

Searching for Zeller's Skipper in SW

Spain

October 2018

Zeller's Skipper is a species that has fascinated me for a while now, not just because it is an interesting looking butterfly, but also because its status in south-west Spain has been the subject of much discussion in entomological circles in recent years. Apparently rare and sporadic in occurrence during the 1900's, an assessment for the IUCN Red List back in 2009 (van Swaay *et al*) suggests that at this time it was "very local" in Spain and that "there are probably no stable populations". More recent surveys by other notable Lepidopterists such as Teresa Farino, and Sylvain Cuvelier and Matt Rowlings (<http://www.phegea.org>) paint a picture of a species that is more widespread and common in Cadiz province, with colonies in adjacent provinces also. There is the suggestion that the species has undergone a rapid recent expansion in the region, but the jury is still out as to whether this is genuinely the case, or whether the populations, which peak in numbers quite late in the season, have merely been overlooked.

I needed to see this species for myself, and a chance email from a fellow UK Butterflifer who had just returned from Spain a couple of weeks back inspired me to make a rather impulsive last-minute booking of a flight to Malaga last Sunday, along with a hire car and a hotel for four nights, just west of Tarifa.

The mission to track down Borbo was on!

Sunday 30th September

My 6:00am flight out of Luton was delayed by a frustrating two and a half hours, and by the time I had finally reached my hotel, it was late Sunday afternoon. The 3am wake up call and a day of travelling had left me quite tired, but I had to have a walk around the local area to see if anything was on the wing. The first butterfly I saw along the coastal strip was almost certainly a **False Mallow Skipper**, but distinguishing this from the Mallow Skipper requires examination of genitalia, something which I am not prepared to do, so its identity shall remain somewhat tentative.



Also flying was a slightly worn Satyrid, which initially confused me, but appears to be the dark form of the **Tree Grayling**, similar to the African *sylvicola* form.



A couple of hundred metres east of my hotel I found several skippers flying amongst some damp grassland habitat by the roadside. They were flying very fast, and landing briefly, but I managed to get my binoculars on them and was amazed to find out they were indeed **Zeller's Skippers**, my first sighting - a life tick! Getting near them with my camera was, however, impossible. They were frenetic!

An early night was called for, so I retired, setting my alarm for 07:00 so I could get out promptly tomorrow and visit my main target site.

Monday 1st October

My alarm woke me at 7am, and I leapt out of bed, enthusiastically throwing open the shutters, only to find that it was pitch black outside! Due to my geographical leap in latitude and longitude and change of time zone I had somehow miscalculated; sunrise was not scheduled until 08:17am.

Time for a hearty continental breakfast...

Soon after first light I was on the road heading towards Benalup. I usually have my Sat Nav set on "fastest route" mode, or occasionally I use "shortest route", but today it seems I had accidentally selected the "frankly most ridiculous" route option, as Mrs. Nav took me down a series of increasingly alarming farm tracks, dirt roads with loose rocks, deep holes, ridges and other assorted obstacles that even a 4x4, let alone a little Peugeot 308, may have had issues with! I was struggling to do more than 20km/h, and an alarming knocking noise towards the rear of the car had begun to get louder and louder. My estimated time of arrival was moving further and further into the future and eventually I reached a no entry sign. Things were not going well. I decided to shut Mrs. Nav up altogether and use google earth on my phone to try and work out where on earth I was. As it happens, things were about to take a turn for the better, as a rapid three point turn seemed to cure the alarming knocking noise, and a couple of minutes later after taking a random right-hander, I found myself driving over a small bridge alongside what appeared to be some highly promising habitat. I parked up, and a few minutes later I was knee-deep in **Zeller's Skippers**! There were hundreds of them on the wing. It was only 10am but they were already highly active and very difficult to follow. Photography was hugely challenging. Even when nectaring they would only sit still for a second or two before moving on, but after much perseverance over the course of several hours I managed to get a few shots.







They are very fast flyers, with a good bounce to their flight. Occasional interactions would result in tails of 5, 6 or 7 adults chasing each other at high velocity over quite a distance. The undersides of fresh individuals are a lovely gingery-bronze colour, clearly visible in flight particularly on the

females, and their subtle underwing spot marks are delightful. Getting shots of the uppersides was not all that easy, as the air temperature was up to 30 degrees and they weren't often posing with open wings. Their main habitat at this site consisted of the edges of rice fields, rivers and irrigation channels, where there was plentiful nectar and breeding habitat.



It was great spending time with these feisty characters, but it wasn't without a certain hazard. Whilst walking along the edges of the waterways, fields and roadsides, I was experiencing something rather odd. Every now and then there would be an explosive "pop" noise, accompanied by a jet of high pressure liquid either bouncing off the rim of my sunhat, splattering me in the face, or hitting me with force in the arm or leg. It was like a high powered miniature water bomb going off randomly. It took me a while to work out what was going on, but it soon became apparent that I was walking through a kind of minefield, at high risk of being under attack! The culprit, it turned out, was an inoffensive-looking plant that was growing in profusion underfoot. It was the Squirting Cucumber *Ecballium elaterium*. As the seed pods of this plant develop, the internal pressure inside the fruit builds up to such an extent that it can reach up to 27 atmospheres; that is almost 400psi of pressure! Eventually the pressure reaches critical point, and the fruit detaches from the stem, at which point all of that internal pressure ejects the seeds, along with its mucilaginous contents, at great force through the air, hitting any innocent Lepidopterists who may be within range! This can and does happen spontaneously, but a fully ripe fruit is a bit like a loaded mousetrap, and the slightest brush of a walking boot, or vibration of a footfall can trigger the device.



Hazards aside, there was much of interest out here. Other butterflies present included **Bath White**, **Clouded Yellow**, **Lang's Short-tailed Blue**, **Rosy Grizzled Skipper**, **Painted Lady**, **Small Copper**, **Common Blue** and **Mediterranean Skipper**. The birdlife was also very interesting, and there were many species of dragonfly on the wing.

Tuesday 2nd October

Today I spent the day searching along the coast for other potential sites. I was hoping to turn up a colony of Desert Orange Tip somewhere, but unfortunately much of the coast nearby was either developed as holiday resort, or was sandy rather than rocky. Even more frustrating, much of it was inaccessible as it was a designated military zone with no admittance. I found another small colony of **Zeller's Skipper** on the coast close to Zahara, where other butterflies included **Spanish Brown Argus** and a late **Cardinal**, along with the gorgeous Crimson Speckled moth.





Long-tailed Blues were the most frequently seen of the blues in most localities where I stopped.





A damp gulley, with plentiful milkweed plants, proved to be a good spot for Monarchs. I haven't seen a Monarch for a good few years, and it's easy to forget just how large and dramatic they are! It was great to spend some time watching them on the wing, egg-laying and nectaring.





Wednesday 3rd October

I spent my last full day out here in South West Spain back amongst the **Zeller's Skippers** and the Squirting Cucumbers, just enjoying the company of these delightful butterflies. This was a great finale to my European butterfly travels this year, which were nicely book-ended by travels out to the south of Spain.

Tomorrow it would be time for a long journey home to Lincolnshire...