

Butterflies of the Picos de Europa

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

12th-19th July 2024

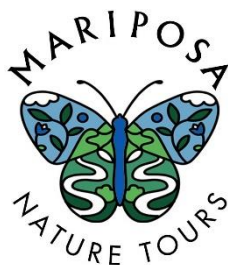


Tour leaders Pau Lucio & Paul Selby

Trip report by Paul Selby

Images kindly shared by our guests

(Images above kindly shared by Bill, clockwise from top left: Scarce Copper, Chapman's Ringlet, Cleopatra, Gavarnie Blue)



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Introduction

While between our leaders we've been visiting the Picos de Europa for years, this was the first Mariposa Nature Tours trip to this incredibly biodiverse, green, and relatively unknown part of Spain. It was based in a lovely family run hotel, in the village of Boca de Huergano.

The guests joining us were Bill, Don, Catherine and Frances.

Day 1, Friday 12th July – Arrivals day

Having come from different places, everyone congregated at Santander airport arrivals lounge in the mid-afternoon, and we were able to set off for our hotel at roughly 3pm. It was grey and relatively cool in Santander, but as we drove south and crossed over the mountain range, we entered the sunshine.



About an hour into our drive, we stopped off at a site near the Embalse de Aguilar reservoir, a known site for Forster's Furry Blue *Polyommatus fulgens*, and possibly the furthest west location for this Spanish endemic.

While we had no luck with this primary target, almost certainly because of the late season, we did get the chance to familiarise ourselves with some of the birds and butterflies that we'd be seeing quite a lot of during the week. For

example, Clouded Yellow *Colias crocea* and Berger's Clouded Yellow *Colias alfacariensis*, Common Blue *Polyommatus icarus* and Chapman's Blue *Polyommatus thersites*, Silver-studded Blue *Plebejus argus*, Southern Heath Fritillary *Melitaea celadussa*, Pearly Heath *Coenonympha arcania* and the Spanish *iphoides* form of Chestnut Heath *Coenonympha glycerion*.

On the bird front, we saw and heard our first Serin, as well as Griffin Vulture and Black Kite.

After about an hour at the site, we then set off for the remaining 90-minute drive, arriving at our hotel in Boca de Huergano just before 7pm. We had a quick unpack and freshen up, before the first of our enjoyable dinners.

We also got the chance to introduce ourselves properly to each other for the first time, and shared our hopes for the exciting week ahead.

Day 2, Saturday 13th July – Argovejo and Cremenos

After a long day for most of us the day before, we had a relatively gentle first day today, which proved sunny and warm throughout.

Our first stop was in the beautiful village of Argovejo, where we walked down a track and back, over the course of the morning. Here we saw Wood White *Leptidea sinapsis*, Southern

Brown Argus *Aricia cramera*, Turquoise Blue *Polyommatus dorylas*, Silver-washed Fritillary *Argynnis paphia*, High Brown Fritillary *Fabriciana adippe*, Piedmont Ringlet *Erebia meolans*, Rock Grayling *Hipparchia alcyone*, Grayling *Hipparchia semele*, and Great Banded Grayling *Brintesia circe*.



Rock Grayling © Paul

We stopped briefly for a coffee, before having lunch at a picnic site near Cremenés. After lunch, we spent 30 minutes exploring around that location, where we saw our first Cardinal *Argynnis pandora* of the week.

It was then only a quick five-minute drive to another site near Cremenés, where we did a slow

circular walk over the course of the afternoon. Here we saw Spanish Chalkhill Blue *Polyommatus albicans*, and spent a good amount of time differentiating Meadow Brown *Maniola jurtina* from Dusky Meadow Brown *Hyponephele lycaon*, as well as identifying all the hairstreaks.

Don also spotted a fresh Large Tortoiseshell *Nymphalis polychloros*.

Doing our daily list at the hotel before dinner in the evening, the group total for the day was 57 butterfly species, a fantastic number, taking us to 61 species so far.



Spanish Chalkhill Blue © Paul

Day 3, Sunday 14th July – Yugueros and Las Salas

Our morning was spent near Yugueros, our furthest location south and west all week, which gave us very different habitat to explore.

The first stop was along a road, where a large colony of Bee-eaters are known to breed. They put on a fabulous display for us, a delight to see so many of this most colourful of European birds.



Blue-spot Hairstreak © Paul

The second stop was a bit further along the road, near a monastery. We saw our first Spanish Purple Hairstreak *Laeosopsis roboris* of the week, our only Blue-spot Hairstreak *Satyrium spini* of the week, in addition to several grayling species.

We again stopped briefly for coffee in Cremenés, before having lunch at the nearby picnic spot.

The afternoon was a walk along the river from the village of Las Salas, where we parked. Here

we saw Lang's Short-tailed Blue *Leptotes pirithous*, Southern White Admiral *Limenitis reducta*, and Large Wall Brown *Lasiommata maera*. Near the end of the day, we suddenly saw a very large butterfly, which landed only briefly by the track, a Lesser Purple Emperor *Apatura ilia*.

That said, there were many less butterflies around than the previous year at this location, in terms of both sheer numbers and species alike. This reflected the butterfly watching experience across much of Western Europe during 2024.

Despite the lower numbers, we still saw 55 species of butterfly over the course of the day, taking us to 72 species overall.

Day 4, Monday 15th July – Valdeon



Prior to breakfast, we had an early morning walk in our village hotel, with the specific target being birds. While there was occasional drizzle, the tail end of an overnight weather front, we still saw a good number of species, including White Stork, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Red-backed Shrike, Sand Martin, Nuthatch, Black Redstart, Common Redstart, Grey Wagtail, and Dipper.

After breakfast, we spent the whole day in the Valdeon, at various sites. On the way to the first main site, we stopped briefly at a viewpoint where we were able to take in our first views of the spectacular and beautiful Picos massif.

We then moved on to a very sensitive site, known for the incredibly rare (in Spain) Woodland Brown *Lopinga achine*. Despite extensive searching, as part of a survey Pau had arranged for us to do, none of us saw any of our target species.

However, we did see Marbled Skipper *Carcharodus lavatherae*, Short-tailed Blue *Cupido argiades*, Adonis Blue *Polyommatus belargus*, and Dark Green Fritillary *Speyeria aglaja*.

Bill was particularly pleased to photograph a resting Cleopatra *Gonepteryx cleopatra*, one of his main aims of the week. While he had seen this butterfly before, he'd never had one stay still enough to photograph.



We stopped briefly at the site of the last Wolf trap ever to be used in Spain, and then briefly again in Posada de Valdeon for coffee, before having lunch at a picnic site nearby.



The afternoon was then spent near Puerto de Pandetrave, one of the best sites for Chapman's Ringlet *Erebia palarica*, the largest *Erebia* ringlet in Europe, and a Picos endemic. All of us got great views, although photographs were harder to take, as they were quite active in the hot sunshine. Also seen here were our only Apollo *Parnassius apollo* of the week, plus Purple-edged Copper *Lycaena hippothoe*.

Our total butterfly species for the day was 53, with nine of them being new, taking us to a running total for the week of 81.

Day 5, Tuesday 16th July – Puerto de Las Senales and La Una

Our first stop in the morning was at Puerto de Las Senales. This had been an excellent site the previous year, but this year high cloud was obscuring the sun, and very few butterflies were flying. Also frustratingly, an excellent pond for dragonflies had been trashed by cattle and horses!

That said, we did get our best views of Knapweed Fritillary *Melitaea phoebe*, Meadow Fritillary *Melitaea parthenoides* and Provencal Fritillary *Melitaea deione* of the week, allowing us to discuss the key identification features.



We moved on, stopping for coffee in Acebedo, before our lunch stop near La Una. Here we had our first views of Dusky Large Blue *Phengaris nausithaus*, an extremely rare butterfly in Spain. They are very confiding, especially when feeding on their favoured *sanguisorba* foodplant, allowing us to take some good photographs, and even a video of Pau with one, which was posted on the Mariposa YouTube site!

After lunch, we walked along a track and back, and it actually got quite hot. Purple-edged Copper *Lycaena hippothoe* was seen, as were both Lesser Marbled Fritillary *Brenthis ino* and Marbled Fritillary *Brenthis daphne*.

Day 6, Wednesday 17th July – Fuente De

This was our longest drive of the week, but well worth it for the spectacular views and higher altitude species.

Having booked the cable car ahead of our arrival, we were on the mountain plateau by 11am, allowing us to take a leisurely stroll to the scree areas. There were large numbers of Griffin Vulture to be seen up here, plus a small number of Egyptian Vulture too.

Butterfly numbers were low, but we did quite quickly find one of our main targets of the week, Gavarnie Blue *Agriades pyrenaicus*, on the main track. Many of the walkers passing by were also interested to see what we had stopped to take so many photographs of!



Bill, Paul and Pau walked ahead, and did their best to identify every *Erebia* that flew past. Only Piedmont Ringlet *Erebia meolans* was confirmed sadly. Paul did see what appeared to be an all-black *Erebia* in flight through his binoculars, but it was too far away to confirm this as one of our other main targets, Lefebvre's Ringlet *Erebia lefebvre*.

We also failed to see Wallcreeper, albeit we're confident it was there, if we'd walked a further kilometre. In our binoculars, we could see a large number of birdwatchers focusing their own binoculars on the scree, where a pair of Wallcreeper are known to breed.

On the way back to the cable car, the group split in two. Paul and Pau took some uneven ground to a dried out pond. Here there were good numbers of Gavarnie Blue. But there were also large numbers of Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus armoricanus* too, as well as our only Chalkhill Blue *Polyommatus coridon* of the week. The highlight however was a single freshly emerged Western Brassy Ringlet *Erebia arvernensis*.

The rest of the group took the main track, arriving earlier at the cable car station, seeing a very close fly past of a Lammergeier! Don took some amazing photos, including one with a bone in its talons.

A thoroughly enjoyable day all round, we celebrated with some refreshments.



Day 7, Thursday 18th July – Portilla de La Reina and Puerto de San Glorio

Our final full day, our first stop was at another good Dusky Large Blue site. There were good numbers, which was fantastic to see. Here we also saw Esper's Marbled White *Melanargia russiae*, an extremely elderly Glanville Fritillary *Melitaea cinxia* and Red-underwing Skipper *Spialia sertorius*.



After a brief coffee stop, we drove on to Puerto de San Glorio, where we had lunch, and then spent an hour exploring the plateau. There were good numbers of Chapman's Ringlet here also.

We had a shortened afternoon, to allow for some guests to pack before dinner, so we stopped at a site Pau had never visited before, but always wanted to, nearby to where a colony of Bog Fritillary had gone extinct a few years previously.

While we didn't see that species, we did see Scarce Copper *Lycaena virgaureae*, amongst a number of other more common species.

Our list had reached 90 species of butterfly by the time we did it that evening. We also spent time discussing our individual highlights of the week, which were many, but included the scenery, the convivial company, the relaxed pace including coffee stops, and of course the butterflies and birds.

Day 8, Friday 20th July – Departure day

Paul and Don were up very early, to ensure Don was back at Santander airport in time for his flights.

With a slightly more relaxed schedule, the remaining guests were able to visit a site on their way back to Santander. This stop proved fruitful for birds in particular, with Montagu's Harrier, Booted Eagle, and Tawny Pipit all seen. Also, one final new butterfly species for the week, Ripart's Anomalous Blue *Polyommatus ripartii*.

With the guests safely at the airport on time, it marked the end of an excellent week.

**Footnote and acknowledgements**

The total butterfly species count for the trip was 91, which is a decent number given the late season, estimated to be two to three weeks later than a "normal" year. (A trip led by Pau at

the same time the previous year had reached 114 butterfly species). Despite the smaller species count, we still saw most of the key target species, including Dusky Large Blue *Phengaris nausithaus*, Gavarne Blue *Agriades pyrenaicus*, and Chapman's Ringlet *Erebia palarica*.

We also saw or heard a large number of birds, totalling 81 species. An excellent number, given many birds have stopped singing by mid-July.

As ever with these trips, it isn't just about the wildlife. Our hotel was very good, with excellent food at breakfast and dinner, as well as the packed lunches. And the small, friendly group looked after each other, sharing knowledge and sightings generously.



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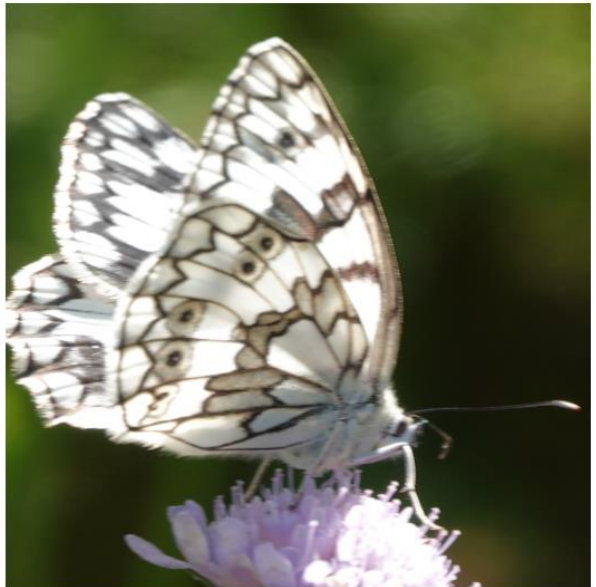
BUTTERFLIES OF THE PICOS DE EUROPA 12-19 JULY 2024									
	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	Butterflies								
1	Mallow Skipper <i>Carcharodus alceae</i>								
2	Marbled Skipper <i>Carcharodus lavatherae</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Tufted Marbled Skipper <i>Carcharodus flocciferus</i>								
4	Red-underwing Skipper <i>Spialia sertorius</i>		✓					✓	
5	Sage Skipper <i>Muschampia proto</i>								
6	Safflower Skipper <i>Pyrgus carthami</i>								
7	Southern Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus malvoides</i>								
8	Olive Skipper <i>Pyrgus serratulae</i>								
9	Rosy Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus onopordi</i>								
10	Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus armoricanus</i>						✓	✓	
11	Large Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus alveus</i>								
12	Essex Skipper <i>Thymelicus lineola</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓	
13	Small Skipper <i>Thymelicus sylvestris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
14	Lulworth Skipper <i>Thymelicus action</i>			✓	✓				
15	Large Skipper <i>Ochlodes Sylvanus</i>								
16	Apollo <i>Parnassius Apollo</i>				✓				
17	Iberian Scarce Swallowtail <i>Iphiclides feisthamelii</i>		✓						
18	Swallowtail <i>Papilio Machaon</i>			✓	✓				
19	Wood White <i>Leptidea sinapis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
20	Mountain Dappled White <i>Euchloe simplonia</i>								
21	Black-veined White <i>Aporia crataegi</i>		✓						
22	Large White <i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	
23	Small White <i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Green-veined White <i>Pieris napi</i>		✓	✓	✓				
25	Bath White <i>Pontia daplidice</i>				✓				
26	Mountain Clouded Yellow <i>Colias phicomone</i>								
27	Clouded Yellow <i>Colias crocea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Berger's Clouded Yellow <i>Colias alfacariensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
29	Brimstone <i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
30	Cleopatra <i>Gonepteryx Cleopatra</i>				✓				
31	Small Copper <i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		✓		✓	✓			
32	Scarce Copper <i>Lycaena virgaureae</i>			✓	✓			✓	
33	Sooty Copper <i>Lycaena tityrus</i>								
34	Purple-edged Copper <i>Lycaena hippothoe</i>				✓	✓		✓	
35	Spanish Purple Hairstreak <i>Laeosopis roboris</i>			✓	✓				
36	White-letter Hairstreak <i>Satyrrium w-album</i>								
37	Blue-spot Hairstreak <i>Satyrrium spini</i>			✓					
38	Ilex Hairstreak <i>Satyrrium ilicis</i>								
39	Sloe Hairstreak <i>Satyrrium acacia</i>		✓	✓					
40	Long-tailed Blue <i>Lampides boeticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
41	Lang's Short-tailed Blue <i>Leptotes pirithous</i>			✓	✓	✓			
42	Small Blue <i>Cupido minimus</i>						✓		

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
43	Short-tailed Blue <i>Cupido argiades</i>				✓				
44	Holly Blue <i>Celastrina argiolus</i>	✓		✓		✓			
45	Green-underside Blue <i>Glaucopsyche alexis</i>								
46	Dusky Large Blue <i>Phengaris nausithous</i>					✓		✓	
47	Silver-studded Blue <i>Plebejus argus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
48	Idas Blue <i>Plebejus idas</i>		✓						
49	Gavarnie Blue <i>Agriades pyrenaicus</i>						✓		
50	Southern Brown Argus <i>Aricia cramera</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
51	Brown Argus <i>Aricia agestis</i>								
52	Mazarine Blue <i>Cyaniris semiargus</i>						✓	✓	
53	Escher's Blue <i>Polyommatus escheri</i>								
54	Turquoise Blue <i>Polyommatus dorylas</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
55	Chapman's Blue <i>Polyommatus thersites</i>	✓		✓			✓		
56	Common Blue <i>Polyommatus icarus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
57	Ripart's Anomalous Blue <i>Polyommatus ripartii</i>								✓
58	Adonis Blue <i>Polyommatus bellargus</i>		✓		✓				
59	Chalkhill Blue <i>Polyommatus coridon</i>						✓		
60	Spanish Chalkhill Blue <i>Polyommatus albicans</i>		✓						
61	Silver-washed Fritillary <i>Argynnis paphia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
62	Cardinal <i>Argynnis pandora</i>		✓	✓	✓				
63	Dark Green Fritillary <i>Speyeria aglaja</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
64	High Brown Fritillary <i>Fabriciana adippe</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
65	Queen of Spain Fritillary <i>Issoria lathonia</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
66	Lesser Marbled Fritillary <i>Brenthis ino</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
67	Marbled Fritillary <i>Brenthis daphne</i>		✓			✓			
68	Twin-spot Fritillary <i>Brenthis hecate</i>								
69	Pearl-bordered Fritillary <i>Boloria euphrosyne</i>								
70	Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary <i>Boloria selene</i>		✓		✓			✓	
71	Weaver's Fritillary <i>Boloria dia</i>								
72	Glanville Fritillary <i>Melitaea cinxia</i>							✓	
73	Knapweed Fritillary <i>Melitaea phoebe</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓	
74	Lesser Spotted Fritillary <i>Melitaea trivia</i>								
75	Spotted Fritillary <i>Melitaea didyma</i>								
76	Provençal Fritillary <i>Melitaea deione</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
77	Meadow Fritillary <i>Melitaea parthenoides</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
78	Heath Fritillary <i>Melitaea athalia</i>								
79	Red Admiral <i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	✓	✓		✓				
80	Painted Lady <i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓						
81	Peacock <i>Aglais io</i>		✓	✓					
82	Small Tortoiseshell <i>Aglais urticae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
83	Comma <i>Polygonia c-album</i>		✓	✓		✓			
84	Large Tortoiseshell <i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>		✓	✓					
85	White Admiral <i>Limenitis camilla</i>								
86	Southern White Admiral <i>Limenitis reducta</i>			✓					

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
87	Speckled Wood <i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
88	Wall Brown <i>Lasiommata megera</i>		✓	✓					
89	Large Wall Brown <i>Lasiommata maera</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	
90	Woodland Brown <i>Lopinga achine</i>								
91	Pearly Heath <i>Coenonympha arcania</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
92	Chestnut Heath <i>Coenonympha glycerion</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
93	Dusky Heath <i>Coenonympha dorus</i>								
94	Small Heath <i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	
95	Gatekeeper <i>Pyronia tithonus</i>		✓		✓				
96	Spanish Gatekeeper <i>Pyronia bathseba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				
97	Ringlet <i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>		✓	✓	✓				
98	Meadow Brown <i>Maniola jurtina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
99	Dusky Meadow Brown <i>Hyponephele lycaon</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
100	Mountain Ringlet <i>Erebia epiphron</i>								
101	de Prunner's Ringlet <i>Erebia triaria</i>								
102	Western Brassy Ringlet <i>Erebia arvernensis</i>						✓		
103	Lefebvre's Ringlet <i>Erebia lefebvrei</i>								
104	Piedmont Ringlet <i>Erebia meolans</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
105	Chapman's Ringlet <i>Erebia palarica</i>				✓	✓		✓	
106	Esper's Marbled White <i>Melanargia russiae</i>		✓		✓			✓	
107	Marbled White <i>Melanargia galathea</i>				✓				
108	Iberian Marbled White <i>Melanargia lachesis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
109	Rock Grayling <i>Hipparchia hermione</i>		✓	✓				✓	
110	Grayling <i>Hipparchia semele</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				
111	Striped Grayling <i>Hipparchia fidia</i>								
112	Great Banded Grayling <i>Brintesia circe</i>		✓	✓					
#	Mediterranean Skipper <i>Gegenes nostradamus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
#	Purple-shot Copper <i>Lycaena alciphron</i>		✓						
#	False Ilex Hairstreak <i>Satyrrium esculi</i>			✓					
#	Baton Blue <i>Pseudophilotes baton</i>		✓						
#	Southern Mountain Argus <i>Aricia montensis</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	
#	False Heath Fritillary <i>Melitaea diamina</i>				✓	✓		✓	
#	Southern Heath Fritillary <i>Melitaea celadussa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
#	Lesser Purple Emperor <i>Apatura ilia</i>			✓					
	Daily total:	17	57	55	53	35	19	40	
	Running total:	17	61	72	81	82	89	90	91

Galleries

All images that follow were kindly shared by tour participants & leaders



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