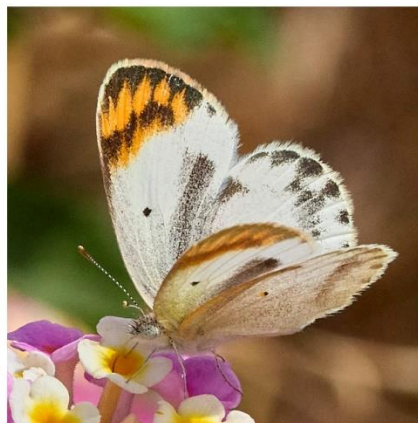


Autumn Exotica in Andalusia

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

23rd – 28th September 2025

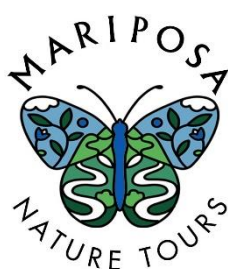


Tour leader Jon Dunn

Trip report by Jon Dunn

(Images, clockwise from top left: Two-tailed Pasha © Kirsty; Desert Orange Tip © Jeremy;

Desert Babul Blue © Jon; Zeller's Skipper © Jean)



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Autumn Exotica in Andalusia

Day 1, 23rd September, arrivals day

With two of our number having arrived in Malaga before the tour started, that left the remainder of the group to join Jon there today. Jean's flight arrived early, courtesy of the airline making haste there for a medical emergency on-board, and Jeremy wasn't far behind her. By midday we were on the road heading east towards Motril, and the *locus classicus* for Desert Orange Tip.



Desert Orange Tip © Jeremy

The drive went smoothly and shortly after 1pm we were parked at a coastal site – rather an unprepossessing site, with sadly much roadside trash and a great deal of dog excrement that spoke volumes of what the hillside track we were about to walk was regularly used for by the locals. Certainly not butterflying!

But we had cause for some optimism, for even from the moving vehicle as we arrived Jon had seen a white butterfly over a lush patch of the larval foodplant, caperberry. We couldn't be certain, but it certainly looked like a good candidate for Desert Orange Tip. And no sooner had we got out of the vehicle than Jon spotted another, right beside the road, nectaring on a small lantana bush. This was, after a little while, joined by another individual.

These proved rather obliging subjects for the cameras while we ate lunch, and then we headed a little uphill, following the dead-end track as it traversed the contours of the hill, overlooking a beach below us, and the Mediterranean beyond. Some intermittent cloud helped us, for there were dozens of Desert Orange Tip to be seen along here, mostly very active in the vicinity of caperberry patches, but prepared to land on the surrounding vegetation and the track (and on one occasion in front of Ainslie, on dog faeces) when the hazy cloud overhead diminished the sun's intensity. At one point a mating pair was encountered – the male and female meeting and swiftly coupling before Jon and Jean's eyes – while other individuals proved very obliging indeed.



Desert Orange Tip pairing © Jon

We spent an hour and a half enjoying these delicate African colonists on the very edge of their world range before heading back west, intending to break our journey to our hotel with a stop for another African colonist, Plain Tiger, some 30 minutes into the journey.

This too proved to be an easy win today, for once again we could see butterflies on the wing the moment our vehicle parked up on the edge of some overgrown fields some way inland from the coast. Fresh Plain Tiger quartered the fields in front of us, with some more worn



females avidly egg-laying on their larval foodplant. Curiously, several insects were aberrant, with varying degrees of paleness on their hindwings – some pure white, rather than the usual deep, rich orange.

It was while looking for extreme examples of this that Jon spotted our third species of the day – a pale butterfly, and a large one, but not a Plain

Tiger – this was an absolute whopper of a Swallowtail, and one that paused a while to settle in front of our appreciative eyes.

The rest of the journey to the hotel was fairly uneventful, albeit we needed to return for a pitstop to the vehicle provider for their staff to show us the arcane knack required to fold the seats down in the van!

Day 2, 24th September

For our first full day we struck west, with skippers our principal targets. The rough fields around La Pena hold both Zeller's and Mediterranean Skipper. The former is something of a mystery, albeit one with a happy ending. Believed for decades to be extirpated and absent from Spain, Zeller's Skipper was rediscovered in the south as recently as 2011, and now seems to have a firm foothold here once more – it's been described, with masterful understatement, as 'a miracle'.



An initial stop near Tarifa was made, at a site that in the past has proven fruitful for Sage Skipper and Monarch, among other species. We found the fields here to be parched and arid, with all vegetation badly browned and, to make matters worse, clearly heavily used by livestock. We wasted no time here, beyond enjoying good views of some Stonechat and Spotless Starling, the latter coming down to drink at a water trough.



With no further ado, we moved on to our coastal site near La Pena. Here the vegetation was reassuringly lush, and we were straight into good butterflies no sooner had we stepped out of the vehicle – the first of several pristine Monarch were gliding around a mosaic of bramble patches, milkweed larval foodplants, and open grassy areas. With patience, these were approachable, albeit somewhat windblown as the day was on

the blustery side.

The lekking site at which we'd found several Zeller's Skipper in 2024 was perhaps too exposed today, and apart from a fleeting sight of an insect by Jon, the skippers were absent,

leaving just a couple of Meadow Brown seeking shelter deep in the long grass out of the wind. Returning towards the vehicle, in the shelter of the lea of the bramble patches, Jon finally found some approachable Zeller's Skipper – at first two insects but, in time, more were seen in the area.

Plain Tiger were also on the wing around here, and provided some distraction. Before we moved on in the late morning, the site was to yield a fine Mediterranean Skipper, found by Jean, and one which was to prove very compliant, posing nicely for us.



Mediterranean Skipper © Jeremy

We headed inland next, to a system of open paddyfields, where we anticipated more skippers. The open country here was, once again, beset by the stiffening breeze, but in the lea of the raised causeway on which the road intersected the paddyfields we were able to

walk the trackway that bordered a paddyfield, sheltered from the wind, and where there was plenty of insect activity to be seen – both butterflies and dragonflies alike.



Zeller's Skipper © Jean

We arrived at lunchtime, so had our picnics at the head of the track, adding some new species while we were at it – Holly Blue and Small White. So far, so conventional! However, once we started to walk the track we quickly found plenty of Zeller's

Skipper present, often nectaring from the flowers of Squirting Cucumber *Ecballium elaterium*. A lovely and very territorial Long-tailed Blue was also encountered here, reluctant to leave its favoured patch of flowers.

Dragonflies were numerous, and colourful – many Red-veined Darter were on the wing, with Scarlet Darter also present but in smaller numbers; both Epaulet Skimmer and Long Skimmer were also present; an Emperor performed a dashing foray over the paddyfield; and Northern Banded Groundlings dogged our steps like faithful terriers.



Long-tailed Blue © Jean

After we'd had our fill of the insects we paused a while to admire the large flocks of White Stork and Glossy Ibis that were feeding in the open in an adjacent field. Ainslie had been busy here with his scope, checking the field also for wagtails and migrant waders.

We returned to our comfortable hotel in the late afternoon, and devoted half an hour to the hotel's well-watered lawns and flower borders – our main target, African Grass Blue, was to be found here as expected, but we also enjoyed a bonus Geranium Bronze as a cherry on the cake.

Day 3, 25th September

With the annoying wind still blowing today, we opted to adjust the itinerary accordingly, heading to the sheltered valley that surrounds the Roman washhouse at Manilva. This proved a sensible and productive decision for the morning, as we were only vaguely aware of the wind moving the treetops on the valley top high above us.

Down in the valley bottom we walked past the washhouse and up the sulphurous stream that feeds into it. The narrow footpath here threads back and forth across the stream, with alternate patches of shade and sunlight. In one pebbly, sunlit corner we found our first



butterfly of the day, and a new one – Sage Skipper. This insect was extremely obliging, obsessively nectaring on yellow flowers, and posing nicely for us.

Exploring this area a little more, Ainslie and Jeremy found a Wall Brown, another new butterfly for the week, while we were also visited by our first Meadow Brown of the day.

Moving back into the main valley proper, and starting to branch out up the karst limestone gorge that branches off it, we saw Monarch in flight over the treetops, and found at least three more Sage Skipper – here, in the more exposed environs of the gorge, they were extremely active, flying around like small jet fighters and only rarely pausing to settle, briefly, for a breather before resuming their hyperactive patrols.

Returning to our vehicle, a Swallowtail made a brief appearance but swiftly moved on. The air temperature was nudging 30°C now, so we made a point of rehydrating before spending a little while looking for dragonflies at a nearby ford. Jon anticipated we'd see Copper Demoiselle here, and hopefully Violet Dropwing too.



The former were showing beautifully, but of the dropwing there was no sign – the overhanging vegetation on the riverbank was lusher than in the previous year, and perhaps the habitat was too overshadowed.



We decided to have our lunch a little further downstream, at a dedicated riverside picnic area. Jon's instinct was that this might be where the Violet Dropwing may be encountered, in more open surroundings. This proved to be the case, and with some nice surprises besides – we found both Violet and Orange-winged Dropwing here, two pioneer African dragonfly species that have colonised southern Spain lately; and also Golden-

ringed Dragonfly patrolling up and down the river. While waiting patiently to get photos of the dropwings we found two small snakes hunting in the water along the river's edge – Jean, investigating later, established these were Viperine Water Snake *Natrix maura*, a fish-hunting snake. This explained why the numerous fish in the clear water scattered so quickly when they caught sight of the snakes!

Jeremy meanwhile continued his quest to get a satisfactory photo of Lang's Short-tailed Blue – two examples were nectaring on flowers that, rather frustratingly, hung way out from the riverbank over the water! Large White were seen here too and, just before we moved on, a male Cleopatra passed along the valley.



We moved inland to explore the countryside around the Embalse de Charco Redondo – when Mariposa founder David Moore had been here in 2023 this had proved good butterflying habitat, with a range of species on offer on the damp margins of the reservoir. Two factors worked against us this year – the water level was much higher, reducing the margins to thick scrub in which we could only find a couple of Meadow Brown; and a persistent grey cloud parked itself above us.

We tried moving a little way down the road to try a circular trail that passed through some promising grassland and sparse woodland, but with the exception of an egg-laying Meadow Brown on the path, the conditions were against us – it was cloudy, with occasional spits of rain, and not at all conducive to butterflying. We made the sensible decision to cut our losses early, and drove inland to the paddyfields we'd visited the previous day. We could see the sky was clear and sunny in that direction, and so it proved – we enjoyed an hour and a half of uninterrupted butterfly and dragonfly joy here!



Zeller's Skipper were again numerous along the field margins, with occasional Mediterranean Skipper also seen here. Long-tailed Blue was again present, and Jon and Jean bumped into an African Grass Blue, albeit nowhere near as cooperative as the examples living in our hotel garden. Jeremy also added Plain Tiger to the day list, while Jean found a fine Small Copper, another new species for the week. On the dragonfly front,

Red-veined Darter were most numerous, while Long Skimmer added further African pioneer glamour, and a couple of mating Emperor were duly admired. Ainslie was concentrating on birds, seeing a scatter of passage waders, including Ruff, Snipe, and Little Stint; and some good passerines too, with Serin, Zitting Cisticola, and Hoopoe all falling to his keen eye.

We returned to the hotel with an hour free before dinner to freshen up and do the daily checklist. Jon, meanwhile, retrieved the banana he'd left bagged on the hot van dashboard

all day, and ordered a little rum from the bar. Not a fruity snack for him – this was preparing Two-tailed Pasha bait for tomorrow!

Day 4, 26th September



Applying Two-tailed Pasha bait © Kirsty

Today dawned with the weather doing exactly what we hoped for – calm, with overnight cloud soon dissipating, and warm sunshine that promised a hot day ahead. Perfect conditions in which to search for Two-tailed Pasha...

A short drive took us up into the hills inland, where we set up our stall for pasha. Parked in a small parking area just big enough for two or three vehicles, next to a mirador overlooking a reservoir, and fringed with Cork Oak and Strawberry Tree, this was the ideal amphitheatre for a pasha performance. The stage just needed a little dressing – and this was soon provided when Jon unsealed the bag

containing his Patent Pasha Paste, a sweet and powerfully aromatic concoction of banana and rum. This was judiciously applied to the bark of several Cork Oaks, in patches at eye level. The stage was set!

We spent the next couple of hours patrolling the quiet road on either side of our lofty mirador, distracted by the local fire fighters practicing picking up water in a large bucket beneath a helicopter on the reservoir below us, and our first Tree Grayling of the week, a great find by Jeremy. Other butterfly interest was provided by Plain Tiger – either a steady succession of single insects passing over the ridge on which we sat, or one determined butterfly working a large circuit around the hilltop – and Wall Brown, with three showy insects on offer.



Tree Grayling © Jean

Then, at midday, all at once both Jon and Jeremy saw our first Two-tailed Pasha – two insects seen simultaneously a little distance apart from one another. We gathered at the



Two-tailed Pasha © Jeremy

site of Jon's sighting and, within five minutes, an insect appeared, pausing for a little while to greedily imbibe from one of our baited Cork Oaks!

The next two hours provided more or less ceaseless encounters with Two-tailed Pasha, as at least five butterflies were present around our centre of operations. At one point three butterflies were simultaneously on the wing over

the very highest point of the ridge, two of them fighting and duelling, the sound of their wings striking one another mid-air clearly audible. This was a mesmerising performance.

We ate our lunch up there with the pashas before finally leaving them to it, heading downhill to walk a trail near Castellar that's reputed to be the best site in Spain for Monarch. While we did see at least four Monarch on this footpath, they generally weren't settling and allowing a close approach. More amenable were our first Speckled Wood of the week, and several more Small Copper. With a little patience, we also enjoyed views of a couple of Moorish Gecko on the walls of a small ruin.



Two-tailed Pasha © Jean



Two-tailed Pasha © Kirsty

The temperature and humidity was rising by mid-afternoon, so we enjoyed a cool drink at a roadside bar, sitting in the shade at the edge of their garden – the butterfly never stopping, for Kirsty spotted a Clouded Yellow that made a brief foray across the lawn.

We elected to head back to the hotel to tussle anew with the hyperactive African Grass Blue colony on the lawn there. These frenetic little butterflies were challenging to approach for photos, but seeing them meant we'd enjoyed both one of Europe's smallest and largest butterfly species in the course of one day.

Day 5, 27th September

With just one butterfly target remaining unseen this week, we headed into the hills north of Tarifa to a site kindly shared with us by a local friend – a hillside threaded with small streams and overspilling water tanks that just might yield us a False Mallow Skipper. The site certainly looked the part and, in the hour and half we devoted to it, yielded Sage Skipper and Monarch.

We decided that it would probably be worth returning here a little later in the day when the sun had animated butterfly activity a little, and explore the somewhat more lush areas around nearby houses and smallholdings but, for now, we would head down to the coast near Tarifa where we might also find our missing skipper, and should be guaranteed considerably more butterflies of other species besides.

We'd no sooner parked the vehicle than we could see multiple Monarch gliding effortlessly around their larval foodplant nearby and, once we walked closer, there were also Plain Tiger mixed among them, sometimes nectaring from the same plant at once. Quite a sight!

Lang's Short-tailed Blue were also being seen sparingly, nectaring on the aromatic yellow



Plain Tiger © Jeremy

flowers of Woody Fleabane *Dittrichia viscosa*. We set a time to return to the vehicle for our picnic lunch, and spread out to see if we could locate a False Mallow Skipper – in the meantime, very much enjoying the butterflies we were seeing.

Jon wandered a little way off, into a large clearing fringed with pine trees and eucalyptus, where a large dense patch of fleabane beckoned. Even from a distance, he could see many lycaenids in the air above the flowers – these proved to be mostly Lang's Short-tailed Blue, a couple of Long-tailed Blue, and a Small Copper. Not bad at all...



Desert Babul Blue © Jon

Walking to the more sheltered back of the patch of flowers, he spotted a small butterfly at rest on the vegetation. It looked more warm-toned than Lang's Short-tailed Blue – and a closer look was to change the course of the day for us all. This was a Desert Babul Blue! Potentially one of the very first credible records of this African species anywhere in mainland Europe – within 200 metres of the coast, and with Africa visible on the

horizon. And it was very fresh indeed, in mint condition. With acacia nearby (the larval foodplant), surely this could be locally-bred?

Jon took a handful of images on his phone and camera to secure the record, and looked up to see Kirsty nearby. Leaving her to look for the butterflies, he ran to find the others. First Jeremy, then Ainslie, and finally Jean were gathered and we set up camp beside the fleabane.

Never had Lang's Short-tailed Blue been so intensively scrutinised! They were numerous here, and barely allowed one another or other lycaenids a moments rest, constantly buzzing one another and sparring mid-air. Getting a good look at any underside was an exercise in patience, not helped by the brambles that laced the fleabane.

Jon brought our lunches, and a large container of water, to the clearing, so the group could remain in situ, on watch. Our patience was gradually rewarded, with sightings of Southern Blue, Clouded Yellow, and Sage Skipper... Jean then found a skipper that, seen from below in her photos, looked like a good candidate for False Mallow.



False Mallow Skipper © Jean

A little while later, in the mid-afternoon, Jon refound a Desert Babul Blue. Kirsty could see it, but it flew almost immediately, hassled by a Lang's Short-tailed Blue. As the group rushed towards Jon, Kirsty raised her binoculars to see if she could locate the Desert Babul Blue, and promptly announced she'd got a False Mallow Skipper! Nectaring briefly on an isolated stem of fleabane, Jeremy and Jon caught a glimpse of it before it too vanished.

We stayed here into the late afternoon, when butterfly activity was diminishing. We'd given it our best shot and, while views of the Desert Babul Blue and False Mallow Skipper had been frustratingly fleeting, both species *were* present there! And how many butterfly groups can say they've been involved in finding potentially one of the very first credible records of a vagrant African butterfly for mainland Europe?!

Day 6, 28th September, departures day

With the first homebound flights leaving at a civilised hour in the early afternoon, we didn't have to rush to leave the hotel early, and made our way with no hurry or delays to the airport at Malaga in good time for check in.

Jon and Mariposa would like to thank the group for making the week such a delight from start to finish – the group dynamic was superb, with many stories and laughs shared amongst us, and everybody's keen eyes contributed to our building a final butterfly list numbering 26 species. That's not a huge total compared with some of our tours, but this holiday is not about numbers – it's about seeing a selection of butterflies that exist on the very edge of their global range here on the southern fringes of mainland Europe. And as we saw this week, one can never rule out there being a genuine surprise to be discovered!

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AUTUMN EXOTICA IN ANDALUSIA 23 rd -28 th SEPTEMBER 2025							
	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
	Butterflies						
1	Southern Brown Argus <i>Aricia cramera</i>						
2	Southern Blue <i>Polyommatus celina</i>					✓	
3	Geranium Bronze <i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>		✓		✓		
4	Lang's Short-tailed Blue <i>Leptotes pirithous</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Long-tailed Blue <i>Lampides boeticus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
6	Holly Blue <i>Celastrina argiolus</i>		✓				
7	African Grass Blue <i>Zizeeria knysna</i>		✓	✓	✓		
8	Small Copper <i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>			✓	✓	✓	
9	Monarch <i>Danaus plexippus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
10	Plain Tiger <i>Danaus chrysippus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Queen of Spain Fritillary <i>Issoria lathonia</i>						
12	Cardinal <i>Argynnis pandora</i>						
13	Tree Grayling <i>Hipparchia statilinus</i>				✓		
14	Meadow Brown <i>Maniola jurtina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
15	Speckled Wood <i>Pararge aegeria</i>				✓		
16	Wall Brown <i>Lasiommata megera</i>			✓	✓		
17	Two-tailed Pasha <i>Charaxes jasius</i>				✓		
18	Red Admiral <i>Vanessa atalanta</i>						
19	Painted Lady <i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓			✓	
20	Swallowtail <i>Papilio machaon</i>	✓	✓	✓			
21	Mediterranean Skipper <i>Gegenes nostradamus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
22	Zeller's Skipper <i>Borbo borbonica</i>		✓	✓		✓	
23	False Mallow Skipper <i>Carcharodus tripolinus</i>					✓	
24	Sage Skipper <i>Muschampia proto</i>			✓		✓	
25	Desert Orange Tip <i>Colotis evagore</i>	✓					
26	Bath White <i>Pontia daplidice</i>						
27	Small White <i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓		✓	✓	
28	Clouded Yellow <i>Colias crocea</i>				✓	✓	
29	Cleopatra <i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>			✓	✓		
30	Brimstone <i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>						
#	Large White <i>Pieris brassicae</i>			✓	✓		
#	Desert Babul Blue <i>Azanus ubaldus</i>					✓	
	Daily total:	3	13	14	15	15	
	Running total:	3	14	19	23	26	
	Miscellaneous flora & fauna						
	Red-veined Darter <i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	Scarlet Darter <i>Crocothemis erythraea</i>	✓	✓	✓			
	Epaulet Skimmer <i>Orthetrum chrysostigma</i>		✓	✓			
	Long Skimmer <i>Orthetrum trinacria</i>		✓	✓			
	Emperor <i>Anax imperator</i>		✓	✓	✓		

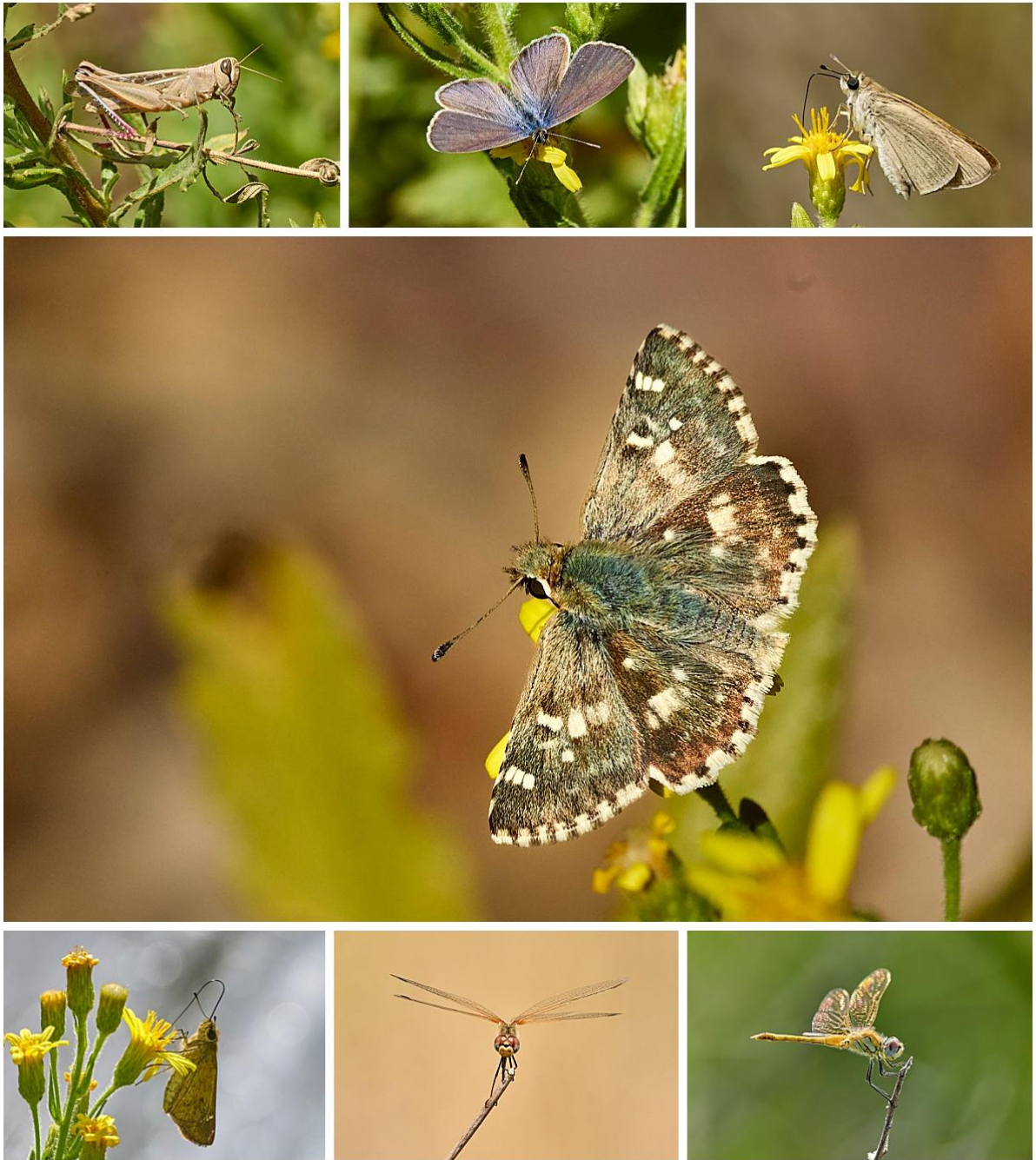
	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
	Northern Banded Groundling <i>Brachythemis impartita</i>		✓				
	Orange-winged Dropwing <i>Trithemis kirbyi</i>			✓			
	Violet Dropwing <i>Trithemis annulata</i>			✓	✓		
	Copper Demoiselle <i>Calopteryx haemorrhoidalis</i>			✓			
	Golden-ringed Dragonfly <i>Cordulegaster boltonii</i>			✓			
	Viperine Water Snake <i>Natrix maura</i>			✓			
	Moorish Gecko <i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>				✓		

Galleries

All images that follow were kindly shared by tour participants



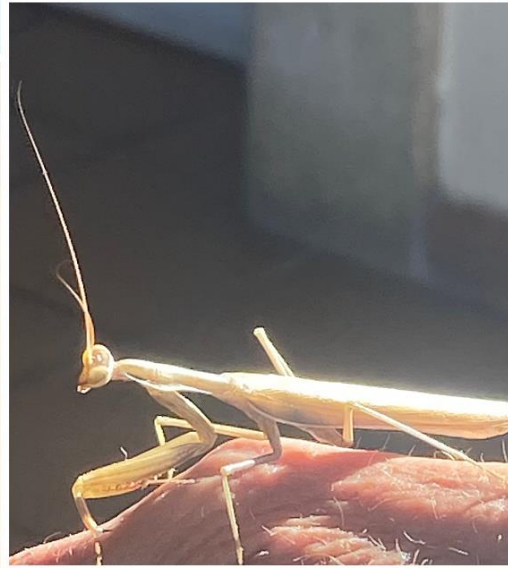
Images © Jeremy



Images © Jeremy



Images © Kirsty



Images © Kirsty



Images © Jean



Images © Jean



Images © Jean

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[Autumn Exotica in Andalusia](#)

Alternatively, we have other butterfly tours that promise a feast of fritillaries and a bonanza of blues elsewhere in Spain, and many more besides!

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