

Butterfly Trip to Southern Spain - April 2016  
Almeria and Granada provinces



Pete Smith



# Butterfly Trip to Southern Spain, April 2016.

This latest European butterfly trip had its origins way back one evening in early 2014, when my main man and fellow European butterfly *compadre* Mr. Bob Lambert and I were discussing where we should go for our next jaunt in search of new butterfly species on the continent. Bob and I have undertaken several momentous explorations in France over the past decade, including visits to Provence, the Hautes-Alpes, the Maritime Alps and Haute-Savoie. These journeys have passed into legend and folklore, as we have found and photographed fabulous insects of great beauty, and often considerable rarity. The particular discussion on this evening was, as is often the case, conducted over the consumption of several bottles of fine red wine, and as the evening progressed, we became very much in agreement that a trip to southern Spain in early spring would give us the chance to meet up with several new "lifers" - butterfly species that neither of us had ever seen before. Top of our target list was the Spanish Greenish Black-Tip, a true heavyweight and premier league player when it comes to rare and difficult European butterflies to find, being confined to just two very small and localised remote areas of Spain; but we also hoped to find other new species such as the Portuguese Dappled White, Desert Orange Tip, Common Tiger Blue and Provence Hairstreak.

Plans were soon in progress, and research commenced. I had the added bonus of having a local contact, good friend and Lincolnshire butterfly expert Mr. Peter Cawdell, who just so happened to own a villa out in the area we were hoping to visit. He knows the area quite well and has studied butterflies extensively in the region for some years. Coincidentally, he is also one of the leading experts on Spanish Greenish Black-Tips! Before long I had found us the perfect base, a lovely looking villa with private pool in the remote village of

Albanchez in the Sierra de Los Filabres, Almeria province. Everything was looking good!

Just before I booked the holiday, our plans were hit by a sidewinder missile...Bob had been waiting to hear the dates for a family wedding commitment in Poland that was happening sometime in 2016, and the news had come through that it was a direct clash with the only week that we could do the Spanish butterfly thing...unbelievable!

Well, I had already invested way too much research time and emotional energy into this trip to let it slip away, not to mention at least £25 spent on road maps and walking maps, so I decided that the show must go on. It was time for a slight metamorphosis (see what I did there?)...

I am so lucky to have such an understanding wife and family, although to be fair, it wasn't actually *that* hard to convince them to come on a family holiday out to the south of Spain in a luxury villa for a week, all expenses paid. My only conditions were a couple of days to myself for pure butterflying. Flights, accommodation and car hire were duly booked. Fasten your seatbelt - the butterfly journey starts here!

**Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2016**

After an early start we leave our Kegworth Hotel, get the flight from East Midlands to Murcia, pick up the hire car and drive to our holiday destination in the lovely rural village of Albánchez, arriving just after 1pm Spanish time. The villa is everything we had hoped for: a lovely setting, very well equipped, and with a great heated swimming pool. We travel to the local supermarket to stock up on food and drink and return to settle in to our home for the week.

Of course I can't resist a quick look around down the road, and late in the afternoon I find **Swallowtail**, **Large White**, **Black-eyed Blue** and **Spanish Brown Argus** within a five minute walk from our villa. Amazingly, **Spanish Brown Argus** is a new species for me!



*Spanish Brown Argus - note more extensive orange lunules than our Brown Argus*

It has been a long day, and after some food and a bottle of Rioja, bed is very welcome!

**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2016**

Today I persuade Vicki to join me on a journey to the coast, so we leave the offspring behind at the villa and travel south-east, to a site recommended to us by Peter Cawdell. It is a fair drive of just over an hour, and we are not sure when we get there if we are at the exact spot recommended, but we park up near some old fortifications and walk down towards the coast. Almost immediately I spot a **Spanish Gatekeeper** in amongst the scrubby grassland, only my second ever sighting of this lovely butterfly.



*Spanish  
Gatekeeper*

A little closer to the coast we find a delightful sheltered cove, with plenty of wild flowers.



This is a great haven and there are several **Lang's Short-tailed Blue** flying here, along with **Western Dappled White**, **Swallowtail** and **Wall Brown**.

Things then get a lot more exciting as Vicki spots something a bit different - a small blue butterfly with an amazing underside pattern. This is my first ever sighting of the gorgeous **Common Tiger Blue**, a tiny gem!



*Common Tiger Blue*

**Monday 4<sup>th</sup> April 2016**

Peter Cawdell has made contact with us today. I probably forgot to mention that he owns a villa in the same village where we are staying, and he also happens to be out here for a week at the same time as us. Today I took a late afternoon stroll down the local "Rambla" with Peter and his daughter Tehani. A Rambla is a dry river bed; this one leads up from Albánchez village to the old viaduct known as "Los Arcos". By now the weather was overcast and cool, and a moderate breeze was blowing. Tehani spotted a **Geranium Bronze** on the way up the Rambla, and we also found **Speckled Wood**, **Spanish Brown Argus**, and **Lang's Short-tailed Blue**. We stopped just before the viaduct, and I spotted an incredibly well-camouflaged "orange tip" roosting on a yellow *crucifer* plant. The other two hadn't seen it, but once I pointed it out Peter immediately expressed the opinion that it was a Moroccan Orange Tip. I had seen the very

angular forewing tips and they had set alarm bells ringing in my head - I was 99% certain that this was a **Sooty Orange Tip**, a very local and hard-to-find species. The breeze was relentless, and made photography very difficult, but eventually I got a shot that confirmed the ID - another lifetime first for me, and the most exciting moment of the holiday so far. What a beauty!



*Sooty Orange Tip - Male Underside*

This was also a new species for Peter, which made it doubly special to find it on his local patch. A couple of days later I managed to get an upper-side photograph close to where we found the above butterfly.



*Sooty Orange Tip - Male upperside*

**Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> April 2016**

I had arranged with Peter that today we would travel together to the Hoya de Baza, Granada province, in search of the elusive Spanish Greenish Black-Tip. Peter and Tehani picked me up at 09:30 and we took the long drive to Baza, then headed north-east and turned off the main road onto a dirt track. Here I was in the hands of Peter's local knowledge as we ventured off onto sandy farm tracks leading into one of the most unique butterfly habitats that I have ever visited. Having turned left, then right, then left again, we finally parked up and walked off into a crazy landscape of low hills and patchy arable land. This was the Hoya de Baza. A "Hoya" literally translates as a valley, depression, trough, or basin, which is a little ironic in this case as the Hoya de Baza is between 800 and 1000 metres above sea level. It is a Hoya only in relation to the fact that it is surrounded by much higher mountain ranges. As we walked towards our destination I was very pleased that I had chosen to wear jeans and a jumper. We had arrived just after 11:00am, but the air temperature was very much in single figures, and to be brutally honest, it was bloody cold! There was nothing on the wing in terms of insect life, and I had low expectations of seeing anything other than the habitat of our main quarry. We walked quite a way before we reached the beginning of the potential habitat of our target butterfly.



Off in the distance we could see snow-covered mountain-tops illuminated by sunlight. There was a patch of blue sky a few miles away, and over the course of a couple of hours it moved painfully slowly in our direction. Gradually the air temperature began to rise, and finally just before 1:00pm we found ourselves with enough sunlight to cast shadows. We had made our way to Peter's favoured site - the highest hillock in the area. A couple of minutes later the day evolved into one of the most memorable events of my butterflying life!

Peter had predicted that the first butterflies to appear would be the Portuguese Dappled Whites. Sure enough, soon after the sun appeared, we found ourselves surrounded by at least half a dozen "dappled whites", all flying up to the highest point of the ridge we were on and doing the classic "hill-topping" thing. To my eye these whites appeared dimorphic, mostly a small sized dappled with occasional larger versions. Sure enough, closer examination and photographic evidence confirmed that most were **Portuguese Dappled White**, another new species for me, with a few **Western Dappled White** also present.



*Portuguese Dappled White*

It was a good couple of minutes later when things got remarkably intense! More and more dappled whites were flying around our high hillock. All of a sudden, a completely different butterfly appeared on the scene; a small but very yellow creature flying around the hilltop - there was a shout of "baze!" from Peter.

Sure enough, here was the Holy Grail, our main target species, the incredible **Spanish Greenish Black-Tip**. It flew around for ten seconds and then landed, giving us a rare short moment to try and get a photo.



*Spanish Greenish Black-Tip*

Fantastic! This was the stuff of dreams, one of Europe's rarest species sat just a few feet away from me. Over the next half an hour we had several more sightings, and very occasional brief landings, but this was a hard butterfly to approach. As the sunshine came and went, I wandered along the ridge away from Peter and Tehani, along to the next peak. At this point I got a shout of "bazae!" from behind, but almost instantaneously I had another **SGBT** of my own appear right in front of me. I tried for another photo but it had other ideas, and for the next five minutes I chased it further and further down the hillside as it teased me with a series of short-lived landings, before eventually stopping briefly at nectar. I did eventually manage to get a couple more photographs, always zooming in from a distance.

Cloud came over again, and I breathlessly climbed back up the hillside to the ridge, and back to the others. We then swapped places, Peter and Tehani moving on to where I had seen the other *bazae*, and me moving back to the first

hilltop. Some minutes later the sun re-appeared, and at one point I found myself with three male **Spanish Greenish Black-Tips** spiralling around in a dog fight over hilltop territory - this was heaven! The whole experience was surreal; here I was in the middle of nowhere, in a very distinctive habitat, seeing a true European rarity doing its thing. The place has a very special feel to it, and you can fully appreciate the need for the hill-topping mate-location strategy of this butterfly that breeds at low density over a large area.



*Hoya de Baza - agricultural land pockets in amongst sparsely vegetated hills*

The larval food-plant was quite common around the edges of the agricultural areas, which were largely given over to cereal production, but was seldom found in the hills themselves. Some of the farmed areas were left fallow, almost like an accidental "set-aside" scheme, and here **Clouded Yellow** and **Western Dappled Whites** could be found. Up on the ridges and hilltops, **Wall Brown** was also commonly encountered, and we found a couple of **Swallowtail** eggs on the Umbellifers. It was hard to leave this fabulous site - I had promised to be back at the villa by 5pm to fire up the barbeque, as it was Toby's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday today, but shamefully I was almost an hour late for my son's celebrations as I simply couldn't leave the Hoya behind in a hurry!



*One of the high points at Hoya de Baza in the foreground*



*More shots of the fantastic Spanish Greenish Black-Tip ssp. bazae*

I did make it home by 6pm, and immediately lit the barbeque - we had a great night of celebrations, on several levels!

**Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> April 2016**

Having been absent for most of the day yesterday, today I took a stroll up the Rambla with Vicki, in pleasant, warm sunshine. It was a lovely walk, and we found 17 species of butterfly, including **Swallowtail** and **Iberian Scarce Swallowtail**, quite a few **Bath Whites**, **Black-eyed Blues**, **Provence Orange Tip**, and **Mallow Skipper**. We also saw at least two different examples of the **Sooty Orange Tip** again.



*Los Arcos - the old viaduct, up the Rambla at Albánchez*



*Bath White*



*Black-eyed Blue*

## **Friday 8<sup>th</sup> April**

Our last full day in Spain, and I had arranged my second butterflying outing with Peter and Tehani. It was my turn to drive, so I picked them up just before 09:30am and we set off for the coast. I wanted to visit the Cabo de Gata, as I had read lots about it being one of the top sites for butterflies and other wildlife in this area. Peter was less sure, as he had visited before and not been particularly impressed. It was well over an hour's drive to the visitor centre for this UNESCO world heritage site, so we arrived around 11:00am and set off on a wander towards the sea. There was a fair breeze blowing, and the habitat didn't look particularly great to be honest. Nevertheless, we

persevered, and we did find three **Green-striped Whites**, a lovely species, plus a single **Swallowtail** butterfly.



*Green-striped  
White*

After an hour and a half, I was convinced that we were wasting our time here, so I suggested to Peter that we cut our losses and headed back to his coastal site further east. I still hadn't seen a Desert Orange Tip this holiday, and it was well up on my target list - I had hoped to see it here at the Cabo de Gata, but that just wasn't happening. Peter rated his site as good for Desert Orange Tip, but it hadn't been flying when Vicki and I had visited last Sunday. So we decided to set off back, and an hour or so later we were walking down the track to the coast. We soon found **Spanish Gatekeeper** and **Common Tiger Blue** again, and as the sun finally came out fully, a **Desert Orange Tip** took to the wing just in front of Peter and I. Brilliant! Another new lifer for me! I spent the next half hour frantically chasing around as two or three of these butterflies flew up and down the coastal slopes.



*Desert Orange Tip*



*Desert Orange Tip*

So there we have it, a fabulous conclusion to a great week in southern Spain. Six new species of butterfly, and also a new species of day flying burnet moth, the White-collared Burnet, *Zygaena lavandulae*, also found on the coast and photographed below in its full glory!



What a dream of a week...a perfect butterfly experience, and a great family holiday also, with Vicki, Emily, Toby and Tom. Great times and great memories!