Spring Butterflies of the French Pyrenees

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report 20th-27th May 2026



Tour leader David Moore

Trip report by David Moore

(Images, clockwise from top left: Black-veined White © Jason; Pearly Heath © Dave;

Pyrenean Clouded Apollo © Ivor; Provence Chalkhill Blue © Kevin)

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Introduction

This popular and long-standing tour to the Eastern French Pyrenees takes in some of the butterfly species that can be found in this scenic and wildlife-diverse region of France.

The base for the week was in Vernet-les-Bains, a charming spa town in the shadow of Mt Canigou, the 2,784m peak which dominates the local landscape

Joining us for the tour were Dave & Jenny, Kevin, Sally, Jason, Ivor and Frank.

What follows is a daily diary for the week, followed by species lists and galleries.

Day 1, 20th May

Arrivals day went smoothly, with the small and rather quiet Perpignan airport being ideal in which to find one another, and the group were on their way by early afternoon and, following check-in at our hotel, David drove everybody up to the nearby Col de Jou.

The weather was fine and sunny with warm temperatures, and there was no shortage of butterfly action, with the first desirable coming along in the form of Chequered Blue *Scolitantides orion*, in a sheltered corner of the main track.


Chequered Blue © Kevin

A handful of fiercely bright Adonis Blue *Polyommatus bellargus* were active in the same area, whilst every so often, a pale lemon-hued male Provence Orange Tip *Anthocharis euphinoides* would briskly saunter by in search of a female.

Knapweed Fritillary *Melitaea phoebe* was patrolling the track, joined by close cousins Glanville *Melitaea cinxia* and Spotted Fritillary *Melitaea didyma*.

In amongst the cistus flowers there were a number of Green Hairstreak *Callophrys rubi*, along with the occasional Iberian Scarce Swallowtail *Iphiclides feisthamelii*.

Other notables were Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus armoricanus*, Clouded Yellow Colias crocea, and Large Wall *Lasiommata maera*.

In little more than an hour and a half, the group had racked up 31 different species in very pleasant surroundings. With the weather forecast set fair for the forthcoming days it promised to be an excellent week.

Day 2, 21st May

A calm, bright sunny morning gave rise to a sense of anticipation as the group drove up to the montane plateau in the direction of Andorra.

The first stop was at a series of grassy meadows close to the mountain village of Eyne. This site is productive due to the variety of habitat, which includes light woodland, scrubby, dry hillsides higher up and damp meadows at the bottom.

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It wasn't long before the first Marsh Fritillary *Euphydryas aurinia* was spotted, nectaring from dandelions in the middle field. This was the *debilis* form, smaller and darker and only found at higher altitudes.

An array of skippers were patrolling where the base of the hillside met the middle field. With the amount of salad burnet present, it was no surprise to find Red Underwing Skipper *Spialia sartorius* in good numbers and, of the larger members of this group, Safflower Skipper *Pyrgus carthami* and Large Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus alveus* were also present.

With the wild narcissi proving to be a delightful distraction, the group enjoyed a good hour here, with other desirables including Mazarine Blue *Cyaniris semiargus*, Sooty Copper *Lycaena tityrus*, Meadow Fritillary *Melitaea parthenoides*, and De Prunner's Ringlet *Erebia triaria*.


Sooty Copper © Dave

Beautiful though the location was, it was time to move on to Porte Puymorens, to a small, unassuming, boggy field, where Violet Copper *Lycaena helle* has a colony.

The lek at the bottom edge of the field was precarious underfoot as usual, but there were two males in this area, often jousting with any Green Hairstreak *Callophrys rubi* which provided irritation to them.

Elsewhere in the area, there were Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae* feasting from the yellow flowers at the side of the railway station, along with Pearl-bordered Fritillary *Boloria euphrosyne*.


Violet Copper © Kevin

Lunch was taken here before the group made their way back in the direction from whence they came, only this time stopping at Eyne's neighbouring village, Llo.

The vehicles were parked next to a stone tower, with some of the group heading back towards the road where Osiris Blue *Cupido osiris* was found amongst the copious sainfoin growing in the gullies.

Further up the hillside, those who walked along the dry track were rewarded with Tufted Marbled Skipper *Carcharodus flocciferus*. Elsewhere, there was Duke of Burgundy *Hamaeris lucina* to enjoy, and the week's first Turquoise Blue *Polyommatus dorylas*.

En route back to the hotel, a further stop was made at Carancas Gorge, but sadly the bar was shut and given the relative lack of butterflies it was decided to move on as by now conditions had become rather hot.

It had been an immensely enjoyable day, with 48 species being recorded. The total for the week's trip was already 56.

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Day 3, 22nd May


Dusky Heath © Kevin

The important factor about today's weather was the lack of wind. This made an ascent of the 501masl hill at Forca Real too tempting to refuse, as calm conditions are excellent for hilltopping butterflies.

Upon arrival, there were several Swallowtail *Papilio machaon* flying around the hermitage at the summit, along with their close cousins Iberian Scarce Swallowtail.

In addition, there was a Cardinal *Argynnis pandora* up there, as well as False Ilex Hairstreak *Satyrium esculi*, Long-tailed Blue *Lampides boeticus*, Blue-spot Hairstreak *Satyrium spini*, and Dusky Heath *Coenonympha dorus*.

But the stars of the morning were undoubtedly the two highly active Two-tailed Pasha, which spent the entire time chasing one another around, although one of them was tempted onto Jason's trainers, a landing perch from which it felt unable to leave for quite some time.


Two-tailed Pasha © Jason

Sally also had one on the palm of her hand after being challenged to outstretch her arm by Frank. It was quite a performance!

On the way down, lunch was taken at a scrubby area and the group were treated to several different species, including Spanish Gatekeeper *Pyronia bathseba*, Cleopatra *Gonepteryx cleopatra*, Lulworth Skipper *Thymelicus acteon*, and Western Marbled White *Melanargia occitanica*.

The afternoon stop was a series of roadside verges and fields beyond the little village of Conat.

Again, the variety of habitat in this sheltered valley attracts a good range of butterflies, and it wasn't long before *beckeri* form of Marsh Fritillary was seen, along with the week's first Provencal Fritillary *Melitaea deione*.


Two-tailed Pasha © Sally

Spanish Festoon *Zerynthia rumina* was seen by a stone wall alongside the road, but it dithered eternally, refusing to settle. Similarly, a Camberwell Beauty *Nymphalis antiopa* hurtled past both Ivor and David at breakneck speed, vanishing up the road within a few short seconds.

Other newcomers here were Southern White Admiral *Limentis reducta*, False Heath Fritillary *Melitaea diamina*, and Black-veined White *Aporia crataegi*.

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The day count was a nice, round half century, with the 17 new species taking the total now to 73.

Day 4, 23rd May


Provence Orange Tip © Ivor

The day was spent in the same mountain valley today, with the first stop being just before the village of Py.

The group did a circuitous walk, which took them along the road before crossing a bridge and descending on the other side of the river.

There were a wide variety of butterfly species on the wing, including first appearances for both Comma *Polygonia c-album* and Large Tortoiseshell *Nymphalis antiopa*. Two more Camberwell Beauty were seen, including one which very conveniently settled on a wall, allowing those who saw it the rare luxury of being able to take good photographs of it.

Following this appetiser, the group then moved on to the main course, which was to be found only a few kilometres up the mountain road, at an altitude of around 1,350masl.

The guide decided to allow the group to simply walk downhill for about a mile, promising that the vehicle would be driven down later, meaning nobody would need to ascend again.


Apollo © Sally

The damp gullies and the lower slopes by the roadside are always productive at this time of year, and there were several Provence Orange Tip bumbling along, with the occasional De Prunner's Ringlet and Swallowtail. However, after a few minutes of descent the first Apollo *Parnassius apollo* was seen, followed by a handful of further individuals.


Pyrenean Clouded Apollo © Ivor

Surprisingly, Pyrenean Clouded Apollo *Parnassius turatii* was seen in far lower numbers, which is the polar opposite of how things normally pan out here, but there were multiple other desirable distractions on the way down to the pick-up point, with Berger's Clouded Yellow *Colias alfacariensis* and Pearly Heath *Coenonympha arcania* being the most notable. Pyrenean Clouded Apollo deserves a special mention here as, after the tour concluded, research was published showing it is a cryptic species in its own right, genetically very different to the Clouded Apollo *Parnassius mnemosyne* found elsewhere in France and further east.

A further stop was made a little lower down the road, but once again the heat was becoming troublesome, with the temperature rising to almost 30c, unusual for this time of year in this region.

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55 species were recorded throughout the day, with the 6 new ones bringing the total now to an impressive 79, with three full days still to come.

Day 5, 24th May

It was time for a complete change of scenery today. After a day spent in a green and verdant mountain valley, it was time to visit some drier sites to the north east of the mountains where the vegetation is classic maquis, consisting of thorny shrubs and wild thyme.

The drive towards Sournia is accompanied by wonderful views looking south towards Mt Canigou and a short stop was duly made to allow everyone to take a few photographs.

Half an hour later, the group arrived at a dry track to the east of the village leading up to a communication mast.


Green-underside Blue © Kevin

The dominant species here is Western Marbled White, and there were plenty around this morning, although Chapman's Blue *Polyommatus thersites* ran them close for numbers.

Green-underside Blue *Glaucopsyche alexis* was a welcome find, as was Escher's Blue *Polyommatus escheri*.

The air was constantly filled with the redolence of lemon thyme, almost making the hour spent here seem like an aromatherapy treatment.

The next site was on the other side of the village, with the vehicles parked by a bridge under which there is a huge amount of flowering valerian. Whilst watching the butterflies around here, one in particular seemed unusual. It turned out to be a High Brown Fritillary *Argynnis adippe*, a species seldom found on this tour.


Spanish Festoon © Kevin

Near the bridge is a stony track that leads to a small, disused quarry. This has always been a traditionally reliable spot for the *beckeri* form of Marsh Fritillary as well as Spanish Festoon, and it wasn't to disappoint today, with both species present here.

After lunch, the group headed into the main quarry. With the heat, there wasn't as much butterfly activity as one would normally expect, but more Spanish Festoon were seen, along with further Osiris Blue, Swallowtail, Spotted Fritillary, and Cleopatra.

The final stop for the day was half an hour to the north of Sournia to a selection of dry, rocky fields on a south-facing slope. The first notable feature of this site was the presence of Provence Chalkhill Blue *Polyommatus hispana*…and good numbers of them. There was also a Scarce Swallowtail *Iphiclides podalirius*, meaning that the group had clearly crossed the 'maginot line', north of which the Iberian species gives way to the more commonly encountered one.

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David and Frank were busy chasing the deeply red fritillaries that were occasionally flying up and down the old olive groves. David was convinced that some were likely to be the extremely rare Spanish Fritillary *Euphydryas desfontainii*, and as a result plans were made to return to the site on the final morning, before temperatures sent the butterflies hyperactive again.

Four new species during the day meant the total now stood at 83.

Day 6, 25th May


Military Orchid © Jason

Conditions were favourable to undertake the longest distance of the week, which would ultimately lead to the Aude departement beyond Axat.

En route though, there was the small matter of exploring the orchid-rich meadows on a hairpin bend a few kilometres beyond the picturesque village of Mosset.

This is a delightful location, and there were a good variety of butterflies about, including Weaver's Fritillary *Boloria dia*, Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper, Mazarine Blue, Sooty Copper, Meadow Fritillary, and Clouded Yellow.

After an hour and a half, the group drove north into the Aude, stopping at a productive roadside site close to the village of Aunat. The main target here was the spring form of Map *Araschnia levana* and one was duly found, but it kept people on their toes by continually disappearing.

A Duke of Burgundy was seen in the same area, whilst further down the road there were good numbers of puddling Silver-studded Blue *Plebejus argus*. False Heath Fritillary was a frequent sight and the week's first Heath Fritillary *Melitaea athalia*, was also recorded.


Silver-studded Blue © Ivor

Several Amanda's Blue *Polyommatus amandus* were seen at the roadside, dwarfing all the other lycaenids present.

A Pyrenean Clouded Apollo was seen briefly along with a Lang's Short-tailed Blue *Leptotes pirithous*, which was busy settling near the bank where the vehicle had been parked.

A brief stop was made at Col de Jau on the way back to break the journey. It was much cooler at 1,500masl and few butterflies were about, although a few hilltopping Small Tortoiseshell were welcome.

The count for the day was the best of the week, with 56 species recorded. The four new ones had brought the aggregate total now to 87 with one full day remaining.

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Day 7, 26th May

The main aim this morning was to hunt down Spanish Fritillary by revisiting the site north of Sournia where David and Frank were convinced they had seen it two days earlier.

The temperature was much lower when the party arrived at the site and time was spent in the open fields below the old olive groves.

Of the first handful of fritillaries seen, all were Spotted Fritillary, until Jason managed to get an image of one that had briefly settled near him. This proved conclusively that Spanish Fritillary was about and eventually another one was seen in the near vicinity.



Again, Provence Chalkhill Blue were numerous, with the occasional Adonis Blue seen amongst them.

There was a comical moment when the group were back at the vehicle. After expending so much time and effort finding Spanish Fritillary in the fields, one suddenly decided to settle briefly just beyond the fence behind the parking area.

In addition, a couple of *beckeri* Marsh Fritillaries were seen, meaning these closely-related species were flying together.

With the day's first challenge now overcome, it was on to the second one – to find Purple-shot Copper *Lycaena alciphron* at Col de Jou, where the group had spent the first afternoon.



This involved a bit of effort, as the butterfly is generally found at the top of the hill where the tower is to be found. Sure enough, a male was located there almost immediately, doing circuits of the area where the thyme was growing but giving reasonably good views.

As ever, both Iberian Scarce Swallowtail and Swallowtail were hilltopping, along with a number of Wall Brown *Lasiommata megera*.

More Chequered Blue were found along the lower track and a female Large Wall briefly settled not far from where the vehicle was parked.

Like every preceding day, the weather remained warm and sunny, meaning yet another full day, with 37 species recorded, leaving the final total on a creditable 89.

Footnote and acknowledgements

Overall, this was a highly successful trip, with all three top targets, Violet Copper, Spanish Fritillary, and Two-tailed Pasha seen.

The largely unbroken sunshine and continual warmth meant no time was lost leading to almost 90 species being recorded during the week.

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Mariposa would like to thank all guests for their convivial company as well as their efforts in the field which contributed greatly to such an enjoyable week.

The family-run hotel was once again a delight as was the town in which it is situated. Mariposa hopes to see all guests again at some point in the near future.

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French Pyrenees © Sally

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SPRING BUTTERFLIES OF THE FRENCH PYRENEES 20th - 27th MAY 2026									
	Species name	**Day 1**	**Day 2**	**Day 3**	**Day 4**	**Day 5**	**Day 6**	**Day 7**	**Day 8**
	Butterflies								
1	Mallow Skipper *Carcharodus alceae*		✓				✓		
2	Tufted Marbled Skipper *Carcharodus flocciferus*		✓		✓	✓	✓		
3	Chequered Skipper *Carterocephalus palaemon*								
4	Dingy Skipper *Erynnis tages*		✓				✓		
5	Small Skipper *Thymelicus sylvestris*								
6	Large Skipper *Ochlodes sylvanus*	✓		✓	✓				
7	Large Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus alveus*		✓						
8	Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus armoricanus*	✓					✓		
9	Safflower Skipper *Pyrgus carthami*		✓		✓				
10	Southern Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus malvoides*	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
11	Red-underwing Skipper *Spialia sertorius*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Lulworth Skipper *Thymelicus acteon*			✓					
13	Brown Argus *Aricia agestis*	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
14	Provençal Short Tailed Blue *Cupido alcetas*								
15	Holly Blue *Celastrina argiolus*		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
16	Small Blue *Cupido minimus*	✓		✓	✓		✓		
17	Osiris Blue *Cupido Osiris*		✓		✓	✓	✓		
18	Mazarine Blue *Cyaniris semiargus*		✓		✓		✓		
19	Green-underside Blue *Glaucopschyche alexis*		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
20	Lang's Short-tailed Blue *Leptotes pirithous*						✓		
21	Silver-studded Blue *Plebejus argus*						✓		
22	Geranium Argus *Aricia eumedon*								
23	Escher's Blue *Polyommatus escheri*					✓			
24	Amanda's Blue *Polyommatus Amandus*		✓				✓		
25	Adonis Blue *Polyommatus bellargus*	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
26	Turquoise Blue *Polyommatus dorylas*		✓						
27	Common Blue *Polyommatus icarus*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Chapman's Blue *Polyommatus thersites*		✓	✓		✓	✓		
29	Chequered Blue *Scolitantides orion*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
30	Small Copper *Lycaena phlaeas*	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
31	Violet Copper *Lycaena helle*		✓						
32	Purple-shot Copper *Lycaena alciphron*							✓	
33	Purple-edged Copper *Lycaena hippothoe*								

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	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
34	Sooty Copper *Lycaena tityrus*		✓		✓		✓	✓	
35	Green Hairstreak *Callophrys rubi*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
36	False Ilex Hairstreak *Satyrium esculi*			✓					
37	Sloe Hairstreak *Satyrium acacia*								
38	Blue-spot Hairstreak *Satyrium spini*			✓		✓			
39	Cardinal *Argynnis pandora*			✓		✓			
40	High Brown Fritillary *Fabriciana adippe*					✓			
41	Dark Green Fritillary *Speyeria aglaja*								
42	Provençal Fritillary *Mellicta dejone*			✓	✓				
43	Weaver's Fritillary *Boloria dia*		✓	✓	✓		✓		
44	Pearl-bordered Fritillary *Boloria euphrosyne*		✓				✓		
45	Marsh Fritillary *Euphydryas Aurinia*		✓	✓		✓		✓	
46	Spanish Fritillary *Euphydryas desfontainii*							✓	
47	Queen of Spain Fritillary *Issoria lathonia*		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
48	Heath Fritillary *Melitaea athalia*						✓	✓	
49	False Heath Fritillary *Melitaea diamine*			✓		✓	✓		
50	Marbled Fritillary *Brenthis daphne*								
51	Lesser Marbled Fritillary *Brenthis ino*								
52	Glanville Fritillary *Melitaea cinxia*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
53	Spotted Fritillary *Melitaea didyma*	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
54	Meadow Fritillary *Melitaea parthenoides*		✓		✓		✓		
55	Knapweed Fritillary *Melitaea phoebe*	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
56	Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae*	✓	✓		✓		✓		
57	Large Tortoiseshell *Nymphalis polychloros*				✓		✓		
58	Map *Araschnia levana*						✓		
59	Comma *Polygonia c-album*				✓		✓		
60	Peacock *Aglais io*			✓	✓		✓		
61	Southern White Admiral *Limenitis reducta*			✓		✓	✓		
62	White Admiral *Limenitis camilla*								
63	Camberwell Beauty *Nymphalis antiopa*			✓	✓		✓		
64	Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta*	✓	✓	✓	✓				
65	Painted Lady *Vanessa cardui*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
66	Spanish Festoon *Zerynthia rumina*			✓		✓		✓	
67	Iberian Scarce Swallowtail *Iphiclides feisthamelii*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
68	Swallowtail *Papilio machaon*		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
69	Apollo *Parnassius apollo*				✓				
70	Pyrenean Clouded Apollo *Parnassius turatii*				✓		✓		

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	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
71	Orange Tip *Anthocharis cardamines*	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
72	Provence Orange Tip *Anthocharis euphinoides*	✓	✓		✓				
73	Black-veined White *Aporia crataegi*			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
74	Berger's Clouded Yellow *Colias alfacariensis*				✓				
75	Clouded Yellow *Colias crocea*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
76	Cleopatra *Gonepteryx cleopatra*		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
77	Brimstone *Gonepteryx rhamni*	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
78	Wood White *Leptidea sinapis*		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
79	Large White *Pieris brassicae*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
80	Green-veined White *Pieris napi*	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
81	Small White *Pieris rapae*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
82	Southern Small White *Pieris mannii*								
83	Western Dappled White *Euchloe crameri*			✓		✓			
84	Bath White *Pontia daplidice*			✓	✓	✓	✓		
85	Duke Of Burgundy *Hamearis lucina*		✓	✓	✓				
86	Pearly Heath *Coenonympha arcania*				✓		✓		
87	Dusky Heath *Coenonympha dorus*			✓					
88	Small Heath *Coenonympha pamphilus*		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
89	Large Wall *Lasiommata maera*	✓		✓	✓			✓	
90	Wall *Lasiommata megera*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
91	Spanish Gatekeeper *Pyronia bathseba*	✓		✓		✓		✓	
92	Meadow Brown *Maniola jurtina*	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
93	Western Marbled White *Melanargia occitanica*			✓		✓		✓	
94	Iberian Marbled White *Melanargia lachesis*								
95	Speckled Wood *Pararge aegeria*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
96	Grayling *Hipparchia semele*								
97	Bright-eyed Ringlet *Erebia oeme*								
98	De Prunner's Ringlet *Erebia triaria*		✓		✓			✓	
	Other possibles								
1	Marbled Skipper *Carcharodus lavatherae*								
2	Olive Skipper *Pyrgus serratulae*								
3	Ilex Hairstreak *Satyrium ilicis*	✓							
4	Geranium Bronze *Cacyreus marshalli*								
5	Large Blue *Phengaris arion*								
6	Short-tailed Blue *Cupido argiades*								
7	Provence Chalkhill Blue *Polyommatus hispana*					✓			
8	Baton Blue *Pseudophilotes baton*								
9	Damon Blue *Polyommatus damon*								

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	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
10	Long-tailed blue *Lampides boeticus*			✓		✓			
11	Silver-studded Blue *Plebejus argus*								
12	Lesser Purple Emperor *Apatura ilia*								
13	Niobe Fritillary *Fabriciana niobe*								
14	Bog Fritillary *Boloria eumonia*								
15	Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary *Clossiana selene*								
16	Piedmont Ringlet *Erebia meolans*								
17	Nettle Tree Butterfly *Libythea celtis*								
18	Scarce Swallowtail *Iphiclides podalirius*					✓	✓		
19	Two-tailed Pasha *Charaxes jasius*			✓					
20	Great Banded Grayling *Brintesia circe*								
	Daily total:	31	48	50	55	42	56	37	
	Running total:	31	56	73	79	83	87	89	

Guest Galleries

All images that follow were kindly shared by tour participants



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And finally… If you liked the sound of Spring Butterflies of the French Pyrenees, we've some other lovely butterfly-watching tours in France with availability remaining on them in 2027. Or, if you'd like to spread your wings a little further afield, we've plenty of other enticing European destinations to consider. Naturally, all of these holidays generate a donation to support the brilliant, science-led conservation work of Butterfly Conservation Europe or, from the orchid tours, Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland:

Butterflies of the Hautes Pyrenees

Butterflies of the Italian Alps & French Mercantour

Butterfly CONSERVATION EUROPE

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