

Val d'Aran

Sunday 29 June – Sunday 6 June 2008

Trip Report

Leader:

Mike Lockwood

Sunday 29 June

Toulouse Airport – Salardú

Weather: hot, with increasing cloud

After a rather slow departure (problems with the luggage carousel), we drove away from Toulouse airport and negotiated the *périphérique* without too many problems.

En route, we counted 63 Black Kites, beating last year's record, as well as a number of Common Buzzards and Common Kestrels. We entered the Vall d'Aran through the non-existent customs post and began to see signs in a strange language that was to be one of the intellectual curiosities of the week: Aranese, a dialect of Occitan that is still spoken in the Vall d'Aran and which was very much present in the names of the places we were to visit.

We arrived in the light rain, but once in the hotel we were able to witness the original diluvium and had to borrow umbrellas to scamper to the restaurant for the night's dinner.

Monday 30 June

Artiga de Lin

Weather: bright and warm at first, overcast and stormy in the afternoon

We awoke to find blue skies and so headed off to Artiga de Lin for our first full day in the field. On the way we had a quick stop for a raptor, a Black Kite, not as common up in the mountains as down on the plain. On the road through the woods most of us had a fleeting glimpse of a Pine Marten as it scurried along side the edge of the river below the road. Once parked at the end of the road, we decided that, given the sun, to head straight up towards the cliffs at the head of the valley and do some butterflying with the botany.

First up outside the van was a slightly faded Bath White and then Mazarine Blue, Safflower Skipper and the first of many Chimney Sweeper moths. We continued up through the pastures, hearing Bonelli's and Garden Warblers, Chiffchaff, Nuthatch and Great Spotted Woodpecker in the woods away to our left. Overhead we had our first Red-billed Choughs and floating Griffon Vultures.

The flora was dominated by large clumps of Irish spurge *Euphorbia hyberna*, with lots of Pyrenean violet *Viola pyrenaica*, common columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris*, wood crane's-bill *geranium sylvaticum*, the tall not-quite-out spikes of great yellow gentian *Gentiana lutea* and a single, perfectly in flower Pyrenean lily *Lilium pyrenaicum*. The large rocks scattered around the pastures held alpine buckthorn *Rhamnus alpinus*, livelong saxifrage *Saxifraga paniculata*, lots of fairy foxglove *Erinus alpinus*, with wood saxifrage *Saxifraga umbrosa* sheltering at their base and a single Norway maple

Acer platanoides growing on top. Butterflies included Orange-tip, Piedmont Ringlet, Black-veined White, Small Blue and, before long, our first Clouded Apollos. An excellent sighting was a female Large Blue egg-laying on thyme.

We were getting further away all the time from the cow-grazed area and up into the pure alpine flower communities. We hit a memorable area of flora: horned pansy, *Viola cornuta*, the seed heads of many Pyrenean snake's-heads *Fritillaria nigra*, lots of lily-of-the-valley *Convallaria majalis* in full flower, swallowwort *Vincetoxicum hirundinaria*, mezereon *Daphne mezereum*, trumpet *Gentiana acaule* and spring *G. verna* gentians, mountain avens *Dryas octopetala* on a small rock, leafless-stemmed globularia *Globularia nudicaulis*, blue-leaved rose *Rosa glauca*, many alpine pasque flowers *Anemone alpina* still in flower and, best of all, the perfect flowers of narcissus-flowered anemone *A. narcissiflora*.

Other floral delights included the low, ground-hugging least willow *Salix herbacea*, rock redcurrant *Ribes petraeum*, scented Solomon's seal *Polygonatum odoratum*, a single frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*, fragrant orchid *Gymnadenia conopsea*, lots of alpine calamint *Acinos alpinus*, alpine aster *Aster alpinus*, one-flowered fleabane *Erigeron uniflorus*, mountain kidney vetch *Anthyllis montana* and the small silvery flowers (in fact, the silvery colour comes from the flower's small papery bracts) of *Paronychia kapela*.

We continued up the ever-steepening path towards the cliffs until we were stopped in our tracks by the call of an Alpine Marmot. Looking around, we failed to see one of these furry creatures, but did locate with the binoculars three chamois on the mountainside up to our right.

Eventually we reached the snow patch and sat down to rest amidst the wonderful floral variety. Mike wandered around and came across a Northern Wall Brown, his first ever, which we all photographed despite its torn wing. We found some even better examples of Mike's favourite flower, the narcissus-flowered anemone, along with the strange leaves of Thore's buttercup *Ranunculus thora*. Over on the cliff we could see magnificent spikes of Pyrenean saxifrage *Saxifraga longifolia*, just too far away to photograph. Overhead Ravens circled and an Alpine Chough called from the summits.

We decided it was time to descend and just after picking up our things a crack of thunder determined that we would descend rather quicker than planned. We beat a dignified if slightly hasty retreat to the van, where we had our picnic amidst a light shower, which threatened more than it actually delivered.

After lunch, we decided to walk the short circuit via the waterfall despite the lightly spitting rain. The roadside pastures held livelong saxifrage *Saxifraga paniculata*, clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata*, Nottingham catchfly *Silene nutans*, Welsh poppy *Mecanopsis cambrica* (a favourite of the gardeners) and more great yellow gentian *Gentiana lutea*. As we headed towards the forest one of the most eye-catching plants to be seen was goat's-beard spirea *Aruncus dioicus*, characterized by its long fingers of white flowers. As well, we chalked up heath spotted orchid *Orchis maculata*, alpine gypsophila *Gypsophila repens*, the attractive yellow pea *Lathyrus laevigatus* with its yellow-turning-to-orange flowers, alpine sow thistle *Cicerbita alpina*, red campion *Silene dioica*, Pyrenean valerian *Valeriana pyrenaica* with its massive leaves, sweet William *Dianthus barbarus* and yellow archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon*. By the side of the road we identified Norway maple, which exudes a white-latex like a spurge if you break off a leaf, and large-flowered butterwort *Pinguicula grandiflora* in a boggy patch.

After about 500 m along the road, we turned right down a track and headed down to the river at the base of the spectacular waterfall. After admiring the crashing water and enjoying its sound for a while, we crossed over a small bridge and headed up a steep path into the dank silver-fir forest. First stop were a couple of flowers of herb Paris *Paris quadrifolia*, and then later on in the woods we found aconite-leaved buttercup *Ranunculus aconitifolius*, adenostyles *Adenostyles alliariae*, another plant with huge leaves, and broad-leaved marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza majalis*.

We returned to the van, and decide to head homewards via the back route through the forest. On the way down we stopped at a boggy wayside meadow with a flush dominated by the tall brook thistle *Cirsium rivulare*, the cotton-grass *Eriophorum angustifolia*, ragged robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi* and meadow sweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, all decorated with a number of tall pale yellow flowerheads of the *Stachys alopecuros* subsp. *godroni*.

On the alternative route home and after a pleasant run through a dank fir forest, we stopped at Ròca de Sèrra, an excellent viewpoint over the valley. Here, we wandered along the road, found common *Digitalis purpurea* and straw *D. lutea* foxgloves, as well as ling *Calluna vulgaris*, an attractive cushion of the bright red rock soapwort *Saponaria ocymoides* next to the road, common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, spreading bellflower *Campanula patula* and red deadnettle *Lamium purpureum*.

We stopped at the sound of Crested Tits, and then also found we could see and hear a Blackcap, group of Marsh Tits, and then a family of Coal Tits. At this point the piercing call of a Black Woodpecker rent the air and we all had good if quick views of one of these majestic woodpeckers as it flew over the forest and along the road behind us. A little further along Mike spotted a Short-toed Eagle cruising high above us across the forest.

Mike went back to get the van, and once back with the group found that they had seen another Black Woodpecker. We carried on a bit further and stopped at a wet flush with more marsh *D. majalis* and spotted orchids *Orchid maculata*, as well as common butterwort *Pinguicula vulgaris*, perforate St. John's Wort *Hypericum perforatum* and a solitary Pearly Heath, our only butterfly of the afternoon!!

And with that, it was time to call it a day after a very successful first day in Era Val d'Aran.

Tuesday 1 July

Vall de Toran - Bausen

Weather: warm, humid and thundery

The day dawned bright again, but somewhat fresher and with the promise of a more storm-free day. Given the good morning weather, we decided to head straight to the Toran valley and leave the Middle Spotted Woodpecker until the afternoon. From the road we had our daily Black Kite and also our only Grey Heron.

We headed straight for Mike's favourite emperor spot, only to find that there was no puddle. So we ate a quick couple of bananas and left the skins next to a pile of salt sacks in the hope that they would mature somewhat over the following days. Over on the other side of the road the butterflies were warming up nicely in a small meadow. Our first sightings included Orange-tip, Green-veined White (whose males smell of lemon), Wood White, a brilliant male Scarce Copper, another Large Blue laying eggs, Mazarine and Holly Blues, lots of Marbled Fritillaries and Ringlets and a rather tatty male Sooty Copper. We headed back to the van and just as we were getting in an emperor flashed past and settled on the road just in front of the van. Mike had time to identify it as Lesser Purple Emperor, and then it was gone. Our only view of an emperor in the whole week!

We moved on to more patches of meadow, recording Pearly Heath, Large, Essex and Dingy Skippers, White Admiral and Bright-eyed Ringlet. By the roadside we noted a lot of rose campion *Lychnis coronaria*, a garden escape, and sweet William *Dianthus barbatus*, as well as twayblade *Listera ovata* in the meadows.

After lunch taken at last year's Large Chequered Skipper spot, we drove up to the end of the valley and parked up in the woods. Our after-lunch stroll took us along a track heading up into the valley in the shade of a mixed forest of beech, European silver-fir *Abies alba* and Norway maple. In the shade of the forest and streams we found yellow pimpernel *Lysimachia nemorum* more yellow pea, accompanied by more goat's-beard spiraea, the leaves of hepatica *Anemone hepatica*, kidney saxifrage

Saxifraga hirsuta, with leaves superficially like the previous day's wood saxifrage, lesser wintergreens *Pyrola minor*, striped toadflax *Linaria repens*, alpenrose *Rhododendron ferrugineum* and a collection of ferns - hard *Polystichum lonchitis*, holly *Blechnum spicant*, the latter with both its sterile and fertile stems, and beech *Thelypteris phegopteris*.

Butterfly-wise the highlights were more Clouded Apollos, our only Spotted Fritillary (very fresh) of the week, numerous Heath Fritillaries and a smart male Mazarine Blue. Over the far hillside cruised a number of Griffon Vultures, with amongst them a single Hobby flying off at a rate of knots.

We reached the end of the track at a bridge over the stream, just downhill from a small reservoir. Here we paused awhile and Mike noticed below a small skipper that turned out to be a Chequered Skipper nectaring on the geraniums. A new butterfly for Mike for the Pyrenees!! Retracing our steps, we added Pearl-bordered Fritillary to our steadily expanding butterfly list, and Stella spotted a number of *Epipactis* orchids, which will now even as I write be flowering into broad-leaved helleborines *Epipactis helleborine*. Another find was a Scarlet Tiger, spotted by Jim basking in the grass (the moth, not Jim!). Once back at the van, we made a short detour into the woods for an area with a lot of yellow bird's-nest *Monotropa hypopitys* in the undergrowth.

It was now woodpecker time, and so we headed for the village of Bausen. We chose to drive straight into the village itself for a little poke around before dropping downhill into the English oak forest.

We walked out through the village and quickly noted a young Black Redstart, still with its yellow gape and Crag Martins. Just outside the village we came across two Spotted Flycatchers on a telephone wire, two young Goldfinches drinking from a puddle and a further couple of Serins. Suddenly we heard a woodpecker call and Mike located a bird in a tree just below the track. Excitement mounted as we all saw that it had a red cap – but our spirits dropped as it flew across the field, showing its relative size and true colouration – a young Great Spotted Woodpecker!

We continued along the track and Mike walked into a meadow and shouted out “Chequered Skipper”. We all entered the field and then Stella saw the “dancing butterfly” skip across the meadow and onto a scabious. We all got quick views of the Large Grizzled Skipper before this glorious little creature danced off, not to be seen again. The first ever sighting for the species in Catalonia outside the Toran valley!!

We decided to celebrate by stopping for refreshment in a bar in the village run by a young couple from near Barcelona. They explained how they had only been open a few months and how this village of some 40 people had once had 4 bars and 500 inhabitants!

We weathered a shower in the bar and set off down the road in the van to try and find the woodpecker. We parked up on a verge and wandered down along this quiet road through the oak woods. Our first sighting, though, was to be a couple of Great Sooty Satyrs on the road edge, followed by a couple of clumps of daisy-leaved toadflax *Anarrhinum bellidifolium* on the verge. We reached a sharp bend in the road with excellent views over the valley and settled down to watch for whatever might come along.

First of all the butterflies around a buddhlea grabbed our attention: a male Purple-shot Copper on a leaf and a Painted Lady nectaring. Then, in quick succession a Woodland Brown wandered past, a number of Purple Hairstreaks showed themselves on the oaks, a Large Wall Brown appeared on the plants below, and two Honey Buzzards flew up the hillside close to us, but unfortunately were quickly lost into the sun and behind the hillside. A Short-toed Eagle appeared high in the sky. By now the sun had come out again and we were all sweating profusely in the very humid afternoon sun.

Mike decided to go back and get Lin, who had stayed to rest in the bus. Once she had arrived we immediately saw a Great-banded Grayling below and Pearly Heath posing on the metal crash barrier. Such a purple patch of observations couldn't last, especially as it was getting late. Nevertheless, we still had time to watch a female Peregrine circle over the hillside in front of us, but had to leave her to hunt as we headed for home.

Wednesday 2 July

Pla de Beret

Weather: warm, cloudy, breezy and clear after lunch.

For the first time we headed up the valley away from Vielha and towards the ski station of Baquiera-Beret and, more specifically, Pla de Beret, a vast area of open grazing where the Atlantic (in the guise of the river Garonne) and the Mediterranean (river Noguera Palleresa) meet.

We stopped at the source of the Garonne, a long way from the eventual destination of its waters on the Atlantic at Bordeaux, and began by admiring the many Water Pipits that were calling and singing around us. At the same spot we picked up a smart male Yellowhammer, heard our first Skylarks and saw our first Northern Wheatears. We walked across the short turf to a boggy stream, where we found greater butterfly orchid *Platanthera chlorantha*, a single frog orchid and a patch of heath spotted orchids, as well as alpine bartsia *Bartsia alpina*, Tofield's asphodel *Tofieldia* (who was Tofield?), a single flower of arnica *Arnica*, whorled or verticillate lousewort *Pedicularis verticillata* and long-leaved butterwort *Pinguicula longifolia*. Also here we found a number of very small common frogs, a Piedmont Ringlet, an Olive Skipper with a very poorly marked upper hindwing and a Common Blue Damselfly.

On a highly colourful neighbouring limestone outcrop we admired the common rock-rose, alpine aster, Montpellier milk-vetch *Astragalus monspessulanus*, livelong saxifrage, matted globularia *Globularia repens*, mountain kidney-vetch, fairy foxglove and common houseleek *Sempervirens tectorum*.

We returned to the van and drove a little way across the Pla de Beret and parked in the car park that serves a number of the ski station's chairlift. Despite the ugliness of the ski installations, there were good birds to be seen. First, however, a quick view of a small pool (seemingly being drained by the ski-station operatives) produced a number of Four-spotted chasers and a Broad-bodied Chaser. Birdwise, we were soon in luck: a pair of Citril Finches flew down and almost landed at our feet. Then a couple of Red-billed Choughs followed closely by a single Alpine Chough that appeared out of nowhere but that was not to be attracted by an offering of salted almonds. Overhead the first Griffon Vultures began to stir, and then Mike noticed a "blackbird-like" bird fly into a solitary bush. On further searching, we found a couple of young Ring Ouzels being fed by a parent bird. Turning around, Mike located a male Rock Thrush perched upon a rounded boulder, and we all had views of it through the 'scope.

We picked up a track towards a large cave from where one of the number of streams in this karstic area was issuing. We found a purple square metre: we first noticed a fresh Duke of Burgundy Fritillary, and as we were looking at it we realised that there were also a number of frog orchids and spring gentians there, as well as a Large Red Damselfly! Further up the track along side the stream we found lily-of-the-valley, alpenrose (rhododendron) in flower, and right at the little cliff, limestone oak-fern *Gymnocarpium robertianum* and a patch of rock valerian *Valeriana montana*.

Retracing our steps, we found a perfect male Mazarine Blue, which was quickly followed by a group of Crossbills that flew overhead with their familiar 'chipping' call. Flower-wise, we noted moonwort *Botrychium lunaria*, patches of mountain avens, garland flower *Daphne cneorum* alongside its congener mezeron *D. mezereum* and round-headed rampion *Phyteuma orbiculare*. Once up onto a little rocky slope, Stella found *Iberis sempervirens*, with its pink top and stinking hellebore *Helleborine foetidum*. Further along we noted a patch of chives *Allium schoenoprasum* and as we were coming back down to the stream, both meadow *Saxifraga granulata* and white musky *Saxifraga moschata* saxifrages and a clump of *Asperula hirta* on a small cliff.

Across the river we came close up for the first time to a beautiful yellow patch of Pyrenean broom, which denoted that we were no longer on the limestone. This small scree cliff also held clumps of

Saxifraga pentadactylis, the yellow flowers of coinia *Coinya cheiranthos*, Nottingham catchfly and two more house leeks, mountain *Sempervivum montanum* and cobweb *S. arachnoideum*.

By now it was lunch time and we sat near a marshy area of the Pla de Beret in the hope that the clouds would finally pass over and give us a chance to look for some dragonflies. Alas, the line of clouds was moving very quickly and so had to be content with a single Four-spotted Chaser. Nevertheless, no one remembered the dragonflies when the Lammergeier flew over!! Mike spotted it over the hillside over the other side of the Pla de Beret and it moved towards us and we all had good views as it disappeared away over the peaks to our right. At last!

We drove off with a spring in our tyres and headed back down towards Salardú, parking at a bend in the road and starting to walk down a track in the ever-sunnier afternoon. First up along the track were Clouded Yellow, Small Blue and Piedmont Ringlet and the Ascalapid, *Libelloides longicornis*. At the same time we managed to then find a couple of Whinchats in the fields below and a Tree Pipit singing in the telescope from a bush very near the track. To add to the confusion, Mike spotted a Short-toed Eagle hovering on the hillside above – well, at least a large raptor hovering that in the end turned into a Honey Buzzard (it was holding itself in the wind without the Short-toed Eagle's flaps). Black-veined Whites and Black-veined moths were on the wing, and also another 'white', that buzzed around us for the while. Mike reckoned it was a female Moroccan Orange-tip and was later vindicated by a close-up view. Here we also recorded Painted Lady, Small Tortoiseshell, Bright-eyed Ringlet (Lin), Red-underwing Skipper (almost caught by a Funnel Spider), our only Spanish Brassy Ringlet (which we forget to put in the check list!) and an Escher's Blue.

Plants here included bloody cranesbill *Geranium sanguineum*, field holly *Eryngium campestre*, common snapdragon *Antirrhinum majus*, winged greenweed *Chaemaespartium sagittale* and alpine aster. Mike and Martin walked down to a wet flush below the path and reported greater butterfly, frog, fragrant, early purple *Orchis mascula*, common spotted *Orchis fuchsia* and broad-leaved marsh orchids!!

An Apollo butterfly whizzed past at great speed (but Jim managed to photograph one in the grass) and we found a number of burnt-tip orchids in a drier field just at the point we decided to head back. The journey back was notable for two things: first, Mike spotted a male Moroccan Orange-tip in its full glory, which in turn spotted a female Moroccan Orange-tip on the species' foodplant, buckler mustard *Biscutella* spp. However, she raised her abdomen in a sign of go away and, despite two well-photographed attempts, his courtship was a failure. And then, just as we were reaching the van another Lammergeier flew over low, even closer than the first, giving us all excellent views of its reddish-orange breast.

By now it was getting on for 4 o'clock and so we decided to head back to the hotel for a restorative cup of tea before heading up to the pastures and meadows at Lana de Bagergue, the valley directly behind the hotel.

Once up at the Lana, we debussed next to a pool and quickly found male and female Broad-bodied Chasers and a number of Silver-studded Blues mudpuddling. Up on the bank behind we saw our first Swallowtail and nearer by our first Small Heath. Also mudpuddling we found two very attractive Turquoise Blues. Further up the valley, another new species up the trip was Tufted Marbled Skipper, and a Apollo gave quick and rather better views than earlier on. In a little stream we found a Western Demoiselle, similar to the more familiar Banded Demoiselle but with pigmented wing tips.

Thursday 3 July

El Portilló - Pleta de Mulleres

Weather: overcast and cool.

After the previous days of good weather, overnight a front came across the valley and left a layer of low clouds that prevented us from heading for the pastures above Vilamos, which were well-ensconced in cloud. Instead we headed for the European silver-fir forests at El Portilló on the border with France, seeing a Red Kite on the way.

We parked on the border and headed off along a flat track through the mature forest. A few birds could be heard – at first Bullfinch, and then Crested and Coal Tits and the odd Goldcrest, but despite the maturity of the forests, we heard no woodpeckers.

In the understorey we found lots of lesser wintergreen, familiar from two days ago, and a couple of bird's-nest orchids *Neottia nidus-avis*. The floral highlight came with Mike's discovery of French saxifrage *Saxifraga clusii* on a small cliff by the side of the track. We walked on hoping to see some improvement in the weather but decided to turn around and retrace our steps after about an hour's walk.

From here we headed downhill to the Middle Spotted Woodpecker wood in an attempt to find this elusive bird. Here too the weather wasn't on our side as the stones of the steepish path through the woods were very slippery and made us take a less steep and muddier path through this excellent forest. We heard Great Spotted Woodpecker, but very little else in the cool, sunless day.

By now it was lunchtime and so we drove off to Es Bòrdes and the restaurant we had reserved.

After our truly Pantegruelian feast we had hoped that the clouds would have lifted somewhat. However, despite the longish lunch, by the time we left Es Bòrdes, the clouds were still low and hugging the hillside. So Mike got on the phone to the hotel and asked them to find out what the weather was doing outside the valley, on the other side of the tunnel. The answer was "sunny intervals", which was enough to persuade us that the brand-new tunnel that links the Vall d'Aran with the Iberian Peninsula was the answer.

Once through the tunnel we found that the weather report was correct and, despite coolish temperatures, we could see the sun. We parked next to the road and picked up a track through pastures dotted with greater butterfly, fragrant (including an albino), spotted heath and many, very gone-over elder-flowered orchids *Dactylorhiza sambucina*. However, best of all were the number of black vanilla orchids *Nigritella nigra* decorating the same pastures, along with lots of catsfoot *Antennaria dioica* and the odd frog orchid and moonwort.

A few butterflies were flying – Clouded Yellow, Bright-eyed Ringlet, a solitary Mountain Ringlet, Large Wall Brown and, best of all, a single male Purple-edged Copper resting in a patch of taller grass.

Once over a little rise the wind got up and the butterflies disappeared. More flowers assaulted our senses, though: clustered bellflower, the large basal leaves (and just one in flower) of white false helleborine *Veratrum album*, as poisonous as the great yellow gentians it resembles, patches of arnica, a few St Bruno's lilies *Paradisea liliastrum* and globe flower *Trollius europaeus*.

We reached a marshy bend in the river, where we poked around and found marsh-loving plants such as cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix*, a true Atlantic species here in its only site in Catalonia, two small white orchids *Pseudoorchis albida*, and the delicate flowers of bird's-eye primrose *Primula farinosa* at the edge of a small stream. In the woods, the ground was covered by the broad strap-like leaves of Pyrenean squill *Scilla lilio-hyacinthus*, while out of the woods sharp-eyed Stella spotted a single flower of Pyrenean hyacinth *Brimeura amethystina*.

And with that, we called it a day on a slightly more relaxing day after the overdose of sights and colours on the previous days.

Friday 4 July

Bassa d'Arres – Vall de Varredòs

Weather: hot, clear and wonderful

The day dawned with a clear blue sky with no clouds and very little humidity. Our first activity was a pre-breakfast stroll through the meadows behind the nearby village of Unha. Our main objective was the local Red-backed Shrikes, which soon appeared as predicted. We watched a male and female perched on the bushes and also recorded a pair of Stonechats, Yellowhammer and a single Buzzard. Flower-wise, the dryish south-facing meadows were speckled by dozens of pyramidal orchids *Anacamptis pyramidalis*.

The day's main activity was centred around the meadows above the villages of Arres and in the Vall de Varradòs. Our first stop was just off the road up to the village of Vilamos, where we 'devanned' for a quick wander in the morning sun. First sightings included an Apollo and Great Banded Grayling flying lazily over the road, as well as in the small meadow Black-veined White, Silver-studded Blue, Ringlet and Dark Green Fritillary. We also noted a shiny green Forester moth and a couple of smart pyramidal orchids.

Soon it was time to move on to the meadows above Arres to start the walk up to the small pool of Bassa d'Arres. We parked just where the asphalt ended, Mike making sure that the van was correctly and aesthetically well-parked. Good numbers of butterflies were already on the wing. One of the first species to be recognised was our first Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, followed in quick succession by Pearly Heath, Apollo, de Prunner's (rather tatty, as befits a fairly early spring species) and Piedmont (smart and fresh) Ringlets, Large Blue (we were becoming rather blasé about this species), Queen of Spain and Glanville Fritillaries and Amanda's Blue. Flowerwise, we enjoyed the St Bruno's lilies and the Carthusian pinks *Dianthus carthusiana* amongst the many flowers in the meadows.

After an hour or so's wandering, we decided to take a short-cut up a path and leave the track. This took us deep into the meadows and Mike caught a new species of ringlet for the trip – Large Ringlet, easily identifiable by its white chequered edge to its wings. Also here were our first Brown Argus, a Large Wall Brown, Green Hairstreak and Moroccan Orange-tip. We continued up through the meadows, finally reaching a track just below the *bassa*. After a few minutes confusion as to whether we should turn left or right, we found the little artificial and pool.

Once up at Bassa d'Arres we sat and rested for a while and took in the view. On the dragonfly front, the *bassa* only produced a few Common Blue Damselflies. On the way down we stuck to the track, noting clustered bellflower, musk mallow *Malva moschata*, grass of Parnassus *Parnassia palustris* and forked spleenwort *Asplenium septentrionale* on a cliff on our left. Here too John pointed out a smart clump of creeping snapdragon *Asarina procumbens*. Then a large dragonfly came sailing into view. Mike identified it as a Sombre Goldenring *Cordulegaster bidentata*, a European version of the more familiar Goldenring from Britain, which just reaches as far south as the Pyrenees.

Once again we short-cutted the track and took the more direct path down through the meadows, passing through glorious flower- and butterfly-filled habitat. Nevertheless, we spent a long time admiring a family group of four Whinchats, Tree Pipit and a male and female Red-backed Shrike that were perching in the trees.

Once back at the van it was lunch-time, which was enlivened by a fly over of five Ravens, a couple of Griffon Vultures and a Honey Buzzard.

After lunch, it was back down the road via a quick attempt to stop for a drink in Vilamos, and on up the Varradòs valley. First stop was a butterflying mud-puddling spot (or pub-muddling, as we called it), that normally produces a good range of species. Today, however, we were limited to a good number of very dark False Heath Fritillaries, lots of Small Blues (common almost everywhere, everyday), Dingy (another 'ever-present'), Tufted Marbled Skippers, Wood White and a couple of Escher's and Mazarine Blues.

We continued on up this delightful valley, as far as the car-park where the tarmac runs out. Here we debussed and headed up towards the meadows further upstream. Again, the butterflies were very much the flavour of the afternoon: Amanda, Turquoise and Escher's Blues, a rather tatty Camberwell Beauty – the last surviving hibernator, more False Heath Fritillaries, a Painted Lady and Clouded Apollos in abundance. We found the not-quite-out flowers of both Martagon Lily and wolf's-bane *Aconitum pyrenaicum*, as well as alpine buckthorn growing out of a large rock.

We continued along the stream lined with water avens *Geum rivale* as far the path would allow and sat and enjoyed the sun and colours. We noted Purple-shot copper and Orange-tip and, as Mike was trying to photograph another female Large Blue egg-laying "on thyme", he looked up and spotted a Black Woodpecker flying across the valley and into a patch of beech just up the slope from where we were sitting. Despite keeping a close eye out, we were not to see it again. A Common Buzzard distracted us for while, but no sign of any other woodpecker.

We dragged ourselves away from this delightful spot to head for a waterfall with the memorable name of 'Salt deth Pish'! On the way we stopped to look for the woodpecker, but at the same time Mike heard the quiet call of a Rock Bunting. Looking around, it was Liz who found it in an ash tree just up the slope from where we were standing. We all had good views of this attractive and discreet bunting.

We continued on to the waterfall, visually impressive and with a fine spray that was a pleasant way of cooling down slightly. A young Dipper flew past Martin and Lin, sat on the wall literally feet behind where the rest of the group were standing, and then flew off above the waterfall. On the way down, we noticed that the plants such as Alpine bartsia and long-leaved butterwort were growing by the path and thriving on the spray they were receiving from the waterfall.

Back at the van it was home time, via another quick stop at the 'pub-muddling' spot, which only produced the same butterflies as before.

Saturday 5 July

Vall d'Aiguamotx – Vall de Lin

Weather: clear, but with a hint of humidity; clouds after lunch.

For the final day we headed for the valley of Aiguamotx (or Tredòs), directly over the valley from the hotel. We drove up this wonderful Aiguamotx valley, through hay meadows waving in the sun and to the car-park where we had to leave the van and get into a taxi to take us up to the lake in the woods with one of the best sphagnum bogs in the whole Pyrenees.

We de-taxed by the track and immediately headed into the woods, observing Mazarine Blue and Heath and Pearl-bordered Fritillaries. After a brief walk, we reached our target, a lake (name withheld) surrounded by an immense bed of *Sphagnum*. We immediately began to see dragonflies: White-faced Darters in tandem and, above all, Emerald dragonflies patrolling the edge of the lake. According to Mike, they were Downy Emeralds (confirmed by Martin's photographs), only known from this site in the Spanish state. As we were walking back the way we had come, a pleasant surprise was a Northern Wall Brown, our second sighting of this Pyrenean rarity. We tried to avoid contact with the vast *sphagnum* bog and stuck as much as we could to the pines. Nevertheless, from the edge of the bog we could see the sundews, common *Drosea rotundifolia* and long-leaved *D. longifolia*, a different species of cotton-grass from previous days, Hare's-tail cottongrass *Eriophorum vaginatum* with only one flower head, alpine bartsia, Tofield's asphodel and large-flowered butterwort.

Around the other side of the lake in and amongst the pines we found a Marsh Fritillary of the subspecies *debilis*, smaller and darker, which feeds on gentians at these high altitudes. Birds in the

woods included Coal and Crested Tits, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Mistle Thrush and a fly over from a small group of Crossbills.

We regained the main track, where we had an all too fleeting view of Mountain Dappled White *Euchloe simplonia*. We picked up a delicious path through the pine forest, where, since it was a Saturday in July, we were destined to meet a number of people – more than in whole of the rest of the week – a few of whom asked how far it was to the ‘lakes’, as Mike had predicted

One of the intended highlights of this walk down should be the *Gentian burseri* that decorate the path here. However, they were not quite in flower, unlike a clump of whorled Solomon’s seal *Polygonatum verticillatum*. Also in the woods we noted bog whortleberry *Vaccinium uliginosum* lots of arnica, another white small orchid and herb Paris. We heard a Common Treecreeper – much quieter call than the Short-toed version – and caught up with more Marsh and Heath Fritillaries and our only Idas blue of the trip. This species is very similar to Silver-studded Blue and to be sure you have to look for a spine on the tibia of the male Silver-studded. We didn’t go to this extreme, but the butterfly we saw had a different jizz – browner underwing colour and a narrower black border on its upperwing. Yet another Large Blue laying eggs barely distracted us as we were nearly back at the car-park!!

Lunch was taken in the shade again near the reservoir at the bottom of the Aiguamotx valley. Afterwards, we went off for a quick wander in the meadows and saw another good display of butterflies, despite the new track that had been carved through the meadows. First up was our first Peacock, and then Jim spotted a White Admiral, which turned out in fact to be a very smart iridescent blue Southern White Admiral, which posed on a tree quite obligingly. We were looking for Lesser Marbled Fritillary, an absentee thus far, but had to be content with a Geranium Argus, with a very distinctive greenish suffusion at the base of the underwing.

We headed off to the Artiga de Lin valley we had visited the first day as the clouds started to build up. We made a couple of stops along the way, but with the cool of the afternoon there was not a lot flying. In one meadow we found wolfsbane in flower and a patch of baneberry *Actaea spicata* with a single flower. Lin found a single fritillary that was probably a Lesser Marbled Fritillary.

And with that we headed off to a nearby restaurant and had a welcoming cup of tea in the garden as the clouds rolled in. Home to pack was the final stop of the day, although we did not yellow saxifrage *Saxifraga aretoides* in a road-side stream – our 9th saxifrage of the trip.

Sunday 6 July

Salardú – Port de Bonaigua – Toulouse airport

As the flight was not until 17.00 we had time to use the morning profitably. Alas. The day awoke cool, with ground-hugging cloud, thus scuppering our idea of returning to the Val de Toran to investigate the banana skins we had left for the emperors!!

So, instead, we headed uphill to the pastures at Port de Bonaigua (2,072 m) and the watershed between the Atlantic and Mediterranean. We quickly got above the cloud and stopped for the obligatory photographs of the sea of clouds topped off by the region’s highest peaks. Up top it was surprisingly mild, with patchy clouds: no butterflies, but plenty of avian activity. Once out of the van we quickly found a Ring Ouzel and a female Rock Thrush feeding (and squabbling) by one of the two marshy pools that lie either side of the road. Soon too we had chalked up singing Water Pipits (one with a nest in a pipe over the door of the restaurant where we had parked), a couple of Citril Finches and a calling Yellowhammer. We walked down the slope to the pool, Jim pointing out a small blue flower which no one could put a name to, and then on a little rock outcrop, small stands of Alpine lychnis *Lychnis alpina*. We began to note Common Blue Damselflies in the grass and, above all, lots of White-faced Darters landing and resting in the stones in the pastures.

Over on the other side of the road next to the other pool we watched emerging Common Blue Damselflies, one of which was seized by a pond skater, but still managed to leave the water, climb up

a grass stem and wait for the skater to drop off. What a way to begin life! We also watched with interest a hawk emerging on a rock: between first seeing it and then returning, it managed to right itself, having begun to emerge as usual 'upside down', and begin to inflate its wings.

We wandered along the road and just into the Iberian Peninsula, where we admired the horses and watched the Griffon Vultures and Red-billed Choughs on and over the mountainside on the other side of the road, just hoping that a Golden Eagle might appear.

Soon, however, it was time to head for lunch at the hotel and to make our fond farewells to Joaquim and Maria Angels who had looked after us so well during the week.

On the way to the airport we began to count the Black Kites as we had a week ago on the way in from the airport. This time we beat our own record: 77 Black Kites, 16 Common Buzzards and 8 Kestrels – over 100 raptors in a 2-hour journey!! As well, Martin spotted 3 Cattle Egrets in a field, one of which flew over the road. And on the outskirts of Toulouse, a Cattle Egret roost right by the roadside took us all by surprise.

And with that we reached the airport and said our goodbyes – somewhat reluctantly knowing that the Val d'Aran hides a treasure of wildlife that may well have to wait until next year.

BIRD LIST; VAL D'ARAN; JUNE-JULY 2008

Species	29 /6	30 /6	1/ 7	2/ 7	3/ 7	4/ 7	5/ 7	6/ 7	Comments
Cattle Egret								40 +	From motorway on way to airport.
Grey Heron			1						From road on the way to Val de Toran
European Honey Buzzard			2	1		1			Two close by on road below Bausen that quickly headed into the sun; singles on other days
Common Buzzard	5	2	2		1	1		16	Fairly common
Lammergeier				2					One (the same bird?) close over head at Pla de Beret and, even closer, another from path below Beret in afternoon
Eurasian Griffon Vulture		2	16	5+	1	2		12	Regular groups most days
Short-toed Eagle		1	1						Views of birds high overhead on 2 days.
Red Kite					1				One bird over valley.
Black Kite	63	2	1		1	2	1	77	Singles in valley, lots in France in lowlands
Peregrine			1						One female giving excellent views below Bausen
Hobby			1						One distant bird over Toran valley
Common Kestrel	3		1	2				8	Fairly common
Yellow-legged Gull	10 +							40 +	In France
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Wood Pigeon		2		2	2				Pairs in wooded areas
Eurasian Collared Dove	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	In villages
Common Cuckoo							H		One heard on last morning
Common Swift	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Eurasian Hoopoe	1	1							One from the road and one at hotel on the first morning that was not seen again
Great Spotted Woodpecker		1	1		1	1	1		Commonly heard and seen
Green Woodpecker		1	1			1			Here and there
Black Woodpecker		1	1H			H			Three contacts: close views on first day
Eurasian Skylark			H					H	Singing up high
European Crag Martin	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Common House Martin	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Barn Swallow	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	In and around villages
White Wagtail			X		X	X	X		On road and in villages
Grey Wagtail			X	X	X	X	X	X	On most streams at mid and low altitude
Tree Pipit				X		X			Common in upland pastures with trees
Water Pipit				X				X	Common in pastures above tree line
Red-backed Shrike							X		In meadows between Unha and Gessa and above Arres
White-throated Dipper			X			X	X		Common on rivers
Wren		H	H		X	X			Heard often
Dunnock				X					1 male singing on Pla de Beret
Rock Thrush				1				1	Male at Pla de Beret and female at Port de Bonaigua
Spotted Flycatcher			X						In Bausen
Common Blackbird	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Ring Ouzel				3				1	Family on Pla de Beret; 1 male at Port de Bonaigua
Mistle Thrush		X				X	X	X	Here and there in a variety of habitats

Song Thrush		X			H				Heard in wooded areas
European Robin		X	X		X				Heard in wooded areas
Black Redstart		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Common in villages and high pastures
Common Stonechat							X		Between Unha and Gessa
Whinchat				X		X		X	Below Pla de Beret, above Arres
Northern Wheatear				X				X	Pla de Beret and Port de Bonaigua
Bonelli's Warbler		H							Heard first morning
Common Chiffchaff		H	H						Heard first and second mornings
Blackcap		H	X		H				Heard in wooded areas
Garden Warbler		H				H			Heard in wooded areas
Goldcrest		X			X				Seen briefly in pine and fir forests
Coal Tit		X	X		X		X		Common in fir and pine forests
Crested Tit		X			X	X	X		Common in fir and pine forests
Great Tit		X	X	X		X			Here and there
Blue Tit			X						Here and there
Long-tailed Tit		X	X		X				In forests
Nuthatch		X	H		X				Heard in forests
Treecreeper							H		One heard Aiguamotx
Eurasian Jay	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Black-billed Magpie	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Common in valley
Red-billed Chough		8		50 +				5	Common at altitude
Alpine Chough		H		1					Only at highest altitudes
Carrion Crow	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Common
Common Raven		X	X		X	5			Common
Common Starling		X	X	X				X	Here and there
Yellowhammer				X	X	X	X	X	Common in pastures and meadows at all altitudes
Rock Bunting							X		One in Varradòs
Common Chaffinch		H	X		X	X	X	X	Common
Eurasian Serin			X	X	X	X	X		Common around villages
Citril Finch				X				X	Pairs at Pla de Beret and Port de Bonaigua
European Greenfinch	X							X	Only in France!!
European Goldfinch			X						Two young birds drinking in track at Bausen
Eurasian Bullfinch					H				Heard in fir forest
Common Linnet				X				X	In upland pastures
Common Crossbill				X			X		Seen at Pla de Beret and Aiguamotx
House Sparrow	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Common

OTHER VERTEBRATES VAL D'ARAN; JUNE-JULY 2008

Species	29/ 6	30/ 6	1/7	2/7	3/7	4/7	5/7	6/7	Comments
MAMMALS									
Pine Marten		X			X				Surprisingly, two sightings of this shy mammal: one from road on way up to Artiga de Lin, and the other in the forest (Lin) near El Portilló.
Vole sp.		X							A small furry creature in a ditch ...
Wild Boar									Signs everywhere
Red Deer						X			Antlers found by John
Roe Deer							X		Across road on way up to car park at Aiguamotx
Chamois		X							At least three in Artiga de Lin
Alpine Marmot		H							Heard clearly but not seen in Artiga de Lin
REPTILES									
Common Wall Lizard			X	X		X	X		Everywhere
AMPHIBIANS									
Fire Salamander		X			X				Most ponds
Common Frog		X		X	X	X	X	X	Most ponds

INVERTEBRATE CHECK LIST VAL D'ARAN; JUNE-JULY 2008

BUTTERFLIES	29/ 6	30/ 6	1/7	2/7	3/7	4/7	5/7	6/7	Comments
PAPILIONIDAE									
Swallowtail				X					One at Lana de Bagergue
Apollo				X		X			Below Beret
Clouded Apollo		X	X	X		X			Widespread in meadows on edge of beech forest
PIERIDAE									
Black-veined white		X	X	X		X	X		Everywhere, everyday. Meadows
Large white		X	X				X		A few on migration
Small white			X				X		Here and there
Green-veined white		X	X						In meadows near forest.
Bath white		X		X					Occasional almost anywhere
Mountain dappled white							X		One just below where we were dropped off by taxi
Moroccan orange-tip				X		X			Below Beret and in Varradòs
Orange-tip		X	X	X		X	X		Common
Clouded yellow		X	X	X		X	X		Common
Brimstone			X						One
Wood white		X	X	X		X	X		Common
LYCAENIDAE									
Purple hairstreak			X						Good numbers below look-out point below Bausen
Green hairstreak		X					X		A couple up high on edge of forest
Small copper		X							Here and there
Scarce copper		X							Meadows in Toran valley
Sooty copper		X							Meadows in Toran valley
Purple-shot copper		X							On Buddlheia below Bausen
Purple-edged copper					X	X			In Pleta de Molieres and Lana de Bagergue
Little/Small blue		X	X	X	X	X	X		Everywhere
Holly blue			X						Vall de Toran

Large blue		X	X	X			X		In four different meadows, egg-laying three times
Silver-studded blue		X	X	X	X	X	X		Very common and numerous
Idas blue							X		One in Aiguamotx
Geranium argus							X		One in Aiguamotx near reservoir
Brown argus						X			One above Arres
Mazarine blue		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Escher's blue				X		X			Below Beret and Varradòs
Amanda's blue						X			Above Arres and Varradòs
Chapman's blue		X							Artiga de Lin
Turquoise blue						X			Varradòs
Chalkhill blue						X			Varradòs – very fresh
Adonis blue						X			Meadows above Arres
Common blue		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
RIODINIDAE									
Duke of Burgundy fritillary				X					Pla de Beret
NYMPHALIDAE									
Lesser purple emperor			X						One in Toran Valley
Southern white admiral							X		One near reservoir, Aiguamotx
White admiral		X							Toran valley
Camberwell beauty						X			Varradòs
Peacock							X		Only near reservoir, Aiguamotx
Red admiral		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Painted lady			X	X		X			Here and there
Small tortoiseshell		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Comma			X						Occasional
Dark green fritillary			X						Toran valley
High brown fritillary			X						Toran valley
Queen of Spain fritillary							X		Scarce
Marbled fritillary		X	X			X	X		Common
Lesser marbled fritillary							X		Woods below Artiga de Lin
Pearl-bordered fritillary			X						Toran valley
Small pearl-bdrd fritillary						X	X		Above Arres and Aiguamotx
Glanville fritillary						X			One in meadows above Arres
Knapweed fritillary						X			One in meadows above Arres
Spotted fritillary			X						One in Toran valley
False heath fritillary						X	X		Common in Varradòs
Heath fritillary		X	X			X	X		Common
Marsh fritillary							X		Small, dark mountain version in Aiguamotx
SATYRINAE									
Marbled white		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Woodland grayling			X						On road below Bausen
Great sooty satyr			X			X			On road below Bausen and below Vilamos
Great banded grayling			X						On road below Bausen
Large ringlet						X			Meadows above Arres
Mountain ringlet				X					Pla de Beret
de Prunner's ringlet						X			Above Arres
Spanish brassy ringlet				X					Below Beret
Bright-eyed ringlet		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Piedmont ringlet		X		X		X			Common
Meadow brown		X							Common
Ringlet		X	X			X			Woodland edges
Small heath		X	X	X	X	X	X		Very common
Pearly heath		X	X	X		X	X		Meadows
Speckled wood		X	X						Woodland
Wall brown						X			Above Arres
Large wall brown			X						Below Bausen,
Northern wall brown		X					X		Artiga de Lin and Aiguamotx

HESPERIIDAE									
Grizzled skipper sp.		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Olive skipper				X					Pla de Beret
Safflower skipper		X							Artiga de Lin
Red-underwing skipper				X		X			Below Beret
Mallow skipper						X			Varradòs
Dingy skipper		X	X	X	X	X	X		Very common
Chequered skipper			X						By reservoir in Toran valley
Large chequered skipper			X						Outside Bausen
Lulworth skipper		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Essex skipper		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Large skipper		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common

Dragonflies	29/6	30/6	1/7	2/7	3/7	4/7	5/7	6/7	Comments
ZYGOPTERA									
Western demoiselle				X					Lana de Bagergue
Common blue damselfly				X		X	X		Around high altitude pools
Large red damselfly				X			X		Around high altitude pools
ANISOPTERA									
Emperor			X				X		Road below Bausen and Aiguamotx
Sombre goldenring						X			Below Bassa d'Arres
Downy emerald							X		Aiguamotx
Broad-bodied chaser				X		X	X		Pools
Four-spotted chaser				X		X	X		High level marshy pools
White-faced darter								X	Port de Bonaigua

Day-flying moths

Mother Shipton *Callistege mi*
 Burnet Companion *Euclidia glyphica*
 Chimney Sweeper *Odezia atrata*
 Speckled Yellow *Pseudopanthera macularia*
 Hummingbird hawkmoth *Macroglossum stellatarum*

Silver-Y *Autographa gamma*
 Latticed heath *Semiothisa clathrata*
 Black-veined moth *Siona lineata*

Small elephant hawkmoth *Deilephila porcellus*

Scarlet tiger *Callimorpha dominula*
 Oak eggar *Lasiocampa quercus*

Clouded buff *Diacrisia sannio*
 Forester *Adscita* sp.

Other invertebrates

Libelloides longicornis

Mike Lockwood, July 2008
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