

Iberian Wildlife Tours/Jeff Clarke Ecology

La Cerdanya (Catalan Pyrenees)

28th June – 5th July 2011

Review



Cadí ridge July 2011 © Jeff Clarke

Note: All images used in this report were taken during the 2011 tour unless otherwise stated.

Teresa Farino & Jeff Clarke

Leaders: Teresa Farino & Jeff Clarke

Full Tour Participants:

Ros George

David George

Eluned Lee



David, Ros & Eluned near the summit of Tossa d'Alp © Jeff Clarke

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Introduction

This review covers the highlights from a wildlife-packed tour of La Cerdanya, in the Spanish Pyrenees, between 28th June & 5th July 2011. This was the first collaboration between Iberian Wildlife Tours and Jeff Clarke Ecology for this particular location. With just three clients, the tour had the potential for a slightly claustrophobic feel but, much to the credit of all those involved, warmth and friendliness was evident throughout the tour, which certainly contributed to a very productive and memorable trip.

Review

Tuesday 28th June

The party gathered at Barcelona airport in scorching conditions, and shortly after 1.00pm we were speeding out of the city towards the eastern Pyrenees. After a couple of hours' progress we pulled off the main highway close to Bagà to find a cool spot for lunch: the dappled shade of some poplars overlooking a limestone ridge. As ever, Teresa's picnic lunch was a treat and, despite the heat, our break was enlivened by a variety of butterflies and a couple of Short-Toed Eagles circling together at moderate height.



Following lunch we gained elevation and stopped at a small stream valley, where we found a multitude of butterflies. By far the most numerous species was the Silver-studded Blue; damp muddy patches along the stream edge were sprinkled with dozens of these dainty Lycaenids. Here too we found close relatives in the shape of Turquoise Blue and Small and Sooty Coppers. A rapid fluttering flight with a rowing action

caught our eye and the combination of spots and striking colours revealed the first of a number of Scarlet Tiger moths, while a delightful male Provence Orange Tip – resplendent in yellow and orange livery – fluttered up and down the track.

The dominant species among the larger butterflies was undoubtedly the Iberian Marbled White; barely a moment passed when there wasn't at least one in view. Fritillaries too were much in evidence, Queen of Spain, Weaver's, Marbled and False Heath Fritillary all being present. Without doubt the butterfly highlight was the appearance of an Apollo rapidly followed by several more examples of this altitude-loving species, although a Scarce Swallowtail and several elusive Southern White Admirals came a close second.

Birds were at a premium in the heat of the day. Blackcaps sang mutedly from deep cover, but the Grey Wagtails were easier to see as they cavorted around the tumbling stream. Among the most eye-catching plants here were Peach-leaved Bellflower, the yellow snapdragon *Antirrhinum braun-blanquetii* and some fabulous cushions of Rock Soapwort.

It was soon time to head for the delightful Hotel Muntanya at Prullans, in the Segre Valley. We settled in and reconvened to go through the day's sightings before a meal overlooking the spectacular Cadí ridge.



A sunset view of Cadí Ridge from Hotel Muntanya © Jeff Clarke

Wednesday 29th June

A brief stop in Martinet for bread allowed us a few minutes to check out the riverine birdlife on the Segre. Grey and White Wagtails abounded and downstream a Common Sandpiper arced away from view. Only Jeff caught a glimpse of the fast retreating form of a Dipper but everyone managed to see the Tree Sparrow sat atop a nearby light stanchion. In addition, at least one Crag Martin darted around among the Swallows, House Martins and Common Swifts.

Our aim today was to explore the hay meadows and limestone plateaux around Orden and Talltendre. We took advantage of having Teresa's four-wheel drive available to recover the minibus, which enabled us to walk the track from Talltendre all the way down to Prullans.

En route to Orden we made a few roadside stops and forays into the surrounding vegetation. Our first, close to a decaying farmstead, failed to produce the hoped for Rock Sparrow but we were handsomely rewarded with a Dartford Warbler, several Rock Buntings and a Tawny Pipit, while from a ridge overlooking the valley we could hear Nightingale. A little higher up, the shadow of a large raptor crossed the road in front of the minibus. We

quickly got out and enjoyed thrillingly close views of a pale-phase Booted Eagle soaring gracefully over our heads. All too soon, however, it gained height and disappeared over a ridge.

The roadside meadows and dry scrub were awash with a great variety of flowering plants, including a pink form of Common Rock-rose, Wild Mignonette, Pyrenean and Beautiful Flaxes, Meadow Clary, Yellow Woundwort, Pyrenean Germander, Lavender Cotton and Blue Cupidone, as well as inconspicuous spikes of the lovely 'brown bluebell' *Dipcadi serotinum*, while delightful Straw Foxgloves loitered amid the Box bushes that were the dominant shrub here. As a by-product of this floral diversity, we had masses of butterflies to enjoy. Lycaenids made up a significant number of the species and, as before, Silver-studded Blue was extremely abundant, occasionally joined by Blue-spot Hairstreaks and Holly Blues. Pearly Heaths were noted at many locations throughout the day and we also picked out our first Chestnut Heaths.



We stopped for a welcome break in the increasing heat of the day at the hamlet of Orden where, out of curiosity, we tapped some White Bryony and in so doing discovered our first Bryony Ladybirds, a perfect example of plant–invertebrate association. We then began our ascent towards Talltendre and ,after being sidetracked briefly by a pair of Cuckoos in the meadow below us, we stopped for some time where a small stream crossed our track. Here we found astonishing concentrations of mud-puddling Lycaenids sucking nutrients from the damp shingle beds. Among their masses we also found a Rock Grayling to add to the Great Banded Grayling that had been attracted to the sweat from Jeff's shoe a little earlier in the walk.



As the heat increased, the birds once again took shelter and became increasingly hard to find, but a Honey Buzzard lifted over a ridge and circled on flattened wings, its longer tail and small projecting head helping to confirm the identification. Periodically other birds would make a brief appearance, including Yellowhammer and Corn Bunting.

Notable flowers along the wayside included typical arable weeds such as Rough Marsh-mallow, Weld, False Sainfoin, Field Eryngo and Cornflower, as well as species more typical of limestone habitats such as Mountain Clover and Matted Globularia.



High-brown Fritillary © Jeff Clarke

By the time we reached Talltendre the heat was fierce but we managed to find some meagre, but very welcome, shade for lunch, provided by the buildings in the petite village square. Our onward route was to take us across a high limestone plateau prior to our eventual descent to Prullans. As we left Talltendre some of the damper meadows were bouncing with butterflies, including some of the larger Fritillaries. We had the

chance to compare Dark Green and High Brown Fritillaries and a bright orange, round-winged, fritillary proved to be Marbled. These were joined by smaller members of the tribe, including Heath, Glanville, Provençal, Meadow and some stunning fresh Spotted Fritillaries. These meadows were also very rich botanically, with Globeflowers and Bistort forming colourful swathes in the wetter reaches, with drier sections harbouring Carthusian Pink, Pyrenean Eryngo, Clustered Bellflower, Round-headed Rampion and Star-of-Bethlehem.

All too soon, however, we emerged into a more open, rocky, heath like habitat, albeit on limestone. Eluned spotted what at first appeared to be a damselfly, but closer inspection revealed it to be our one and only Ant Lion of the trip, probably *Myrmeleon formicarius*. The flora in these dry conditions was just as rich as in the hay meadows, with White Asphodel, St Bernard's Lily and Fragrant Orchid among the highlights.

Jeff heard a song in the distance which sounded like Rock Thrush and so it proved to be. Eventually everyone had fabulous views of a trio of birds disputing territories, with two dusky blue and orange males vying for the somewhat dowdier female. The same area held a few Stonechats and the ubiquitous Black Redstart.

After photographing a stunning pair of mating Black-veined Whites, we noticed a number of Robber Flies carrying their bounty; many insects seemed to be on the menu and we



Antlion Myrmeleon formicarius © Teresa Farino

photographed these predators carrying Juniper Shieldbugs and large Mottled Beauty type moths. Along the same section of the track we encountered a number of day flying moths including several Slender Scotch Burnet moths (*Zygaena loti*), plus the related Royal and Transparent Burnets (*Z. sarpedon* and *Z. purpuralis*). A curious little black and red longhorn beetle on the spurges along the margins of the track turned out to be *Oberea erythrocephala*.

As we descended into Prullans, the heat of the day began to subside and the birds became more active. We found several Woodlarks – as it turned out, these were our only sightings of the week – together with a smart male Red backed Shrike.

Robber Fly sp. with Juniper Shieldbug
© Jeff Clarke



Thursday 30th June

Today we headed out to the mountain pine forests, glacial lakes and peatbogs of the Estans de la Pera. The target species for our first stop, above the village of Lles, was Marsh Helleborine but unfortunately none were to be found, although we did record Heath Spotted Orchid, Twayblade and White False Helleborine in the wet roadside grassland. Eluned spied our first Scarce Copper of the week here, while Teresa picked up another

interesting longhorn on a hogweed umbel, this time a species of *Agapanthia*, although we're still not sure whether it was *A. cardui* or *A. suturalis*.

Further up the road we made a longer stop in an area of sloping pine woods that contained an area of wet flushes and several damp meadows. Butterflies abounded and we eventually found our target species for the location – Bog Fritillary – flying together with Purple Shot Coppers and Mazarine Blues. The wet meadows were coloured yellow by the blooms of Marsh Marigolds, Great Yellow Gentians, Spike Rampion and Spotted Cat's-ear, while drier grasslands nearby turned up Maiden Pink, Mountain Everlasting and Field Gentian.

The pine woodland contained many active Wood Ant nests in the drier section but we were most keen to explore the boggy slopes. Here we found a number of interesting plants, notably white-flowered Pyrenean Buttercup, Common Butterwort, Pyramidal Bugle and clumps of jewel-like, violet Pyrenean Gentians, easily identified by their 10-lobed flowers. In one of the sunlit clearings, surrounded by small bushes of Alpenrose, studded with clusters of deep pink flowers, we found more butterflies, including a pristine Dingy Skipper.



As we picked our way slowly across the inundated ground we could hear the 'tooping' of small parties of Crossbills passing overhead. The party split at this point, with the botanists concentrating on the bog flora and the birdwatchers transferring their attention to the Crossbills feeding on fallen pine cones. We had superb views of one bird at close range, prising apart the scales of the cone to extract the seed, whilst overhead a Goldcrest sang repeatedly.



After elevenses we headed for higher slopes with siliceous outcrops. The flora changed markedly and suddenly the boulder chokes were awash with majestic Great Yellow Gentians and Pyrenean Lilies. Other interesting plants here included Alpine St John's-wort, Alpine Rose, Striped Toadflax, the delicate bellflower *Campanula scheuchzeri*, and two huge umbellifers: *Molopospermum*, with yellow umbels, and white-flowered Masterwort, with much broader leaves.

Coal Tits called constantly around us as we explored these areas, while a roadside watercourse was alive with tadpoles, probably of Common Frog. We also

encountered a very large carabid beetle scuttling across the track. We secured it for a photograph and later identified it as *Carabus rutilans*.



We eventually made the top car park in a truly scenic location, with scattered pines interspersed with numerous rushing streams and Alpine Marmots calling from the



surrounding rocky hills. We enjoyed another delicious picnic and began hearing calls from one of our hoped-for birds. After a while a pair of Citril Finches descended to the picnic area and we revelled in superb views as they fed on the ground. It's not often you have these high altitude finches full frame in your scope view and the light was perfect, illuminating the subtle greens and greys of their plumage.

After lunch we began our ascent to one of the glacial lakes. We searched a small pool close to the car park and watched a male Broad-bodied Chaser dashing over the surface. Near the inlet, amid a picture postcard setting, we found some spectacular clumps of Water Saxifrage. We hadn't

got much further when we finally managed to locate a distant Alpine Marmot calling from an area of boulders on the adjacent slopes. As we worked our way across a more open pasture we obtained a decent view of a male Ring Ouzel, the first of a number of brief sightings.

The flora of these dry acid pastures was different again and we added a number of new plants to our list, notably Rock Campion, Alpine Catchfly, Alpine Bistort, Mountain Houseleek, Alpine Clover, *Phyteuma charmelii* and Purple Coltsfoot.

As we climbed higher the butterfly fauna had noticeably thinned out, although a number of 'ringlets' skittered past without pausing and were thus very difficult to identify. The only species we were able to confirm were Piedmont and De Prunner's, while the Brassy Ringlets might have been either Common or Pyrenean (or possibly even both species!). The most surprising butterfly find of this trek, however, was a very fresh specimen of Silver-spotted Skipper: an exceptionally early date for this late-summer butterfly to be on the wing.



After approximately an hour we reached the first glacial lake, where Minnows were readily observed in the outflow waters. The surrounding ridges were scanned for various birds of prey but only a handful of Griffon Vultures obliged.

Teresa, Ros and David explore the far shoreline in pursuit of botanical delights, turning up Alpine Toadflax and the rather rare Geranium-like Saxifrage, with Starry Saxifrage on the margins of the lake. Teresa also located a Wood Tiger moth here. As we descended and returned to the vehicle we had a few more opportunities to watch and listen to the Citril Finches: a fitting end to a lovely day in this beautiful valley.

Friday 1st July



Today we switched to the lowlands of the Segre Valley, beginning the day at a flooded gravel pit close to Sanavastre. As we approached, through wheat and barley fields, we spied a group of three Hoopoes flying floppily across the terrain. As we parked up and exited the vehicle the 'krooping' calls of Bee-eaters drifted across the flat valley bottom. It didn't take long to locate where they were coming from. The pock-marked banks of the gravel pit sides betrayed the presence of a breeding colony of these lovely birds. We got a little closer to the colony but maintained a reasonable distance as we did not wish to disturb them. Nevertheless, we had superb scope views as they dismembered various flying insects whilst sitting on a favoured perch.

In the base of the pit the loud chattering song of a Great Reed Warbler repeatedly blasted forth. These birds are not normally shy but this one kept to deep cover and never showed. Among the damselflies in the marginal vegetation we positively identified Common Bluet and Common Bluetail.

By the time we returned to the vehicle the day was really beginning to heat up. It was time to head towards the river Segre itself.

We parked below the village and headed along the riverside track. All around us we could hear Nightingales, Garden Warblers and an occasional Golden Oriole. Butterflies were in abundance and most seemed to be concentrated on flowering brambles and wild rose bushes. We had a couple of particular target species in mind and very soon the first of these, in the shape of a Map Butterfly, was found nectaring



on a rose. We soon located many more of these delicately marked nymphalids, and noted that they were all second generation individuals, although they varied considerably in the extent of orange markings on the upper wings. Lycaenid butterflies were again abundant and we added Escher's and Short-tailed Blues and Spanish Purple Hairstreak to our burgeoning list, as well as nymphalids such as Red Admiral, Comma and Ringlet.

As we slowly progressed along we became a strung out as a group and this meant that only David and Jeff had good views of the Nightingales engaged in a bout of territorial dispute. The heat began to tell and the birds largely fell quiet and became very elusive, sticking to the deep shade, although we did hear Wryneck in the distance. By the time we arrived at the braided section of the river it was uncomfortable to stay in the full sun for too long and shade-seeking became essential.

The flooded track along this section of the river prevented further progress but it did provide a good opportunity to catch up with some of the local Odonata. Yellow winged Darters obliged with close views for all, accompanied by smaller numbers of Four-spotted Chasers and the odd Emperor. Broad-bodied Chasers fizzed regularly across the flooded track and with them were also one or two Black-tailed Skimmers. Blue Eyed Damselfly was probably the highlight among the damsels but we also located Azure and Mediterranean

Bluets and Common, Western Willow and Robust Spreadwings here.

Teresa decided to wade barefoot along the flooded track in search of something special. Jeff followed and eventually found Teresa stalking a large butterfly. As one zipped past Jeff he called it as a Painted Lady but Teresa suspected it was something much more exciting and so it





Lesser Purple Emperor f. clytie © Teresa Farino

proved for very soon she was homing in on a Lesser Purple Emperor of the Spanish form *clytie*. Frustratingly it never showed well for the rest of the tour party, who'd preferred not to get their feet wet: barely more than an orangey blur in a high-speed flyby.

By now the heat of the day had become pretty unbearable in the confines of the valley bottom, so

we headed back towards the vehicle. Surprisingly we had decent views of a Spotted Flycatcher hunting low around a series of fallen branches and we also caught up with a Common Sandpiper that called incessantly along the river. It took some finding because we were concentrating on the shoreline when in fact it was perched on a broken off tree trunk at least 15 feet above the ground. Just before seeking sanctuary in the air-conditioned minibus we came across a roosting Owl Fly (*Libelloides longicornis*), after which we paused briefly once more to admire a pair of Beautiful Demoiselles.

We needed elevation and shade to escape the heat and so we headed for the dense coniferous forest near the ski resort of La Masella. We lunched in the streamside car park and watched small 'grizzled skipper' butterflies dancing around on the damp gravels, where we also picked up our first Marbled Skipper of the trip. As we began our ascent the shade was very welcome. Periodically we would come to a sunny glade and here we would find many butterflies, mainly fritillaries, darting around. False Heath Fritillaries, as well as both Small-pearl Bordered and Pearl Bordered were found and we eventually located another of our target species in the shape of Niobe Fritillary.



'Owlfly' *Libelloides longicornis* © Jeff Clarke



Martagon Lily © Jeff Clarke

The trees here were primarily Scots Pines and calling amongst them were Short-toed Treecreepers. It took some time but everyone eventually managed a good view of this cryptic little woodland bird. The forest floor had some lovely plants, including Wood Crane's-bill, Water Avens, Pyrenean Golden-drop, Alpine Skullcap and Greater Butterfly-orchid, although the undoubted highlight was the exotic-looking Martagon Lily.

Most overturned rocks produced little but ants' nests but eventually one gave us a Slow-Worm and a Common Frog. As we began our descent we photographed yet another fritillary, which turned out to be Lesser Marbled. Unfortunately, although we checked the stream at every opportunity, we never found the hoped-for Pyrenean Brook Newt.

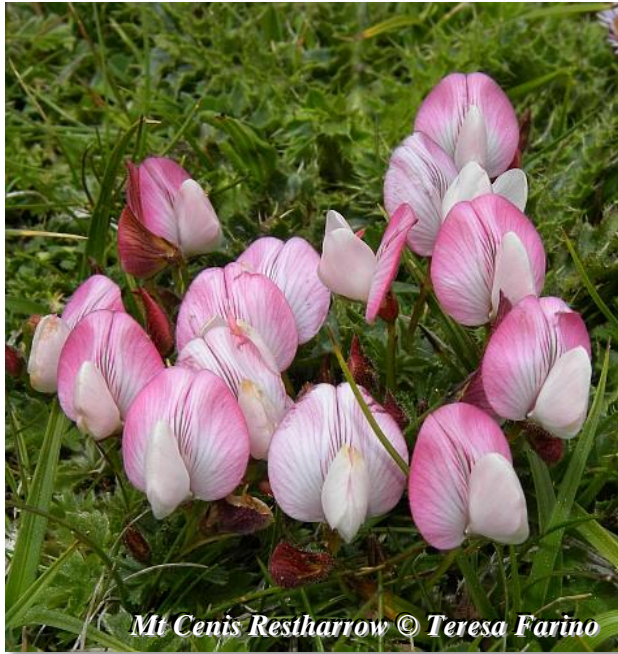
By the time we reached the car park the heat of the day was at last dissipating but it had done its work and we were all pretty tired and ready to return to the hotel for our evening meal.

Saturday 2nd July

A pre-breakfast walk in Prullans proved very rewarding. As we made our way out of the village we could hear the almost electronic 'zink' calls of Rock Sparrows and we eventually found two sitting on a pan-tiled roof. We mooched on down the track and could soon hear Golden Orioles singing. Great spotted Woodpeckers were readily located and Nightingales also sang loudly. After a bit of searching we eventually managed some decent flight views of both male and female Golden Orioles and we also had brief views of a pair of Wrynecks as they stopped momentarily in a dead tree before disappearing into the neighbouring canopy. A male Red-backed Shrike completed a very enjoyable hour.



Lesser Marbled Fritillary © Jeff Clarke



Mt Cenis Restharrow © Teresa Farino

After breakfast we headed for the high spot of the week, arriving at the *telecabina* via which we were quickly transported to just below the summit of Tossa d'Alp. The apparently bleak pastures were in sharp contrast to the lower grasslands, harbouring true alpine plants in typically tight cushions or creeping mats. Among the more eye-catching elements of this limestone pasture were pink Mt Cenis Restharrow, Yellow Oxytropis, crimson Pyrenean Vetch and delightful clumps of Garland Flower and Alpine Asters, as well as the

varied blues of Pyrenean and Alpine Gentians. Ros spotted a low-growing mat of Mountain Avens – the first time Teresa had ever seen this plant here – after which our attention was drawn to the small limestone outcrops by cushions of the related *Potentilla nivalis*.

These rock-gardens turned out to be far more diverse, botanically speaking, turning up saxifrages such as White Musky, Hairy and the charming Reddish, as well as dense cushions of Pyrenean Whitlow-grass and Moss Campion, plus Yellow Wood-violet, *Valeriana apula* and Yellow Genipi.



Alpine Gentian © Teresa Farino

The loose screes, by contrast, hosted Parnassus-leaved Buttercup, Spoon-leaved Candytuft and some colourful clumps of Alpine Toadflax. Here Teresa also located a lone individual of yet another longhorn beetle, this time of the Iberian endemic genus *Iberodorcadion*, which was later identified as *I. fulginator* ssp. *meridionale*.



Spoon-leaved Candytuft © Teresa Farino



Northern Wheatears and Black Redstarts flitted at intervals as we made our slow progress towards the summits. Both cattle and horses were grazing these high pastures and it was interesting to watch the stallions proclaiming dominion over their harems of females. It was an enlivening sensation to be at one of the summits looking down on sun-washed slopes as they were rapidly engulfed by fast rising clouds, which regularly obliterated the view beyond a few metres, before just as quickly clearing once more.



Below our vantage point a small bird belted out a scratchy song. Our first view of an Alpine Accentor, we had an even better view a little later as one searched for insects amongst the broken turf a few metres away. A few Red-billed and Alpine Choughs appeared from time to time, though none came particularly close. A Kestrel appeared briefly but the only other raptors were a few, mostly distant, Griffon Vultures.

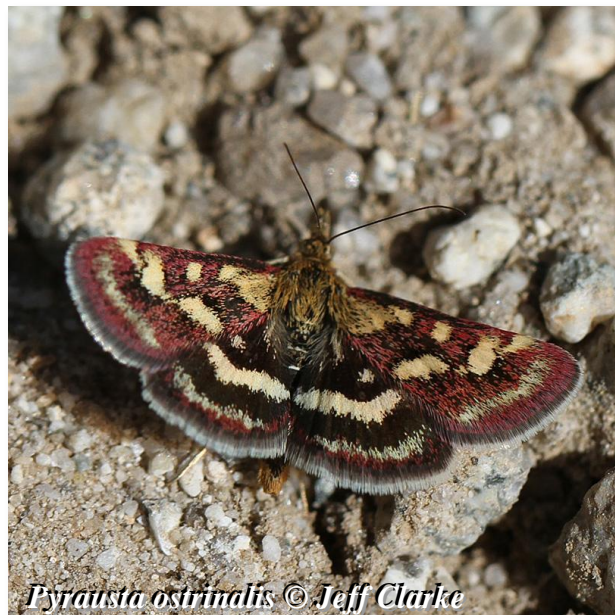
Despite the altitude butterflies were in evidence and Teresa had soon located a Mountain Clouded Yellow. We also encountered a number of 'grizzled' skippers but despite our best efforts we struggled to put a definite name to most of them as their diagnostic characters were intermediate between several species. More readily named were the dainty Marsh Fritillaries of the sub-species *debilis*, found in the scattered, dampish, hollows close to the summit. It's difficult to know precisely why this isn't a species in its own right as it is so markedly different from the nominate form in appearance and habits.

Overlooking the Segre Valley © Jeff Clarke



While the others were birdwatching, Teresa spent a frustrating hour trying to photograph some of the other high-altitude lepidoptera of the peak, eventually claiming moderate success with the very elusive Lefèbvre's and Pyrenean Brassy Ringlets, as well as encountering the pyralid moths *Pyrausta cingulata* and *P. ostrinalis*.

After lunch we began a slow descent and by this time there were good numbers of Scotch Burnet moths darting about. These are a real rarity in the UK, but here we saw



Pyrausta ostrinalis © Jeff Clarke

many hundreds over a period of a couple of hours.

After descending on the *telecabina* we headed for an area of abandoned meadows lower down the mountain.

This proved to be a real butterfly fest. The most notable species found here was the Mountain Alcon Blue but it was just one of many species. Here too we found Safflower Skipper, Amanda's Blue & Knapweed Fritillary, also new for the tour. This grassland–scrub habitat was also particularly good for day flying moths, notably the burnets. Several species were bumbling among the flowers, including Transparent and Slender Scotch Burnets, *Zygaena romeo* and the extravagantly marked *Zygaena hilaris*.



Scotch Burnet © Teresa Farino



Mountain Alcon Blue © Jeff Clarke

All too soon we were out of time. The heat of the day was in rapid decline and the hotel and our evening meal beckoned; the impending thunderstorm further encouraged our departure.

Sunday 3rd July

During another pre-breakfast walk we found many of the same birds as earlier in the week but a group of three Green Woodpeckers calling loudly provided some contrast. This time we couldn't locate the Wryneck but we did have superb views of Golden Orioles as they perched in dead

trees at eye level on the other side of a small valley. The males shone brilliantly in the morning sunlight. We found Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreeper in the wooded valley bottom. A Roe Deer scooted for cover across an adjoining field and as we made our return, Ros spotted a Stoat running off down the track.



Crossbill © Teresa Farino

It was time to explore the area south of the Cadí ridge. We stopped in the village of Bagà at the excellent park information centre, and from here we headed out for a series of short walks around the Coll de Pal, beneath Griffon Vultures coasting along the ridge lines. We stopped for a short time on a picturesque track, where the sound of Crossbills was much in evidence and eventually were rewarded with superb eye level views of both male and female working their way through the pine cones. One male in particular posed for its picture. Here too we had our closest miss with a Black Woodpecker as one

called loudly in flight just below our eye line. Despite our best efforts we could not locate it: a case of not being able to see the Black Woodpecker for the trees!



Searching for alpine flora © Jeff Clarke



Ramonda © Jeff Clarke

We then travelled on a little further to explore a lovely rock garden in an area of old mines. On the cliffs here we found the extremely scarce Ramonda in full flower, including a white version that Teresa had not previously seen in her long experience of these alpine plants. Other notable crevice plants included some fabulous Pyrenean Saxifrages, although these were only just coming in to flower, plus Alpine Pasque-flower, Livelong Saxifrage, Alchemilla-leaved Cinquefoil and Matted Globularia.

The surrounding grassland was more heavily grazed than on Teresa's previous visits but it still harboured many flowering plants and consequently attracted good number of moths and butterflies. Some patches of Viper's Bugloss were particularly favoured by Hummingbird Hawkmoths and occasionally among them would appear a species of Bee Hawk. Among the many Black veined Whites were a number of Apollos. They preferred nectaring on the thistles and one finally consented to be photographed. As we returned to the minibus, everyone had good views of a feeding Moroccan Orange-tip. Previously this had been a fly-by species.



For Teresa, however, the principal highlight here was the substantial longhorns that were flying around the pines, one of which had become trapped in the minibus. Having duly taken its photo for posterity, she was able to later identify it as *Monochamus sutor*.

Isard 'Southern Chamois' © Jeff Clarke



Lunch was taken at a mountain refuge and whilst we enjoyed our delicious picnic Jeff kept a close watch on the nearby ridge. The weather conditions had created a perfect up-draught and a succession of Griffon Vultures began to use it as a commuting route. After only a few minutes a couple of flattened-winged shapes approached. A shout of encouragement brought the

group scrambling across and reaching for binoculars. Slowly but surely the two shapes approached and resolved themselves into a pair of majestic Lammergeiers. As exciting as that was it got better, the pair came close and for a few moments circled low overhead before finding a thermal and drifting off down the ridge. We saw many fantastic birds during this week but I'm sure everyone would pick out this encounter as their most memorable ornithological moment of the tour.

From here we moved on to the Coll de Pal itself. By now the weather was decidedly dull, though still warm enough for butterflies to be on the wing. We spied a distant Isard and, having watched some people pass fairly close to it without it taking fright, we decided to take a closer look. It was a fair old climb but eventually we got to within less than 100m of the creature: close enough to get reasonable photographs. It watched us cautiously and then resumed feeding, so we left it in peace. On our descent we found a few 'Vanilla' orchids *Nigritella austriaca* ssp. *iberica*, including at least one specimen still in good condition and next to it Ros also spotted some Moonwort.

In the meantime, Teresa had taken a different track, working the stream as she searched for more high-mountain butterflies. These were remarkably cooperative in the cool, dull conditions, posing with open wings as they tried to absorb what little solar heat was available, so she ended up with some reasonable images of both upper and under wings of



Vanilla Orchid © Jeff Clarke

two small lycaenids, enabling her to identify them as Glandon and Eros Blues, neither of which we saw elsewhere during the trip, unfortunately.

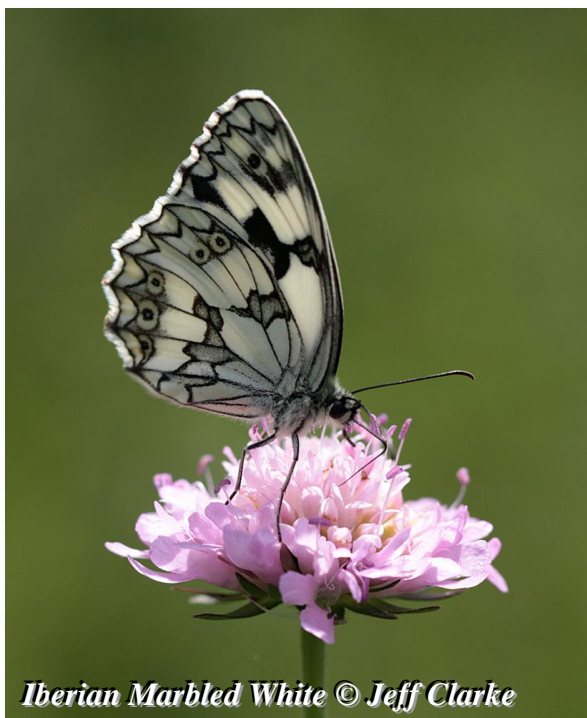
Teresa also had a somewhat unexpected sighting of a Wallcreeper at the top of the ridge, which she called in on the walky-talky but the ominous build up of cloud looming in our direction meant there was little incentive for the rest of the group to march back up the hill again to join her. We sat and watched both members of the Chough family fly through. Our lone Isard was joined by at least twenty others and at least one Alpine Marmot declared its presence among the boulder fields. The first spots of significant rain were beginning to fall as we clambered aboard the mini-bus, just in time! The light levels fell so low it was like late dusk and soon the rain was pounding down as thunder and lightning crashed around the mountainside. We took that as our cue to head for home.



Glandon Blue © Teresa Farino

Monday 4th July

This was to be another day of high altitude exploration as we headed for the picturesque Prat d' Aguiló, on the north side of the Cadí ridge, via the Estana Valley. Using Teresa's 4x4, we began our slow ascent along the tracks, passing a recently harvested hay field in the centre of which sat our only Crested Lark of the week.



Iberian Marbled White © Jeff Clarke

We stopped in an area of open pine woodland and spent an hour in the pleasant morning sunshine searching out the butterflies and plants. We didn't add any new species of butterfly here but there was a good range to be seen. As at so many places, the most abundant of the larger butterflies was the Iberian Marbled White, but we also saw Glanville and Knapweed Fritillaries here. Bird-wise this spot was dominated by Garden Warbler and we eventually had good views of a territorial male.

The limestone crags here provided us with some lush cushions of Tufted Catchfly, with

the enigmatic Stemless Cotton-thistle and the rather inappropriately named *Galium maritimum*, with brownish flowers, growing in the loose soil at the base.

We then drove the track to the limit and parked up overlooking a large area of pine forest. Immediately the sound of Crossbills and Citril finches could be heard but we searched in vain for Black Woodpecker. We began our slow climb across the high pastures of the *prat* towards the Serra del Cadí itself, clad in stunted pines and limestone scree.



As we crossed the slopes we found Linnets, Black Redstarts, Serins and large numbers of Citril Finches. We had superb scoped views of several family parties of the latter sitting on dead branches scattered across the pasture.



As we reached the pine belt at the back of the *prat* the cloud began to build. We entered the pine woodland in search of some different plants and here we found the exquisite One-flowered Wintergreen. All around too we found evidence of Wild Boar, the turf turned over by their snuffling snouts. The rumbles of thunder gave us pause for thought and it was obvious that the weather was about to intervene on our progress, so we began our descent to the mountain refuge, all the while enjoying more great views of the Citril Finches.

The air had cooled significantly and the delicious hot chocolate drink at the refuge was most welcome. Once the weather improved slightly, Jeff and Eluned put some time in trying to tease out a Wallcreeper on a nearby cliff and boulder field. Our luck was out though but we did hear another Alpine Marmot. It was time for a reassessment and lunch.

We ate overlooking the pine forest to the north and presently a group of Griffon Vultures slowly progressed through the mountains just below our eye level and not too far away. A small cliff by the car park contained some superb examples of Pyrenean Saxifrage in full

flower: this plant is no shrinking violet, with some of the massed flower spikes measuring well over 60cm in length. The weather window held just long enough to complete lunch before the heavens really opened and rain stopped play. We headed for the hotel and made good use of our time by carrying out most of our packing.

By late afternoon the rain was a memory and it gave way to a lovely sunny evening and we took the opportunity to head back out to the Bee-eater colony near Sanavastre. As we approached the gravel pit, three Black Kites circled with lazy flaps and slowly drifted away eastwards. A Kestrel hunted close by and we had stunning views in dazzling light of the 'rainbow' birds. Several pairs were drifting around and we worked our way across the area to get the light behind us for maximum effect, the dipping sun emphasizing their colours. Other birds here included Corn Bunting and 'Spanish' Yellow wagtail, while Tree Sparrows explored some of the quarry cliff holes and small numbers of Spotless Starling passed by. The occasional Skylark took to the air to proclaim its territorial rights. Northern Wheatears fed chicks recently out of the nest, Common Whitethroats chased about in the willows at the water's edge and the most self-effacing Great Reed Warbler once again shunned the limelight.



Pyrenean Saxifrage © Jeff Clarke

Tuesday 5th July

With just a few hours left before we needed to be back at the airport in Barcelona, we decided to head towards Martinet for a pre-breakfast stroll. A misty morning promised a glorious day ahead. We enjoyed a circular walk from the car park, during which Golden Orioles yodelled above our heads but kept to the leafy canopy of the Poplars, so the river provided most of the interest, with Grey and White Wagtails and at least a dozen Common Sandpipers. Sadly, however, we once again 'dipped' on the Dipper.



Chalk-hill Blue © Jeff Clarke

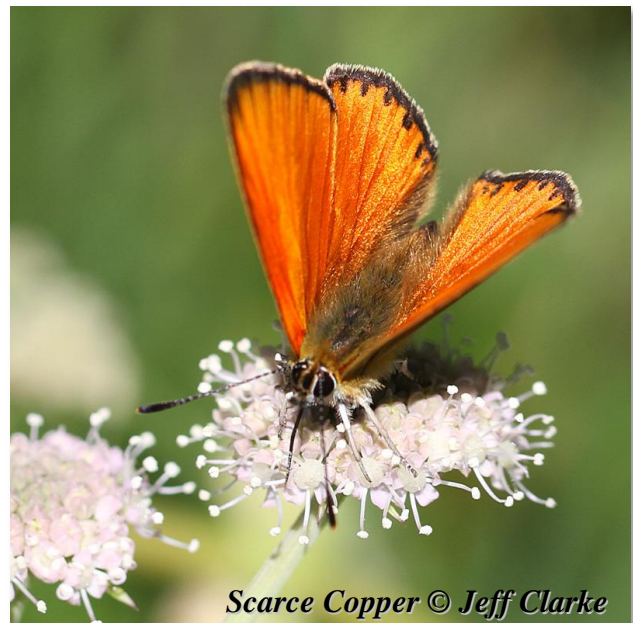


Purple-edged Copper © Jeff Clarke

We packed up the vehicles ready to head for our principal location of the day: the meadows and glacial lakes above Meranges. Our first stop found us exploring a small boggy meadow and pine woodland. The place was filled with coppers; Sooty and Purple-Shot were commonplace, but here too we found our first Purple-edged Coppers, while spectacularly iridescent Scarce Coppers were finally seen by the whole group. The males fizzed over the flower tops in territorial flight before resuming their watch from a favourite flower

head. As ever, a number of blue butterflies were nectaring on the profusion of wildflowers and we added Chalk-hill Blue to the trip list.

Before long the heat was really building and that, together with the high humidity, prompted us to head higher, so we drove to the first of the lakes at Malniu. We enjoyed our final picnic as Citril Finches called from the surrounding Scots Pine trees and then circumnavigated the lake in search of butterflies and dragonflies. Several distant darters remained unidentified but a single Scarlet Darter posed obligingly on a rock for Jeff and Eluned before scooting away. Teresa was concentrating on the damselflies in the marginal vegetation and when she got home, realised that she had inadvertently taken a picture of mating Spearhead Bluets, which are confined to the Pyrenees in Spain: a very pleasing first for her to end the trip on!



Scarce Copper © Jeff Clarke

Fritillaries darted around but never seemed to settle to allow positive identification, so our hoped-for Shepherd's or Mountain Fritillaries were not to be. Our last Griffon Vultures of the trip glided effortlessly along the adjacent ridge and an Alpine Marmot called at quite close quarters but we couldn't locate it. We found our final bird species of the trip near the outfall of the lake, a family part of Mallards.

So it was time to say our thanks and good-byes to Teresa, climb aboard the mini-bus for the final time and head for the stifling heat of Barcelona airport, then home.

Summary

As is invariably the case on a wildlife holiday to Spain, this had proved to be a fascinating week, jam-packed with a rich and varied selection of flora and fauna. As always, we missed things we had hoped to see but found others that we'd not expected. The scenery and atmosphere of the mountains was at times truly magical and the company and conversation was lively and stimulating. Whether you were a birder, a botanist or an invertebrate enthusiast there would be much to remember and enjoy about the trip. This report only skims the surface of what we, as a group, recorded and as ever there were a number of species seen only briefly by the leaders that the other participants missed, which we have not included in the trip list totals. We amassed 85 species of butterfly, 90 species of birds and uncounted but substantial numbers of day flying moths, dragonflies, damselflies, reptiles, amphibians and mammals. The botanists also enjoyed a superb range of alpine plants, many of which have very restricted world distributions. It is only when you visit such a landscape that you appreciate catastrophic loss of floral and invertebrate diversity and abundance suffered in the UK over recent decades. Thankfully there remain a few special places like La Cerdanya that are within easy reach and where it is still possible to see a mass of butterflies dancing in the sunshine across flower-filled meadows.

We hope that those of you thinking about exploring this area in search of its special flora and fauna will be inspired by the potential highlighted in this report. If you are interested in joining one of our future tours, or perhaps even bringing your group across for a tailor made tour, then please check our websites for our up-to-date tour schedules and contact details.



For information about future tours please visit our websites:

Jeff Clarke: <http://www.jeffclarkeecology.co.uk/>

Teresa Farino: <http://www.iberianwildlife.com/teresa-farino.htm#Teresa-Farino-Trips>

Jeff Clarke & Teresa Farino 2011