A scramble up a hillside gave us **Large Wall Brown**, along with the usual assortment of blues and fritillaries. A second stop just before the col on the Italian side was even better, with a pristine **Large Blue** and several mating pairs of **Small Apollo**. Once over into France, the cloud was thick again, so we headed down to lower altitude and ended up stopping just south of cock rock, where the sun had re-appeared and the temperature was up to 28 degrees. A fantastic meadow produced dozens of **Damon Blues**, plus **Chalkhill**, **Adonis**, **Idas** and **Mountain Alcon Blues**. Fritillaries here included **False Heath**, **Knapweed**, **Titania's**, **Dark**

**Green** and **High Brown**, and we also found **Southern White Admiral** and **Wood White** in an adjacent strip of woodland. This was a fitting finale to our week in the Queyras, and we headed back to base, to begin the process of packing our cases.

*Damon Blue*  
*mating pair*



### Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> July

It is a sad day as we tidy up the house, clean the bathroom and kitchen, load the car and depart from what has been a magical home from home for the past week. While Bob takes the rubbish to the *dechetterie*, I return the keys to Madame Duval, tell her what a great holiday we have had, and thank her for her help. Our flight home leaves Nice late in the evening, so we have plenty of time to take a slow drive back, and this time I chose a different route, taking in Barcelonnette and then heading south via the Col d'Allos.

We stopped in a layby off the D908 south of Barcelonnette, in the *foret communale de Uvernet-Fours* and scrambled onto a lovely flower rich clearing. Here we found a couple of very fresh **Mountain Alcon Blues** (those we had seen earlier in the week were very tatty), along with **Heath Fritillary**, **Great Banded Grayling**, **Blue-spot Hairstreak** and many other species. The Mountain Alcon Blues posed beautifully for us on the *Gentians*. We stopped here for about half

an hour before heading onwards along what was possibly the scariest road we had yet travelled. It was the usual crazy mix of bends, rocks and sheer drops, but was even narrower than the roads so far, and we had several tense moments when passing oncoming vehicles. Many kilometres further on, we did two stops in rapid succession, either side of la Colle St.Michel on the D908, where we had our first **Grayling** and **Ilex Hairstreak** of the holiday, plus **Great Sooty Satyr**, **Purple-shot Copper**, **Marbled White** and **Berger's Clouded Yellow** amongst others.

A final stop just south of le Fugeret added **Long-tailed Blue** to our list, and then it was full speed onwards to Nice. 8 days and just shy of 1,000 kilometres later, we returned the hire car and had a couple of hours to kill at the airport, before flying back into Liverpool and driving back to Bobs, arriving home close to midnight.

What a week! 98 species of butterfly, including 14 personal lifetime firsts. We had found some true high alpine rarities, and visited some stunning landscapes. Of all the target species on our hit list, we had seen just about everything we could have hoped for, and had experienced some of the most dramatic butterfly action of our lives. I will certainly never forget the sight of hundreds of blues and large ringlets mud-puddling and filling the air with activity, nor forget the buzz of sitting at 2300m above sea level, watching Sooty Ringlets gliding over sheer scree slopes in the dramatic landscape of the col d'Izoard. Finding Glandon and Eros Blues in good numbers in their alpine homes was pure joy. Seeing dozens of Titania's Fritillaries nectaring on a large thistle patch was tremendous. My first Cynthia's Fritillary was probably the most exciting moment of the week in many ways, but there was so much good stuff, it is impossible to choose a favourite moment. Even the nuns will stick in my memory. Many thanks to Bob for accompanying me on this crazy adventure, for doing all the navigating and cooking all the food of an evening. I am really not sure where we can go next to top this, but watch this space...

**\*Footnote (2020)** – the Sooty Ringlet females of f.oreos, with hindsight are almost certainly Silky Ringlets. Further experience in the intervening years has resulted in me frequently finding these two species flying together in this sort of high altitude scree habitat.

*Front cover photo background by Bob Lambert*