

# Les Cévennes

Saturday 2 – Saturday 9 June 2007

## Trip report

### Leaders:

Mike Lockwood

Didier Azéma

### TRIP DIARY

An excellent trip, with a bumper (28) crop of orchids, of which all but two or three were in good enough nick to be photographed. On the other hand the fairly wet spring and the cool conditions of the previous week and the week we were in Les Cévennes did no favours for the butterflies and we ended with a respectable but unremarkable total of just over 50 species. In the end, the warm weather of the final two days came just a couple of days too late. However, the Clouded Apollos were where they should be and we had excellent views of very fresh Chequered Blues and a Purple-shot Copper.

Birdwise, everything behaved as it should, and we had excellent views of all the target species. The highlights were undoubtedly the Alpine Swifts and Black Vulture in quick succession and the numerous male Rock Thrushes on the same day (Thursay – Nîmes le Vieux).

The finding of a dead *Gomphus grasilini* clubtail dragonfly gave us hope that a few more dragonflies might be forthcoming on the rivers, but alas the weather and time of day never really coincided to give us a chance to look on the river Tarn for any of the *Gomphus* or *Onychogomphus* species that the area is noted for.

And of course, the Beavers and lady's slipper orchids: to arrive at the beaver site and find two Beavers sitting waiting for us on the opposite bank was a guide's dream come true!, whilst the scramble down to the orchids did not seem nearly as difficult as the previous year. As well, they were in better condition than in 2006.

A personal highlight was the previously mentioned Alpine Swift – right place, right time, the endemic *Ophrys avonini*, the recently emerged Chequered Blues, and Didier's Walter Raleigh impersonation!

### Saturday 2 June

#### NÎMES AIRPORT – FLORAC

Weather: windy with clouds and a few patches of sun.

It was a delight to meet a group at an 'intimate' airport such as Nîmes, and so we were soon away through the outer Nîmes ring-road (with no sign of the Roman amphitheatre or Pont de Gard) and on the main road to Florac. After passing through the mining town of Alès, with Grey Heron and Little Egret on the River Gardon, we had a quick refreshment stop in a lay-by with Green-veined White and Clouded Yellow flying around the uncut patches of grass. We were in Florac by 5.30, and so we decided to recovene at 6 for a stroll around the town and the park.

In the wooded gardens behind the Chateau that serves as the offices of the Cévennes National Park we were pleased to find uncut meadows replete with meadow clary *Salvia pratensis*, wood crane's-bill *Geranium sylvaticum* and wood scabious *Knautia dipsacifolia*, although without any butterflies in attendance. Under the trees the pink flowers of the knotted crane's-bill *Geranium nodosum* stood out.

Birdwise, the hotel had Serin in the car-park and the town Black Redstart on the roofs. Looking up to the cliffs behind the town a Black Kite cruised past and then a little later on five Griffon Vultures. Once over the waterfall, which Didier explained was one of only six such outlets for the rain that falls on the

plateau of the Causse Mejean, we entered the park land and stopped next to a conifer full of Firecrests. For once, with a bit of patience, we all got views of this most elusive of birds. A Spotted Flycatcher and male Serin alternated on a dead branch and a couple of Crag Martins gave us a fine aerial display over the amphitheatre (modern).

We continued back to the hotel, noting Grey Heron, Dipper and Grey Wagtail on the stream near the fish farm.

### **Sunday 3 June**

#### **ISPAGNAC – CAUSSE SAUVETERRE – LES BONDONS – EL BRIANÇON – RIVERS TARN & TARNON**

Weather: cloudy with light wind and patches of sun.

A good start to the trip with a bit of everything!!

After leaving the hotel our first stop was a corner of a meadow on the road up to Didier's village, where he promised us that the lizard orchids *Himantoglossum hircinum* were in flower. We were not disappointed, and we were delighted to find in the same field pyramidal *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, bee *Ophrys apifera* and woodcock *O. scolopax* orchids. We also had views through the telescope of an obliging male Red-back Shrike and a Cirl Bunting, whilst a Nightingale sang in the background. As we were leaving, a solitary blue butterfly struggled onto the wing, which we were able to identify as a Provençal Short-tailed Blue.

We rejoined the main road and wound up the road onto the plateau of Le Causse Sauveterre, stark rolling limestone grassland populated with pine plantations. We stopped at a spot that Mike and Didier know that sometimes has a few of the large yellow flowers of *Adonis vernalis* hanging on until June. And lo and behold! –we found two smart flowers in the shade of a pine, whilst all around only the well mature seed heads and leaves were on display. Quite a find!

Poking around the dry limestone we also came across mats of *Coronilla minima*, white rock-rose *Helianthemum appenninum*, Montpellier milk-vetch *Astragalus monspeliense* and white flax *Linum suffruticosum*. Hidden away in the woods there were a few white helleborines *Cephalanthera damasonium* and a stand of alpine aster *Aster alpinus*, very common in this part of the world. We all also admired a group of 12 burnt-tip orchids *Orchis ustulata*, a solitary tassled hyacinth *Muscari comosum* and a stand of *Leucanthemum graminifolium*, an ox-eye daisy endemic to southern France. Allen found a rose whose leaves, when crushed, smelt of apple, which turned out to be apple rose *Rosa villosa* agg. Woodlarks and Skylarks sang above us, a Quail called and, once back at the van, a family of Crested Tits performed in a pine just over our heads.

We moved onto some meadows that lie exactly on the contact zone between the granite uplands and the cultivable limestone grasslands. Here we able to enter freely into the meadow and wander to our heart's content. The flowers on the granite grassland were almost too numerous to mention: lots of great yellow gentians *Gentiana lutea* not quite out yet, small clumps of bistort *Polygonum bistorta*, arnica *Arnica montana*, pheasant-eye's daffodil *Narcissus poeticus*, spiked rampion *Phyteuma spicata* and star of Bethlehem *Ornithogalum umbellatum*. A number of deep red common pasque flowers *Pulsatilla vulgaris* were still in bloom, along with just a few of the thousands of elder-flowered orchids *Dactylorhiza sambucina*, both yellow and red. Further into the meadow we started to find heath spotted *Dactylorhiza maculata*, fragrant *Gymnadenia conopsea* and a single early marsh *Dactylorhiza incarnata* orchids. Allan noted mats of knawel *Scleranthus perennis* growing on the granite boulders.

Skylarks filed the air and a Griffon Vulture floated into view. Just a few butterflies were about: a Grizzled Skipper of some description, Clouded Yellow and a Glanville Fritillary nectaring on thyme. As we wandered back to the van, Didier found a Large Red Damselfly in a small pond, and the botanists Allen and Jack noted *Dianthus sylvaticus*. Once back on the road again we looked at a group of common twayblades *Listera ovata* growing by the wayside.

Hunger was upon us and so we headed off for lunch at Les Bondons, two curious pimple-like hills set in rolling limestone grassland.

At lunch, an Osiris Blue chose Didier's hand to sit upon and a group of three Short-toed Eagles flew past at short range in front of us. We were also especially struck by the number of Large Whites that was flying past. Mike pointed out that they were flying due north and were on migration. As we sat and watched, they were passing at a rate of about 5 a minute, with the odd Small White, Clouded Yellow, Red Admiral and Brimstone also heading north. Northern Wheatears sat on a nearby fence as Corn Buntings reeled and Quails did what Quails do in the background.

Our post-prandial stroll through the grassland produced Red-back Shrikes on the bushes and a slightly elusive male Rock Thrush on a fence post in the mid-distance. Other finds included a solitary frog orchid, a Natterjack Toad under a stone (well found, Jennifer!), lots of Lackey Moth caterpillars and fossil ammonites in the soft mudstone. The flower highlights were clumps of cupidone *Catanache caerulea*, brown vetch *Lathyrus setifolius* and a golden-drop *Onosma fastiagata*.

From here we picked up the windy road that dropped back down towards Florac, stopping at a bridge over the river Briçon in the woods. We walked up the road a while, noting on the low schist cliff pink patches of rock soapwort *Saponaria ocymoides*, the white-flowered rock cinquefoil *Potentilla rupestre*, the large leaves of orphine *Sedum telephium*, *Anthemis saxatilis*, small clumps of forked spleenwort *Asplenium septentrionale* in the cracks in the rock, a clump of a mignonette *Reseda jacquinii*, the bright pink *Silene armeria*, daisy-leaved toadflax *Anarrhinum bellifolium*, and Nottingham catchfly *Silene nutans*.

And then we had a purple patch of butterflies: a couple of Piedmont Ringlets nectaring by the road, fresh Chequered Blues basking, an incredibly new Purple-shot Copper and, whilst we were admiring the copper, a Duke of Burgundy Fritillary was spotted basking on the bushes behind. Finally, before leaving, we had time to admire a number of Greater Butterfly Orchids in the woods.

Our final destination was the river Tarn near Quézac (where the famous bottled water comes from). The afternoon was warmish, but it didn't seem to do much for the dragonflies and we only found a couple of male Western Demoiselles. A Meadow Brown and Black-veined Whites brought our butterfly tally for the day to an end. The botanists found the day's best pyramidal orchid and a large Venus' looking-glass *Legousia speculum-veneris*. And from here, we still had time to go to a final spot on the river the other side of Florac, where we slumped on the rocks (covered in tufted catchfly *Silene saxifraga*) and watched a total of 26 Griffon Vultures fly over high above us, surely on their way to roost.

## **Sunday 4 June**

### **MT. LOZÈRE – MEADOWS NEAR PONT DE MONTVERT – BARRAGE DE VERNÈDE, RIVER TARN**

Weather: cloudy with rain in the afternoon

A long day, with the obvious highlight of the pair of inquisitive beavers.

We started the day by going for a pre-breakfast stroll into the park at Florac. Our haul for the morning was similar to the afternoon of arrival: Serin, Wren, Blue Tit and Spotted Flycatcher. However, we were able to add to the list Nuthatch and a couple of lizard orchids growing almost like weeds. However, the find of the morning must go down to Sue and Steve who found most of a *Gomphus graslini* on the street in Florac, a species of dragonfly endemic to southern France and the Iberian Peninsula.

Once breakfasted, we drove up through the town of Pont de Montvert, famous for its connections with Robert Louis Stevenson and the Camisards, and on up into the granite pastures high above the river Tarn. At our first stop singing Whinchats came quickly into sight, although there were few other birds. We picked up a grassy path and headed down into a lightly grazed pasture where we admired a single great yellow gentian in full flower. As we poked around the pasture we found similar plants to the granite pastures from the day before: spiked rampion, pheasant-eye's daffodil, heart's ease *Viola tricolour* and fragrant orchid. Under the trees near the stream we found scented Solomon's seal *Polygonatum odoratum* and yellow archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon*.

The sun was trying to come out but not really succeeding. Few butterflies other than an Olive Skipper and Green Hairstreaks were stirring. However, as we returned to the gate Didier spotted a female Sooty Copper, which in the low temperatures, stayed very still for all to see.

Back at the vans, the sun brought out a few more butterflies, including a Queen of Spain Fritillary, Common Blue and Small Copper. Just as we were going to leave, Mike heard a Wryneck calling and on walking back down the road managed to spot it on the obligatory dead branch. After much scampering to and fro with scopes, we all got views of it and were even able to appreciate the paler lines down its back.

We moved onto some higher meadows, which had more of the same in terms of the flora. Nevertheless, one of the day's highlights was spotted by Lorna on a rock on the other side of a field: a male Quail calling from on a rock, fully out in the open. After even more scurrying with the scopes, we were all able to see its throat and head moving as its called out its 'Whet my lips' call. In the same area we also found a striking male Yellowhammer and Whitethroats.

We walked back towards the vans, stopping to admire the bistort-full meadows with attractive patches of globe flowers *Trolium europaeus*. From behind the ruined hamlet of L'Hospitet, a site once occupied by the Knights Templars, we wandered gently along another track into a small patch of beeches. A Chiffchaff called and as we returned, the sun brought out a few Piedmont Ringlets, Pearl-bordered Fritillaries and a Scarce Swallowtail.

Lunch was next on the agenda, which we had in a meadow just below the ruined village. Pure peace and quiet were only interrupted by Mike finding a female Broad-bodied Chaser and a few Pearl-bordered Fritillaries sailing by.

As the weather was rather threatening, we decided that it was best to move downhill to the Tarn Valley. Our smooth progression was interrupted only by a male Hen Harrier on a rock, which we all saw well (although the child lock's on Mike's van kept a few trapped in the bus for a while!!) as it cruised over the rough grazing. A little further down we stopped for a Short-toed Eagle, which proceeded to fly low over our heads and hover over the pasture just behind where we had parked the van. Superb views of its big deep wingbeats.

A little further down the road we stopped again for a second Short-toed Eagle (and an Adonis Blue) before reaching Pont de Montvert at the bottom of the hill. From here we headed away from the village up along a narrow valley to a good parking place in the woods. Here, we walked up along the stream admiring the bankside vegetation full of alpine leek *Allium victoriae* and the striking tall umbellifer *Mololonspermum peloponnesiaicum*. Also hiding away in the gloom near the river were a few white flowers of aconite-leaved buttercup *Ranunculus aconitifolia* and in the woods, large-flowered sandwort *Arenaria grandiflora*. Butterfly-wise, a Wood White flitted past, a Speckled Wood basked in a brief patch of sunshine and we all watched a Scarce Swallowtail and a Sooty Copper nectaring on a patch of time.

We turned around after a little away along the track and headed back down the road, where Stephen and Mike got an all too brief view of a Green Lizard with its shiny blue head. Next to the road in more open habitat the roadside banks were covered with *Saxifraga continentalis*, the bright red *Silene viscosa*, rock cinquefoil, clumps of forked spleenwort, while in the meadow below there were a few great yellow gentians in flower, pheasant-eye's daffodil and the pink flowers of great meadow-rue *Thalictrum aguilegiaefolia* spotted by Mike through binoculars. Mike then heard a Black Woodpecker calling and, to our surprise, the bird appeared from the wood and flew over the valley in front of us a little way down the road. Most of us saw it, although not all with binoculars.

As the thunder was starting to rumble, Mike and Didier went back for the vans and we returned home early to prepare for the evening's Beaver hunt. First, however we walked into Florac for a visit to the National Park shop and a cup of much deserved coffee in the square.

After dinner with cherry liquor from the hotel as a gift, and under darkening skies, we bundled into the vans to head for the dam with Didier's Beavers. After almost running over a Hare, success was immediate as we arrived, for on the far shore of the lake two Beavers were sitting out in the open and we all had wonderful views in the scope. And as is their wont, they swam towards us to check us out, reaching to within 50 m of where we were standing, before turning on their fat tails and heading for their lodge and disappearing underwater. A large bat skimmed the surface of the water, which the bat experts stated was almost certainly Daubenton's Bat. Didier led the group around towards the lodge, where we could see evidence of the Beaver's activity – trees gnawed through and fallen into the water and barkless branches stripped by the Beaver's sharp teeth.

And so ended a long day.

## **Tuesday 5 June**

### **LE CAUSSE MÉJEAN – MEYRUEIS**

Weather: Mainly cloudy, odd patch of sun.

The day we saw the lady slipper orchids!! (and 15 other species of orchid).

We got away from Florac smartly at around 9.15 and climbed up out of the Tarn valley and onto the limestone plateau of Le Causse Méjean, stopping briefly for a group of circling Griffon Vultures (around 30) and then a Black Kite.

Our first stop was at the local aerodrome where we stood in vain amongst myriads of Skylarks trying to find a Calandra Lark.

The next stop was less planned, however, as Mike spotted a Stone Curlew flying across the road ahead. It landed in a field and we stopped in the road (luckily, not busy) and we all able to enjoy views through the scope of this strange bird.

Soon we pressed onto our main stop of the day, Roc des Hortous, an excellent viewing platform over the Tarn Valley. First, we had to negotiate the café at the entrance, which charged for parking and entrance into the gardens. Then, after a coffee we headed off through the grassy meadows at the edge of Le Causse in pursuit of Didier, who had gone on ahead to prepare the rope (sic)!

There was an immediate profusion of orchids: man *Aceras antropopum*, military *Orchis militaris*, fragrant, common spotted *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* orchids and white helleborine. Under a tree we found good numbers of bird's-nest orchid *Neottia nidus-avis* and the last remaining plants of a number of crested lousewort *Pedicularis comosa*. A fly orchid *Ophrys insectifera* caught our attention just as we met up with Didier again to begin the descent towards the lady slipper orchids *Cypripedium calceolus*, the main aim of the day's excursion.

Didier led us through the woods and down a path that wasn't really as steep as Mike had painted it. On the last 100 m it was good to have the rope to guide us, but in no time at all we were photographing the 11 or so lady slippers that were in flower in the clearing. They were probably just slightly past their best, although one was all but perfect and none had actually lost its colour. Once spiritually refreshed, we started to ascend, this time taking better note of the lily-of-the valley *Convallaria majalis*, pale-green wintergreens *Pyrola chlorantha* and the yellow flax *Linum campanulatum* in the understorey, and made it up to the top in no time. From here we returned along the same path to the vans to get the picnic, only interrupting our walk for a good look at a group of three violet limodores *Limodora abortivum*.

We had our picnic in a field, enlivened by a female Field Cricket and a solitary Chapman's Blue (ithout extra spot), and then, whilst Didier went off to retrieve the luggage from Florac, Mike and the rest went for a wander in the woods. We could hear Bonelli's Warblers clearly, but failed to get a good view. After a short circuit, we returned to our picnic site and headed slowly along the road as we waited for Didier. Our most remarkable sighting were two bushes of deadly nightshade *Atropa belladonna* and black nightshade *Solanum nigrum*, to add to the black henbane also along the roadside, three poisonous plants all belonging to the Solanaceae family.

Once reunited with Didier, we head off across the Causse towards Meyrueis, admiring a number of romantic stone villages before stopping at the *lavogne* (cattle pond) near Hures. The lack of sun and muddy edges meant that the hoped for mud-puddling butterflies were absent. However, in their stead, there were numerous dragonflies on the wings: lots of Four-spotted Chasers chasing each other, rather fewer Broad-bodied Chasers, an Emperor, a few Large Red Damselflies and myriads of Azure Damselflies. The prize, however, and a new species for Mike, was a single Downy Emerald that was cruising the far edge in company with the chasers.

From here we moved on to another *lavogne* (after a quick stop to try and see the Rock Sparrows we could hear and for a female Montagu's Harrier) at Drigas. This was rather more disappointing, with no dragonflies or butterflies, and just some egg balls belonging to Midwife Toads (which we heard calling as we were leaving). A Tawny Pipit singing from a nearby post was some consolation. We all enjoyed,

however, the flock of sheep that came past with the sheep dogs out in front! Estimates varied from 400-800 sheep in all.

By now it was getting late, and so we headed for Meyrueis along the back roads, stopping for another female Hen Harrier and a Short-toed Eagle hovering just over the road.

### **Wednesday 6 June**

#### **LE ROZIER – LE GROTTÉ DE DARGILAN**

Weather: Cloudy in the morning and then rain in afternoon until around 4.

An enjoyable if slightly wet day.

We began the day with a pre-breakfast jaunt to a *lavogne* up on the Causse Noir to the south of Meyrueis. Little was moving in the cloudy morning, although the telescope brought us good views of Common Whitethroat and Cirl Bunting; the persistently calling Hoopoe refused to show itself. Walking back to the road, however, Mike spotted a couple of orchids that, on closer examination, turned out to be yellow-lipped fly orchids *Ophrys ayoninis*, a locally endemic version of the more familiar fly orchid we had seen the day before. Away on the other side of the road we looked at many more orchids, including military and burnt tip and a remarkable group of more than 50 bird's-nest orchids.

After breakfast we drove down the valley of the river Jonte to its confluence with the river Tarn near the village of Le Rozier. Here, we picked up a track that led us to the abandoned village of Capluc, perched in the shadow of the cliffs of the Causse Méjean.

We noted all the true Mediterranean species of shrub and flower on the way up the steep track: turpentine tree *Pistacia terebinthus*, Etruscan honeysuckle *Lonicera etrusca*, Mediterranean buckthorn *Rhamnus alaternus*, Saint Lucie's cherry *Prunus mahaleb*, Montpellier maple *Acer monspessulanum*, Osyris *Osyris alba* and *Dorycnium pentaphilum*. As well the lizard orchids were well in flower and there were numerous all but over flowers of burnt candytuft *Aethionema saxatile*.

Once at a little plateau, we rested. However, the cloudy day was preventing the Griffon Vultures from getting airborne and we had to make do with views from afar of birds perched on a cliff over on the other side of the valley. A Jay flew past calling in a very strange fashion and a Red-billed Chough sat on the nearest rock pinnacle. A high fly-over Alpine Swift left nobody satisfied and there was no sign of either Peregrine or Blue Rock Thrush. Our first and only butterfly of the morning – a Pearly Heath, no less- stretched its wings briefly before allowing itself to be photographed at will.

We picked up a small path on the left of the rock pinnacle and entered the shady Scots pine *Pinus sylvestris* and downy oak *Quercus pubescens* woods in search of more orchids. At first we noted a group of Coal Tits, which then we revised to include a family group of Marsh Tits. As well, we enjoyed the fine clumps of blue aphyllanthes *Aphyllanthes monspeliensis* and the large umbellifer *Laserpitium siler*. Other flowers included pale-green wintergreens and two very small red helleborines *Cephalanthera rubra*. We reached a small ruined building nestling under the cliff and had a quick look at a small spring where we found Fire Salamander larvae and, thanks to Steve's photo, Palmate Newt larvae.

At this point it started to rain and so we decided to make a hasty retreat back to where we had planned to have lunch, the little plateau. However, as the rain continued to fall we beat our retreat as far as the vans and went off to Le Rozier for lunch in a bar. After a bit of debate, we found a bar where we could eat our quiche and have a drink.

With the rain not letting off, we decided on a drive through the Causse Noir to see if we could see anything interesting and a visit to Le Grotte de Dargilan, one of France's most famous caves. Our drive through the colourful wayside was most noticeable for a couple of lesser butterfly orchids *Platanthera bifolia*, and as the rain continued to fall we reached the entrance to the cave. As wet-weather options go, Dargilan is one of the best: over a kilometre of lit chambers and tunnels, full of the most amazing coloured tumbling stalactites and mounting stalagmites, as well as curtains of petrified waterfalls and mysterious lakes and streams.

Moreover, at the cave exit the low cliffs were full of fairy foxglove *Erinus alpina*, Cadí sandwort *Arenaria ligericina*, one large Pyrenean bell flower *Campanula affinis* and a small tuft of the endemic

*Saxifraga cebennensis*. As we regrouped a Common Whitethroat sang from on top of a spot-lamp and a Black Redstart fed in the grass below us.

As the rain had stopped we decided to go for a wander near Meyrueis in what was left of the afternoon, not before we had stopped at some large rocks next to the road, where Mike made us all admire *Saxifraga cebennensis* again. We whizzed through Meyrueis and out on the road we had entered in on the previous afternoon. We parked up a back road and wandered along the road through glorious pastures coloured yellow by the yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor* and blue by the blue aphyllanthes. Choughs played around the cliff-top up to our right and a Tree Pipit sang from a wire.

Just before cutting up right on a track, some of us had brief views of a male Rock Bunting “two bushes” back. Elizabeth and Lorna had views as the bush in front swayed and revealed the singing bunting behind. A little further along, a Melodious Warbler provided equally brief views for Jennifer.

We found a few blues – Common, Osiris and Silver-studded – in the grass just as the rain recommenced, and sent us back at a dignified pace. Elizabeth had excellent close-up views of the Tree Pipit on the wire, and Didier pointed out the egg case of a Praying Mantis and made everyone smell the lizard orchid, to make us understand why it is called the ‘sheep orchid’ in French.

### **Wednesday 6 June**

#### **NÎMES LE VIEUX – LA CAUSSE MÉJEAN**

Weather: Cloudy in the morning but improving as the afternoon went on until the storms built up.

A day on the Causse Méjean that seemed to get better as it progressed.

We headed for the rock chaos of Nîmes le Vieux and, once parked up at the hamlet of L’Hom, we began to follow one of the National Park’s marked trails towards an area of rugged rock pinnacles and spires. We soon found a male Rock Thrush on one of the more distant spires, but as the morning wore on, we began to have better views of other males in the scope. Eventually, one male chose to sit fairly close and perform its song flight as we watched him in his red, white and blue splendour. One of our other target birds, Ortolan Bunting, also appeared fairly early on in the morning: a singing male on another rock pinnacle, somewhat further away, but still with his green head visible through the scope. The tops of the rock pinnacles were also occupied by Tree Pipit, Woodlark and Black Redstart. A Sparrowhawk circled in the background.

Flower-wise, most of the low-growing but colourful flowers were familiar from other days: alpine aster, white rock-rose, the small-flowered *Helianthemum oelandicum* in profusion, the odd burnt orchid, mountain kidney vetch, and the yellow *Coronilla minima*. Once at the top of the first climb, we stopped and searched amongst the rock pinnacles for rock-loving plants: Mike found a bush of the white alpine mezereon *Daphne alpina* at arm’s length and then the related but much smaller garland flower *Daphne cneorum*, also growing out of a rock face.

We retraced our steps, and then cut across the rock chaos to pick up another path that was to take us to the tallest pinnacle with the best display of *Saxifraga cebennensis*. On the way in a little dell just as the sun started to break through a few butterflies began to fly – Common and Adonis Blues, Heath Fritillary, Meadow Brown, Small Heath and numerous skippers, the only real group of butterflies that proved to be numerous.

At the top of this next climb and in the shade of the large pinnacle we all admired the stunningly beautiful clumps of the locally endemic saxifrage before we decreed it was lunch-time and started to descend towards the village of L’Hom. On the way down, with sun now promising to beat down fairly strongly, we noted three Honey Buzzards gliding northwards on flat wings – almost certainly late migrants – and a group of three ravens. Back down in the village we suddenly heard the wheezing sound of Rock Sparrows and were pleased as one came and perched on a wire in front of us. All had good views of this noisy little bird and of a Black Redstart on the roof of a nearby building.

We drove off to lunch, stopping only for a superb male Rock Thrush on a wire just 40 m from the vans.

Lunch was taken in the shade for the first time, with a number of butterflies beginning to show in the meadow in front of us: Glanville and Knapweed Fritillaries chased each other and a Wood White, Adonis Blues and Brown Argus added support to the numerous skippers. From the tree we were

sheltering under we watched as 20 or so Griffon Vultures flew over and then as three Short-toed Eagles appeared from behind the rocks, one calling.

After lunch we headed across the grassy and brilliantly colourful *causse* towards the cliff edge we could envisage in the distance. The yellows of the *Coronilla minima*, the lilac *Aster alpinus* and the shimmering white of the feather grass *Stipa pennata* was an unforgettable sight. We found a going-over early purple orchid *Orchis mascula* and numerous burnt-tip orchids, fast becoming our commonest orchid. As we reached a field edge and were forced to turn right to reach the cliff-edge, Didier suddenly spotted a perfect bug orchid *Orchis coriophora*, our 27th orchid for the trip. It was much photographed before we proceeded to the cliff edge itself, where we had stunning views across to Mont Aigoual and down to the valley below at our feet. Sitting and relaxing in the sun, Jennifer suddenly cried "Alpine Swift", and lo and behold, two of these fine birds flew over, did a couple of low circles and then disappeared, all in full view of the whole group.

Encouraged we continued along the cliff edge and just as we were about to enter a small wood of planted pines Griffon Vultures started to fly low along the cliff just above our heads. First one Griffon, then another and then a Black Vulture, the bird the rain on Wednesday had stopped us from seeing. Again we all got good views, and even had some kind of view from the scope as it circled rather too far away for comfort.

At this point the clouds seemed to be building up rather seriously and so we hastened back towards the vans, with Didier doing his Sir Walter Raleigh impression with his coat and a barbed-wire fence (who said gallantry was a thing of the past?!), and not before Sue and Steven had found a lady orchid! – not the freshest, but identifiable as such with her petticoat still showing. Orchid n° 28! Didier ran to get one bus and we all then managed to get back into our respective vans more or less as the first raindrops fell. In the end the rain amounted to a storm in a tea-cup and so on the way home along side the high cliffs of the *causse* we had time to examine the wonderful views from the van.

We ended the day with a late-night excursion around the back roads of the Causse Méjean. At our first listening stop, a Nightingale did its best to drown out all other noises, although we also make out the continuous babbling of Skylarks and the calling of more than one Quail. A little further on a second stop was rather more productive: first a distant Stone Curlew, and then a chorus, with what eventually sounded like two birds flying close by but unseen in the night sky. We continued on to the village of Drigas, and then back towards Meyrueis. Mike's bus had a quick glimpse of a European Nightjar off to the right of the road, and on the main road coming back into Meyrueis we all saw a number of fat Common Toads waddling slowly across the roads.

A fine end to a long and productive day.

### **Friday 8 June Mt Aigoual**

**Weather: warm and mainly sunny.**

For our final day we headed off to the granite slopes of Mt. Aigoual, confident by now that the week's rain had finished and that we could ascend the slopes of one of the windiest places in the world!

Our first stop was on the banks of the River Bonheur just before it disappears into a giant cave only to reappear some hundreds of metres lower down at the foot of a giant chasm. We strolled through the meadows full of the two-coloured red trefoil *Trifolium rubens* and with the by now familiar Red-backed Shrike present on the telephone wires. Sue found a Garden Warbler singing in a bush.

Down by the stream we found our first Mazarine Blue, as well as a couple of Common Blues and skippers 'nectaring' on the burnt edges of an old cardboard box. Who knows what they were finding there! In the meadow itself next to the stream, a female Beautiful Demoiselle took the morning sun, and butterflies included a tatty Green-underside Blue, well past its best, Sooty Copper, Scarce Swallowtail, Queen-of-Spain Fritillary, Speckled Wood and Red-underside Skipper. There were plenty of burnt-tip orchids, more bug orchids to add to the two we had found the day before, a clump of pheasant-eye's daffodils and the giant liliaceous leaves of autumn crocus, with its large fruits right at the base of the leaves.

Soon we moved onto the next meadow, this time on the granite and deep in the fir and beech forest. It proved to be rather dry and the highlight turned out to be mating Sooty Coppers, an attractive Speckled

Wood nectaring on the bright yellow flowers of Austrian leopardsbane *Doronicum austriacum* and a Piedmont Ringlet.

From here it was uphill still further towards the summit of Mt. Aigoual, although there was an urgent stop to be made for Clouded Apollo on the way. We were in luck, as the early morning sun had brought these rare butterflies out, but the clouds that were forming as we arrived had stopped them flying and left them easy to find on flower heads (they stop flying as soon as the sun goes in!). We found one almost immediately next to the path and then as we got our eyes in there more appeared. However, as soon as the sun broke through they were upon the wing again immediately.

We went for a short stroll in the woods as a family group of Marsh Tits flew past to find Mike's patch of May lilies *Maianthemum bifolium* in the heart of the beech wood. We struggled somewhat and just found a couple of flowers in bloom, few in number but well photographable.

By now it was lunch- and coffee-time, and so we drove to the summit of Mt. Aigoual to picnic next to the café and conveniences on the summit. On a clear day Didier told us that you can see the Alps, Pyrenees and the Mediterranean Sea from this wonderful view-point. We had good views, especially northwards towards the Causse Méjean, but the views of the sea and Alps will have to wait for another day.

Our post-prandial excursion was a short walk to find a few of the remaining wild tulips *Tulipa australis* that hide in the forest on the summit. There were still enough left in flower to enjoy, although the best of the show must have been about a week ago. From here we had a brief stop at another small meadow and found a couple of red elder-flowered orchids still in good nick. Whilst we were sitting relaxing a Common Wall Lizard paraded itself over the rocks in a small gully, visiting each rock one-by-one and giving us all close-up views in turn.

From the summit it was –logically- downhill to one of Mike's favourite areas of meadows. However, this year they were exceedingly quiet and after watching a Broad-bodied Chaser sit on a stick that Jim had planted next to a pond, we decided to walk down the road instead of through the meadows to see what we could find. Alas, butterfly-wise there was very little to report; a Short-toed Eagle showed well on the hillside opposite.

Mike decided that we would have to lose height to find any butterflies and so we picked up the narrow road we were walking along and dropped down about 300 m in the hope of a flowery, butterfly-rich meadow. We were in luck as by the roadside nectaring on the viper's bugloss *Echium vulgare* we found crowds of Black-veined Whites, with a supporting cast of Small Skipper and False Heath, Pearl-bordered & Niobe Fritillaries, the latter our first and only 'large' fritillary of the trip. On the low roadside cliffs we found *Reseda jacquinii*, mountain sheep's bit *Jasione montana*, forked spleenwort, daisy-leaved toadflax, orphine and an attractive thistle *Centaurea pectinata*.

To round the day off we stopped at a road-side bridge and braved a 'No entry' sign to wander over an old bridge over the river Tarnon. The main attraction here was a group of over 80 Black-veined Whites mud-puddling with 2 Common and 1 Adonis Blues on the track.

And to finish off the day, in our upstairs gazebo, where we convened to write our lists, we found a trapped Large Tortoiseshell, struggling to get out of a window! It was photographed and then liberated.

### **Saturday 9 June Meyrueis – Nîmes Airport**

Our first task in the morning was to go to the local tourist office to buy a copy of Didier's book on alks in the Tarn Valley, which he dutifully signed.

And then it was a relaxed drive to Nîmes airport, with a quick stop at the viewing site overlooking the fantastic Viaduc de Millau. After a quick stop for petrol, we arrived at the airport in good time for a final picnic in the departure lounge! On the way we noted 2 White Storks, a Bee-eater, 2 Wood Pigeons and a Turtle Dove to add to the week's tally.

**BIRDS, LES CÉVENNES, JUNE 2007**

Species	2/6	3/6	4/6	5/6	6/6	7/6	8/6	9/6	Comments
Grey Heron	X	X	X	X					Along river Gardon; breeding colony in woods behind Florac
Little Egret	X								Along river Gardon
White Stork								X	Two from motorway on way to airport
Mallard	X	X							On river Tarn
European Honey Buzzard						X			Three on migration at Nîmes le Vieux
Common Buzzard				X		X			Singles on 2 days
Black Vulture						X			One overhead along cliffs near Nîmes le Vieux
Eurasian Griffon Vulture	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	Everyday bar one, with groups of up to 30.
Short-toed Eagle		X		X	X	X	X		Groups of three on two occasions; pairs on two occasions
Black Kite	X			X					Along road from Nîmes; one on Causse Méjean
Sparrowhawk		X				X			Two individuals: Les Bondons & Nîmes le Vieux
Hen Harrier			X						Male on Mt. Lozère
Montagu's Harrier				X					Two females near Drigas on Causse Méjean
Common Kestrel		X	X	X	X	X	X		Regular in open areas
Common Quail		X	X	X	X	X	X		Heard and even seen!
Red-legged Partridge					X				One heard on Causse
Stone Curlew				X		X			One seen near airstrip; 3-4 heard in evening near Drigas.
Yellow-legged Gull								X	On way to airport
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Wood Pigeon								X	On way to airport
Turtle Dove								X	On way to airport
Eurasian Collared Dove	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Common Cuckoo		X	X	X	X	X	X		Heard every day
European Nightjar						X			One seen near Drigas in dark
Alpine Swift					X	X			Bad view near La Rozier; excellent of pair near Nîmes le Vieux
Common Swift	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Eurasian Hoopoe		X			X				Heard near Tarn and near waterhole near Meyrueis
European Bee-eater								X	On way to airport
Eurasian Wryneck			X						One calling and seen on Mt. Lozère
Great Spotted Woodpecker			X					X	Heard occasionally
Green Woodpecker			X				X		Heard occasionally
Black Woodpecker			X						One seen near Pont de Montvert

Woodlark		X	X	X		X			Common in upland open areas
Eurasian Skylark		X	X	X		X	X		Very common in upland open areas
European Crag Martin	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		In Florac and elsewhere
Common House Martin	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Barn Swallow	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
White Wagtail	X	X		X		X			Occasional sightings
Grey Wagtail	X		X						On river Tarn near Florac
Tree Pipit			X		X	X	X		In open areas with trees
Tawny Pipit				X					Near water hole at Drigas
Red-backed Shrike		X	X	X	X	X	X		Everywhere with bushes and open areas
White-throated Dipper	X								On river in Florac
Wren		X							Heard occasionally
Rock Thrush		X				X			At les Bondons and Nîmes le Vieux
Common Blackbird	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		Seen daily
Mistle Thrush					X				Seen near water hole near Meyrueis
Song Thrush							X		Heard on Mt. Aigoual
European Robin	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		Heard or seen daily
Common Nightingale	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Heard or seen daily – very common
Black Redstart	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		Heard or seen daily –common around villages
Common Stonechat		X	X	X		X	X		Not rare in open areas
Whinchat			X						Common on Mt. Lozère
Northern Wheatear		X	X	X		X			Common in open areas
Melodious Warbler					X				One near Meyrueis
Subalpine Warbler					X				One near Meyrueis
Garden Warbler					X		X		One singing and one seen
Blackcap	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		Singing or seen everyday
Common Whitethroat		X	X			X	X		In upland areas with tall bushes
Western Bonelli's Warbler					X	X	X		In conifer stands
Chiffchaff			X		X		X		In beechwoods and conifers.
Firecrest	X	X		X			X		In conifers in park in Florac and elsewhere
Spotted Flycatcher	X	X							In park in Florac
Coal Tit			X		X		X		In conifers
Crested Tit		X	X		X		X		In conifers
Great Tit	X	X	X		X		X		Common
Blue Tit	X	X	X		X	X	X		Common
Marsh Tit					X		X		Near Le Rozier and on Mt. Aigoual
Short-toed Treecreeper		X							Hear in park in Florac
Eurasian Jay	X	X			X	X			Common
Black-billed Magpie	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Abundant
Red-billed Chough					X	X			Near Le Rozier and Nîmes le Vieux



## BUTTERFLY AND OTHER INVERTEBRATES, LES CÉVENNES, JUNE 2007

Species	2/6	3/6	4/6	5/6	6/6	7/6	8/6	9/6	Comments
Scarce swallowtail			X			X			Occasional
Clouded apollo							X		Mt. Aigoual
Black-veined white		X	X	X	X	X	X		The commonest species by far
Large white		X	X	X		X	X		Seen on migration most days
Small white	X	X	X	X		X	X		Common
Green-veined white	X								Scarce
Orange-tip			X	X			X		Regular
Clouded yellow							X		Here and there
Berger's clouded yellow							X		
Brimstone		X							One migrating with Large Whites
Wood white		X			X	X			Here and there
Green hairstreak			X						Rough pastures with bushes
Small copper			X						Here and there
Sooty copper			X				X		Common in humid meadows
Purple-shot copper		X							One fresh male
Provençal Short-tailed blue		X		X					Recorded in humid meadows
Osiris blue		X			X				Recorded in meadows with <i>Onobrychis</i> sps.
Holly blue						X			
Green-underside blue							X		One very worn butterfly
Chequered blue		X							Two very fresh males
Silver-studded blue					X				Roosting in cool weather
Brown argus					X				Here and there
Mazarine blue							X		Appeared at end of week
Chapman's blue				X					Causse Méjean
Adonis blue		X				X	X		Present on limestone and granite
Common blue		X	X	X	X	X	X		Commonest Lycaenidae
Duke of Burgundy fritillary		X							One basking near river Briançon
Large tortoiseshell							X		In hotel!
Peacock						X	X		Here and there
Red admiral		X				X	X		On migration
Painted lady		X	X	X		X	X		On migration
Small tortoiseshell		X					X		At altitude
Comma			X			X			
Niobe fritillary							X		Fresh individual

									nectaring on <i>Echium</i>
Queen of Spain fritillary		X	X	X		X	X		Common
Pearl-bordered fritillary			X			X	X		Commonest fritillary
Glanville fritillary			X			X			Here and there
Knapweed fritillary				X		X			Here and there
False heath fritillary							X		Nectaring on <i>Echium</i>
Heath fritillary				X		X			
Piedmont ringlet		X					X		On granite of Mt. Lozère and Mt. Aigoual
Meadow brown						X	X		Appeared in second half of week
Small heath		X	X	X	X	X	X		Most widespread species
Pearly heath					X				Just one butterfly
Speckled wood		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Wall brown		X	X	X		X	X		Common
Large wall brown						X	X		
Grizzled skipper		X	X	X		X	X		Commonest group of butterflies
Olive skipper		X	X			X	X		Common
Safflower skipper						X			Causse Méjean
Red-underwing skipper						X	X		
Dingy skipper		X	X	X		X			Common
Small skipper							X		Nectaring on <i>Echium</i>

Species	2/6	3/6	4/6	5/6	6/6	7/6	8/6	9/6	Comments
ODONATA									
Western Demoiselle		X							Two on river Tarn
Beautiful Demoiselle							X		One female on river Bonheur
Large Red Damselfly		X	X	X					Mt. Lozère and lavogne
Azure Damselfly				X					Hundreds at lavogne near Hures
Emperor Dragonfly				X					One at lavogne near Hures
Downy Emerald				X					One at lavogne near Hures
Gomphus graslini		X							One found dead in Florac
Four-spotted Chaser				X					Good numbers at at lavogne near Hures
Broad-bodied Chaser			X	X			X		4-5 at lavogne near Hures

**Additional invertebrates (compiled by Hugh Griffiths)**

**Beetles**

*Cantharis rustica* a soldier beetle 06/ 04 10:07  
*Chrysomela populi* Poplar Leaf Beetle 06/03 17:07

**Bugs**

*Carpocoris purpureipennis* a shield bug 06/03 15:29  
*Coreus marginatus* Dock Bug  
*Dolycoris baccarum* Sloe Bug 06/07 09:52  
*Elasmotethus interstinctus* Birch Shield Bug 06/02 16:42  
*Eurygaster* sp. (*maura/testudinaria*) a shield bug 06/03 12:03  
*Graphosoma lineatum* Striped Shield Bug 06/03 15:01  
*Lygaeus pandurus* Pistachio Red Bug 06/02 16:38  
*Lygaeus equestris* 06/03 14:15  
*Psacasta exanthematica* a shield bug 06/06 10:24

**Caterpillars**

*Eriogaster lanestris* Small Eggar 06/05 17:06  
*Cuccullia* sp. 06/05 15:02  
*Malacosoma neustria* Lackey Moth - just about everywhere

**Moths**

*Autographa gamma* Silver Y  
*Chiasmia clathrata* Latticed Heath 06/03 15:29  
*Callistege mi* Mother Shipton  
*Euclidia glyphica* Burnet Companion 06/04 09:53  
*Macroglossum stellatarum* Hummingbird Hawkmoth  
*Odezia atrata* Chimney Sweeper 06/03 14:24 Every day.  
*Pseudopanthera macularia* Speckled Yellow 06/04 15:02  
*Scopula ornata* 04 10:23  
*Siona lineata* Black-veined Moth 06/03 15:08

**Others**

*Episyrphus balteatus* Marmalade Hoverfly  
*Libelluloides coccajus* (*Ascalaphus libelluloides*) 06/03 14:30  
*Xylocopa violacea* Carpenter Bee 06/04 15:15 - just about everywhere

## ORCHIDS, LES CÉVENNES, JUNE 2007

Species	2/6	3/6	4/6	5/6	6/6	7/6	8/6	9/6	Comments
Lady slipper orchid				X					Roc des Hortous
Broad-leaved helleborine				X					Roc des Hortous, but only in bud
White helleborine		X		X	X	X			Well gone-over
Sword-leaved helleborine				X	X	X			Most in fairly good condition
Red helleborine					X				Small but out
Greater butterfly orchid		X		X	X	X			Common
Lesser butterfly orchid					X				Road to Dargilan
Common twayblade		X		X		X			Common
Lizard orchid		X			X		X		Very common; fully in flower at lower altitude
Violet limodore				X					Roc des Hortous
Pyramidal orchid		X		X	X	X			Very common on limestone
Burnt-tip orchid		X		X	X	X			Very common
Early purple orchid						X			One going over near Nîmes le Vieux
Lady orchid						X			One going over near Nîmes le Vieux
Bug orchid						X	X		Two near Nîmes le Vieux and 10 river Bonheur
Frog orchid		X							On Les Bondons
Military orchid		X		X	X	X			Common
Early marsh orchid		X							One granite pastures near Les Bondons
Elder-flowered orchid		X					X		Two red form still in good condition Mt. Aigoual
Heath spotted orchid			X				X		Common on limestone
Common spotted orchid		X		X	X	X			Common on acid
Fragrant orchid		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Bird's-nest orchid				X	X				Groups of up to 50 on Causse Noir
Man orchid		X		X	X	X			Fairly common
Fly orchid				X					Roc des Hortous
Yellow-lipped orchid					X				Near <i>lavogne</i> near Mayrueis
Bee orchid		X							Near Ispagnac
Woodcock orchid		X				X			Near Ispagnac and Nîmes le Vieux