

Butterflies of Tenerife

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

20th-26th March 2024



Tour leaders David Moore & Dave Fairhurst

Trip report by David Moore

Images kindly shared by our guests

(Images above, clockwise from top left: Plain Tiger (Dave W), Canary Blue (Andrew), Canary Skipper (Rod), African Migrant (Gillian))



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Introduction

This was the inaugural butterfly tour run by Mariposa Nature Tours, based in Puerto de la Cruz on the north coast of Tenerife and taking in many of the best areas for wildlife on the island.

Joining us for the tour were Jean, Rod, Lynn, Ainslie, Dave W, Andrew, Gillian and Mira.

What follows is a daily diary for the week, followed by species lists and a gallery of guests' images.

Day 1, 20th March

Arrivals day is always a chore, but Jean had already claimed the accolade of being Mariposa's first ever guest by arriving the day before. As the others gradually got through customs, some of the earlier guests to arrive took the liberty of relieving the accrued torment of this most miserable of European winters by stepping outside the terminal to enjoy the 24°C temperatures.



Canary Blue © Rod

Rod and Lynn had a good scout round and came back with Rod sharing an image he'd just taken of Canary Blue, one of the top targets for the week.

A small diversion was made en route to the hotel, with the group spending time at a small roundabout in Playa San Juan, looking (unsuccessfully) for the sub-Saharan species, **African Migrant** *Catopsilia florella*, which lives up to its name by flying large distances to end up on this Atlantic archipelago.

There was another African butterfly present however – the diminutive **Geranium Bronze**

Cacyreus marshalli, was seen in a nearby area of waste ground. What the residents made of half a dozen adults taking photographs opposite their windows in this less than salubrious location is anybody's guess!

It took less than an hour to move on to Puerto de la Cruz, the base for the week. The Puerto Palace hotel was largely occupied by German tour groups, but there was sufficient room to find seats at the bar to run through the proposed week's itinerary, and to enjoy a buffet meal later on.

Day 2, 21st March

The morning was rather cloudy, but we headed out undaunted to the first port of call, the Mirador de Lagrima, just west of Puerto de la Cruz. A few brief sunny intervals ensued, and during this time, David M blew his whistle to alert the group to an unexpected **Plain Tiger** *Danaus chryssipus* which was fluttering around the bamboo grasses on the other side of this busy highway.

The insect was not immediately apparent where it had gone down during a cloudy spell, but everyone eventually got a view of this large and attractive species, one that is not normally around in any numbers this early in the year.

As everybody assembled back near the vehicles, a **Canary Red Admiral** *Vanessa vulcania* flew by, but rather frustratingly did not settle. The same was true of the **Canary Large White** *Pieris cheiranthi* which was seen about 20 metres further up the road, before dropping down on the wrong side of a sheer cliff.



Canary Speckled Wood © Rod

Time to move on, and the next destination was just five minutes away: the Barranco de Ruiz. A **Canary Speckled Wood** *Pararge xiphioides* was helpfully posing wings closed, showing the definitive white marking on the hindwing undersides, very close to where the vehicles had been parked.

However, the cloud interfered with proceedings meaning that the only other butterfly of note seen closely was an impeccably behaved Plain Tiger, which was resting on a shrub in the upper terraced area of this site.

A few endemic Laurel Pigeons were seen flying in the wide gorge, and David M and Lynn were lucky to see a **Canary Brimstone** *Gonepteryx cleobule* settle, although it was at the bottom of the gorge and was out of reach of camera lenses.

Although this brief visit was a little underwhelming, the barranco is fairly close to the hotel so everybody knew it would be visited again, hopefully in better weather conditions.

The afternoon was spent at an altitude site, Las Lajas, due to light rain and cool temperatures affecting the north of the island, including the Canary Blue site at Santiago del Teide.

It was pleasantly sunny on the drive along the higher plateau, but frustratingly that sunshine turned into mist upon arrival at Las Lajas itself. There were occasional short breaks in the cloud but these were insufficient to elicit any butterfly activity, although the group did get to see the impressive Blue Chaffinches, and Gillian even managed to get an image of one on a picnic table next to an Atlantic Canary.

A decision was made to return to the hotel via the other route down from Mt Teide. This went well to begin with as, at 2,000 metres altitude, the group was above the clouds. However, as the descent was made, heavy rain began to fall, something the islands had not seen for some considerable while.



Blue Chaffinch (and Atlantic Canary) © Gillian

At one point during this storm, the temperature on the vehicle's gauge read an astonishing 6°C, meaning the group were grateful for the somewhat warmer conditions that awaited us upon the return to the hotel.

Day 3, 22nd March

Looking at the mountains first thing in the morning, it was clear to all that something extraordinary had happened overnight. There was a covering of snow down to 1,000 metres above sea level. A little research revealed that this rare phenomenon was known locally as 'La Dana', an isolated depression at high levels, which brings strong winds and heavy rain.

What it also did was to bring the first snow to cover Mt Teide for over a year and the roads at altitude were consequently closed for the next 48 hours in the interests of safety.

With all that in mind, it was decided that the best option for today was to visit the Palmetum in the capital, Santa Cruz, which is right on the coast and likely to be least affected by adverse weather.

So it proved, with the group finally enjoying a dose of warm sunshine with little interference from any clouds. There were several tiny **African Grass Blues** *Zizeeria knysna* flying around the manicured lawns within the palmetum, but soon after, the group were making the acquaintance of another butterfly, this one being at the polar opposite of the size scale.



Monarch *Danaus plexippus* is a hugely impressive butterfly, and the group were treated to as many as ten individuals cavorting around the tropical milkweed, which is their larval foodplant.

There was even a nearby refreshment stall so those who wished could have a coffee, cold drink, or an ice cream whilst watching these insects gracefully soar around, often flying into the seating area before returning to the flowers.

After taking in this spectacle, it was decided to leave a little earlier than planned to reach the next site at Tacoronte before the weather closed in.

There was a minor obstacle when it was found that the road to the site was closed, but an alternative was quickly established, with the group arriving to rather dull conditions, although this didn't stop Andrew from finding a **Painted Lady** *Vanessa cardui* in the meadow.

A few **Small Whites** *Pieris rapae* were also seen, but within half an hour drops of rain began to fall and the group had no option but to retreat to the vehicles in the nearby car park.

Dave F then advised a short drive to a site he knew for the endemic Bolle's Pigeon. This turned out to be successful, with a few seen flying at Mirador Pico del Ingles. Ainslie's mobile SatNav later enabled the vehicles to quickly get back to the motorway, with just a short wait at some roadworks near one of the villages.

Again, there was little promise of an improvement in the weather, so the group returned to the hotel, from where a few walked down to the local barranco, finding a female **Bath White** *Pontia daplidice* amongst the scrub near the bridge.

Day 4, 23rd March

The day began quite promisingly with relatively bright skies, so the group travelled to possibly the best area on the island, Charcas de Erjos, in the hope that conditions would not deteriorate.

The sun was still in situ upon arrival, but there were grey clouds threatening to obscure it, and that they did, but not before David M had found a **Long-tailed Blue** *Lampides boeticus* seen on the way down the track from the entrance. A little later, the week's first **Clouded Yellow** *Colias crocea* was sighted too.

Sadly, from then things only got worse from a weather perspective, meaning that the group had to resort to a Plan B, which involved an unscheduled trip to Icod de los Vinos, where the majority visited the mariposario whilst the rest went for a wander around the adjacent Parque del Drago Milenario.



Laurel Pigeon © Andrew

Understandably, there was no shortage of butterflies in the mariposario, but a few were also seen by those who entered Drago Park, with Canary Speckled Wood being a welcome find.

As is often the case, the skies were brighter near the coast, so a further stop was made at Barranco de Ruiz. Quite a few Laurel Pigeons were seen, perhaps grounded by the dank conditions, but skies eventually cleared up, and a few more Plain Tigers were seen high on the

terraces, with a handful of Small Whites active by the car park.

Once again, after returning to the hotel, some of the group visited the local barranco and saw a Monarch there, as well as another Bath White.

Day 5, 24th March

This turned out to be the most productive day of the trip, with the sunshine generally winning the battle against the clouds, meaning that an hour and a half was spent in pleasant conditions at Charcas de Erjos in the morning.

Long-tailed Blues were around in reasonable numbers, with **Small Copper** *Lycaena phlaeas* also putting in an appearance. Sadly, there was no sign of the main target, Canary Red Admiral, but Andrew took a long distance image of what



Small Copper © Jean



American Painted Lady © Andrew

he believed was a Painted Lady. It was only after scrutinising his images once the holiday was over that the insect's identity was definitively confirmed: the Holy Grail – **American Painted Lady** *Vanessa virginiensis*, without doubt the hardest species to find on this island.

Following lunch which included a brief fly-by from a Canary Red Admiral, conditions seemed stable, so it was decided to visit the

cemetery at Santiago del Teide once again. This was the third time the group had made their way to this location, and within five minutes of leaving the vehicles Dave F spotted the main target, a female **Canary Blue** *Leptotes webbianus* resting on a branch of a desiccated shrub.

Over the course of the next 40 minutes or so two additional males were also found, with Jean very helpfully alerting the others after finding the first.

With such success within such a short space of time, the group were able to head east of Puerto de la Cruz to the Jardines del Marquesado de la Quinta Roja, which is situated in the pretty town of La Orotava.

Shortly after entering the gardens via the main gate, two Canary Red Admirals were spotted, with both settling, although the first one was frustratingly above head-height in a pine tree. Gillian headed off to where the other one had flown, and found it basking beautifully on a pale wall, where it stayed for several minutes allowing everyone to finally get close to this fabulous species.



Canary Blue © Gillian



Canary Red Admiral © Gillian

A handful of Monarchs were also on the wing, whilst Andrew found a way to enter some waste ground adjacent to the gardens which looked promising. The rest of the group duly followed, and were treated to several Canary Speckled Woods posing for photographs.

There was still time for the entire group to go to the local barranco again in Puerto de la Cruz, this time in the vehicles. It was lovely

and warm down there, and several African Grass Blues and a Bath White were seen, but despite some acacia bushes being present, there was no sign of **Desert Babul Blue** *Azanus ubaldus* which was reported from this location the previous year.

Thirteen species of butterfly had been recorded today, which was the best daily tally of the week and, unsurprisingly, coincided with the kindest weather. This was a glimpse of what might have been on other days had the weather not been so unseasonably unsettled.

Day 5, 25th March

It was hard for the guides to decide where to visit first this morning, but given the low cloud, David M opted for the eastern site near to the capital, as its relative proximity to the coast might prove preferable to a high altitude site in the northwest.



Canary Skipper © Dave W

Thankfully, the skies remained largely clear throughout the visit to Parque de las Mesas, although there was a tense moment when three police officers arrived to ask what the group were doing on land with a sign 'Prohibido el Paso' at the entrance.

Happily, they were satisfied with the guides' explanation and indeed followed the group after Dave F called out that he had found the main target, **Canary Skipper** *Thymelicus christi* about 30m away.

This female was very approachable and never flew more than 10m in the time the group were watching her, and as a bonus the week's first (and only) **Southern Brown Argus** *Aricia cramera* suddenly turned up, wowing the group with its impressive, broad orange upperwing lunules.

The next journey was to be the longest of the week, from the eastern end of the island all the way to Teno Alto on the northwest peninsula. The cloud at altitude was evident well before the turn off was reached and sadly the group were unable to rise above it, with a fresh breeze rolling the cloud up the hillside where the intention had been to find **Tenerife Green-striped White** *Euchloe eversi*.



Southern Brown Argus © Jean



After an hour or so plodding along the track in a vain attempt to find a roosting butterfly, it was decided to move down to somewhere warmer and sunnier – the Barranco de Ruiz again.

Once again, there were Plain Tigers found on the upper terrace. Clearly, this spot is attractive to them, so much so that two mating pairs were seen on the occasion of this visit.

A few more Laurel Pigeons were also seen, although they seemed more reluctant to perch given the sunny conditions.

A settled Emperor dragonfly was a popular attraction, with even a group of local Spaniards taking a look, and another Canary Brimstone was seen but sadly never settled.

One bonus that was to pay dividends the next day was bumping into two other butterfly enthusiasts from the UK, Dave P and Keith W, the first of whom relayed exciting information of how the pair had seen double figure numbers of African Migrants at Playa San Juan earlier that day, including several that were nectaring in gardens close to the roundabout.

Day 7, 26th March

With all guests' scheduled flights departing in the late afternoon, there was no need to rush in the morning, so the group bade farewell to the hotel just after 9:30am before heading off one last time to Charcas de Erjos.

Conditions were rather miserable upon arrival, with thick cloud and drops of rain. That didn't deter the bulk of the group, who braved the 13°C temperatures to look for birds, doing so quite successfully.

Everyone got back to the vehicles promptly and now it was a case of crossing fingers that the bad weather didn't extend all the way south to the next stop at Playa San Juan.

Thankfully, skies were largely clear upon arrival but a strong wind was blowing as the group set off to the gardens where the African Migrants had been seen by others the previous day.

Sure enough, there was one individual perched on some flowers at a property on the corner of the road. Whilst the yellowish underside suggested it was a female, its pale upperside colour, seen in flight, seemed more like that of the male. Some subsequent research found that there is a pale female form which resembles the male's uppersides, so both this one, and one of the two later seen at the roundabout, were females.



The larval foodplant, cassia, was being investigated by this second female. She landed frequently, and a review of images taken showed ovipositing.

There was a worrying moment when this individual was swept into the road by the strong winds, colliding with the windscreen of an oncoming van. One of the leaders saw it drop to the floor and managed to safely recover it – happily it flew off strongly when released by the flowers with seemingly no ill effects.

With the excitement now over, it was time to head back to the airport to depart for home.

Footnote and acknowledgements

It is scarcely believable that all target species were seen (with the exception of one) during a week where the weather on the island would have been considered cold and wet even in deepest winter, let alone on the cusp of April.

There had been no forewarning prior to arrival of this weather event, and it effectively rendered altitude sites out of range after the first day, which is the reason why Tenerife Green-striped White was not found.

Even near to the coast, conditions were generally less than ideal. The winter had been exceptionally warm and dry by Canary Island standards, with much of the plant life suffering from prolonged water deprivation when the group arrived. Similarly, those conditions seemed to have adversely affected the numbers of butterflies, with only Small White seen in three figures.

It was a case of hard graft to find many of the others, with some species turning up in single figure numbers, or even just one individual.

Mariposa would therefore like to thank all eight guests who endured so much yet found the energy, the commitment and the relentless positivity to track down the most coveted species. It was just reward for everybody that almost all were eventually found.

The scenery was wonderful as ever on this volcanic island, although it was a shame that the clouds largely rendered visibility much poorer than it is usually here.

One thing is certain, the group were exposed to conditions that were as bad as they could ever be at this time of year and yet still emerged successful with the butterflies and birds recorded and observed, thanks to a great team effort and never-ending enthusiasm.

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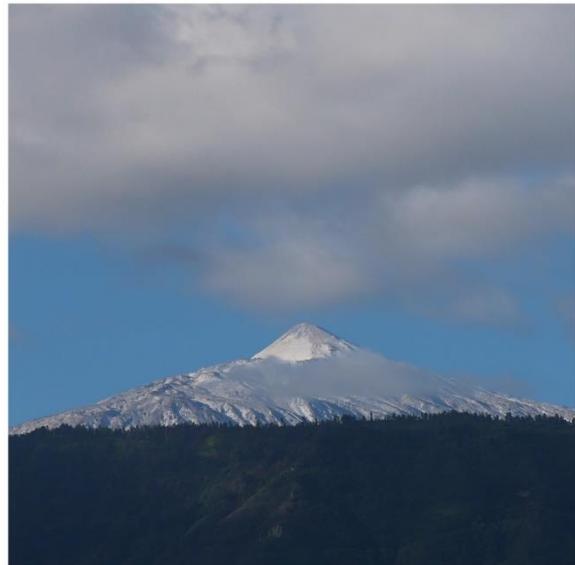
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Guests' Galleries

All images that follow were kindly shared by tour participants.



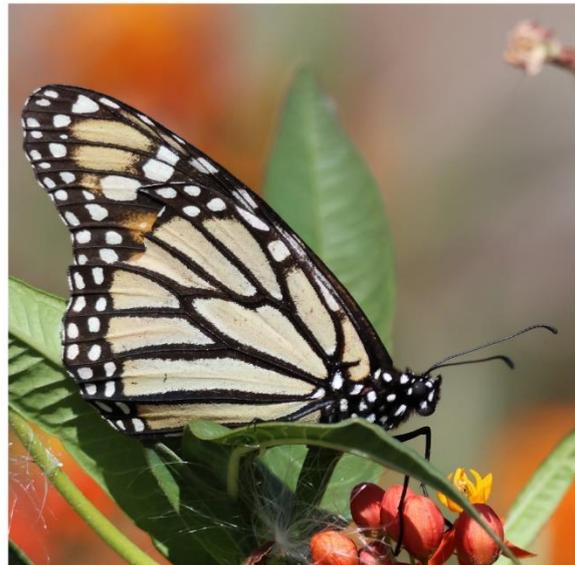
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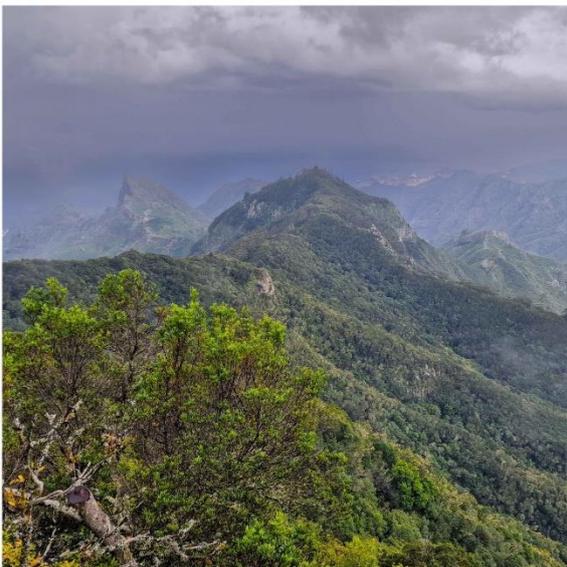
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