

French Pyrenees

Thursday 25 June - Wednesday 1 July 2009

Trip Report

Leader:

John Muddeman

Our summer tour to the High Pyrenees is designed to take in the best of the magnificent scenery and the rich wildlife of the French Pyrenees. We visited sites that offered a range of habitats at different elevations, from the snow-capped peaks above Gavarnie to the lowlands along the valley of the Garonne. With a mixture of birds, butterflies flowers and fabulous scenery there is always something to keep everyone happy.

Western Cattle Egrets in the lowlands have increased in numbers. Christine spotted a breeding colony right by the motorway, which for those that missed it, we saw on return to the airport. A Short-toed Eagle drifted over the hills, near Cazères, was rather unexpected.

Perhaps the thundery conditions over the Pyrenees persuaded it to try hunting at lower altitudes. A few Eurasian Hobbies cruised about plucking dragonflies from the air. More intriguingly was a possible brief Eleonora's Falcon, that revealed a few of the characteristics of this species, but poor light hampered conclusive identification. As usual a few Red Kites could be picked out from the Black Kites that patrolled the lowlands in some numbers. On the return trip a singing male Melodious Warbler popped into full view, but a male Cirl Bunting in the same patch of scrub was frustratingly skulking. A close European Honey Buzzard drifted past. A small colony of Eurasian Tree Sparrows and a couple of Common Hoopoes were much admired. The butterfly highlight near Cazères was a delightful Silverwashed Fritillary that took a liking to our minibus taking salts from the seats and then from Susan's hand. At the same locality the jewel like Cerulean Chafers were very much admired shinning out from the green vegetation like small luminescent flowers. The profusion of dragonflies included Blue Chaser (Scarce Chaser) and Broad Darter (Scarlet Darter). Old names in brackets. The Lizard Orchids and Greater Butterfly Orchids attracted attention. From our base in Gèdre we explored the high valleys and Cols or passes in the area. The Vallée d'Ossoue has to be one of the most amazing valleys in the Pyrenees, with its beautiful flower meadows surrounded by massive limestone cliffs, which are often patrolled by Lammergeiers, looking out for the odd bone. This year was no exception with three individuals watched cruising and perched. Eurasian Griffons were watched through the telescope perched on the peaks and cliff edges waiting for the air to warm before launching themselves into the air. Two or more Golden Eagles drifted over. We saw three Common Rock-Thrushes including a male displaying, with wings raised in alarm, at an Alpine Marmot that had strayed too close to its nest site. A couple of Red-backed Shrikes perched on Junipers. As soon as the sun hit the meadows butterflies seemed to burst into life. Black-veined Whites, Piedmont & Bright-eyed Ringlets, Heath Fritillaries were the most common. With cloud cover they could be found resting in the vegetation allowing a very close approach. In this way we obtained fantastic views of Large Blue, Lesser Marbled Fritillary and High Brown Fritillary. During the heat of the day dozens of butterflies were drawn to a damp area by the river. With six species of Blue and four species of Skipper things could be confusing. Arousing considerable interest were the Psychidae or Bagworms moth larvae, which construct a protective cases from silk and small pieces of vegetation, so that they look like a terrestrial form of the Caddis Fly larvae. The plants were a joy. Among the vast swathes of Greater Yellowrattle were Burnt Orchid, St Bernard's and St Bruno's Lily and nearby were the Pyrenean specialty Ramonda, the local Tufted Soapwort and the dramatic Leafy Lousewort. The walk from Gavarnie village to the Cirque de Gavarnie is a spectacular one. Seeing wildlife on the way is a bonus. This year we walked right up to the cirque itself under the waterfall. On the way Alpine Swifts were spotted hunting over one of the mountain ridges. A close Crested Tit searched for food for many minutes often in full view. Surprise of the day was a brief migrant Golden Oriole seen from the Hotel at the cirque. A lone Pyrenean Chamois was spotted grazing above the Cirque itself. Butterflies were not out in full numbers. The biggest surprise was a Duke of Burgundy. The flower meadows were

again spectacular; Globeflower, the rather underwhelming Edelweiss, Long-leaved Butterworts clinging to the damp vertical rock faces and perhaps most impressive of all was the stands of Pyrenean Lily. The Col du Tourmalet is famous as one of the routes taken by the Tour de France. For birdwatchers it is the site of many special high altitude species. The White-winged Snowfinches almost fed from the hand and there was a particularly fine male in display flight at the café. Nearby we watched up to three close Alpine Accentors, which included one collecting food for its young. A pair of Common Rock- Thrushes perched on the rocky crags and female Ring Ouzels zipped past. Prize for most unusual food item went to a Northern Wheatear that attempted to control a Common Wall Lizard. Squadrons of Eurasian Griffons passed very low overhead. Numbers of this species seem to be down this year perhaps a reflection of the reduced number of carcasses available to them due changes in EU legislation.

Alpine flora included the Alpine Snowbell, Alpine Toadflax and Pyrenean Buttercup. Exploring the lower slopes a shockingly redcapped male Firecrest caused gasps of awe as it fluffed up its crown feathers in a territorial dispute. Finding a Black Woodpecker was a welcome surprise, although it did not settle for long for perched views, but flew past us a couple of times. Susan found a Pyrenean Brook Newt. It was an orange striped form. The plants here and a little further down included a whole mountainside of Asphodel as well as Welsh Poppy, Common Columbine, Spiked Pyrenean Speedwell, Hairless Alpine Sow-thistle and Pyrenean Valerium among others. From the Col de Tentos we strolled up to the Spanish border. No passport control but fabulous mountain views. Two Alpine Accentors flew over, a singing male Common Rock-thrush was 'scoped up and a few Eurasian Griffons cruising overhead. Pyrenean Rock Lizards basked in the warm sunshine. The yellow flowered Vitaliana, Pyrenean Buttercups, Moss Campion and clumps of deep vivid blue Trumpet and Spring Gentians caught the eye. A Martagon Lily in flower was much admired. Both Water and Tree Pipits were watched right by the minibus. The meadows at Saussa were bursting with wild flowers. Roadside verges held a profusion of Pyramidal Orchids, Pyrenean Eryngoes and Horned Violets. A Rock Bunting collecting food for its young was a welcome surprise. Up to four Quail sang away and a male Whinchat was much appreciated. Heading to the foothills we explored the meadows and woodland by the Forêt d'Arragnat. A Middle-spotted Woodpecker popped up and in the forest itself three Crested Tits fed unconcernedly just feet away. Birds of prey included an educational dark morph Booted Eagle and a Peregrine, spotted by Don, that devoured a prey item. Along one of the forest tracks a Purple Emperor sucked up mineral salts. Its confident nature allowed ample photographs to be taken. Susan's keen eyes spotted a Yellow Bird's-nest under the conifers. A singing Midwife Toad pinked away in the hotel grounds.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES

BIRDS

Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	One singing Cazères 25th and five singing Saussa 29th
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Several Cazères 25th & 1st
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	One Cazères 25th
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	A breeding colony with at least twenty birds west of Toulouse 25th & 1st, one near Cazères 25th and a further thirty or so en route 1st. These figures indicate a notable increase compared to recent years.
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	One north Luz St Sauveur 30th
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	One Cazères 1st
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Small numbers seen almost daily
Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	Three area around Cazères 25th and one Forêt d'Arragnat 30th
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	One Forêt d'Arragnat 1st
European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	One Forêt d'Arragnat 30th and one area around Cazères 1st

Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	Three area around Cazères 25th, one Vallée d'Ossoue 26th and a few en route 30th & 1st
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	Very common in the lowlands and foothills and one Gèdre and Le Leinz
Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>	Three Vallée d'Ossoue 26th and one Gèdre 29th & 30th
Eurasian Griffon	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	Seen daily in the mountains and several Forêt d'Arragnat 30th
Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	One near Cazères 25th and another Gèdre 26th
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	A few seen here and there
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Two Vallée d'Ossoue 26th and one seen by Don at Gèdre 27th
Booted Eagle	<i>Aquila pennata</i>	One Forêt d'Arragnat 30th and one Cazères 1st
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Several area around Cazères 25th
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	Two en route 1st
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	Several along the Garonne and outskirts Toulouse
Feral Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	Regularly seen around Luz and in the lowlands.
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	A few seen here and there but mainly in the lowlands
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Common
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	One heard Vallée d'Ossoue 26th
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	Four Gavarnie 27th & Don saw two Gèdre 27th
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	Common, especially in the lowlands
Common Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Two Cazères 1st
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>	One briefly Forêt d'Arragnat 30th
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	Family groups heard Le Leinz 28th and seen Forêt d'Arragnat 1st
Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	One Le Leinz 28th
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	Two area around Cazères 25th
Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	Several seen in the mountains and a couple lower down
Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>	One briefly Gavarnie 27th
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	Seen regularly every daily.
Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Common
Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	A few seen here and there in the mountains
Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>	Many close sightings this year.
Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	Four en route 1st
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	Small numbers most days
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Two in area around Cazères 25th, one Gèdre, one Col du Tourmalet 28th and two Col de Tentès 29 th
Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>	Several Gavarnie 27th and a couple Forêt d'Arragnat 30th
Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	One Gavarnie 27th and three Forêt d'Arragnat 30th
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	A few here and there
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	A few Forêt d'Arragnat 1st

Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	Common in the mountains. Don had at least fifty over Gèdre 29th
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	A scattering of birds mostly at lower elevations
Northern House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	Seen regularly.
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	One heard Vallée d'Ossoue 26th and two Col de Tentes 29th
Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>	A singing male near Cazères 1st
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	A few here and there.
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	The most common singing warbler
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	Singing in Vallée d'Ossoue and Gavarnie
Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	One Col du Tourmalet 28th and seen Gèdre in the hotel garden
Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Heard regularly and seen just occasionally
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	Heard Forêt d'Arragnat 30th & 1st
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	More common in the lowlands
Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>	One Col du Tourmalet 28th and two briefly Le Leinz 30th
Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Widespread and common
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	A couple seen or heard
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	Several sightings
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	More often heard than seen
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	Common
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	One male Saussa 29th
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	A couple in the lowlands and two Vallée d'Ossoue 26th.
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Common at higher altitudes
Common Rock-thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>	Three Vallée d'Ossoue 26th, a pair Col du Tourmalet 28th and a singing male Col de Tentes 29th
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	Seen at Gèdre but otherwise only glimpsed flying away rapidly at other locations
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Seen daily
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	A few Cazères 1st
White-winged Snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>	Five Col du Tourmalet 28th
Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>	Three Col du Tourmalet 28th and two Col de Tentes 29th
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	A couple seen at higher elevations.
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	Several seen
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Small numbers most days in towns and villages
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>	Three Vallée d'Ossoue 26th, one en route 29th and one Forêt d'Arragnat 30th
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	Widespread and common in the higher altitudes above the tree line with many roadside birds seen well.
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Widespread and seen daily in wooded areas.
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	Seen in several locations.
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	A couple by the hotel
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Ones and twos seen here and there
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	Only a handful seen
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	A couple here and there
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citronella</i>	Several seen in many locations

Rock Bunting
Cirl Bunting

Emberiza cia
Emberiza cirlus

One Saussa briefly 29th
One heard area around Cazères 25th and
one all too briefly nearby 1st

MAMMALS

Roe Deer
Pyrenean Chamois

Capreolus capreolus
Rupicapra pyrenaica

One Le Leinz 30th
Six Vallée d'Ossoue 26th and one
Gavarnie 27th

Alpine Marmot

Marmota marmota

Common in certain valleys, especially in
the Vallée d'Ossoue.

Red Squirrel

Sciurus vulgaris

One en route 28th and one Le Leinz 28th
and a few there 30th

Muskrat

Ondatra zibethicus

One of this introduced South American
species Cazères 1st

REPTILES

Common Wall Lizard
Pyrenean Rock Lizard
Slow-worm

Podarcis muralis
Iberolacerta bonnali
Anguis fragilis

One dead

AMPHIBIANS

Common Frog
Midwife Toad
Pyrenean Brook Newt

Rana temporaria
Alytes obstetricans
Euproctus asper

BUTTERFLIES

Swallowtail
Apollo
Black-veined White
Large White
Small White
Peak White
Orange-tip
Clouded Yellow
Brimstone
Wood White
Green Hairstreak
Little Blue
Large Blue
Silver-studded Blue
Brown Argus
Mazarine Blue
Turquoise Blue
Chalk-hill Blue
Adonis Blue
Common Blue
Purple Emperor
White Admiral
Red Admiral
Painted Lady
Small Tortoiseshell
Comma
Silver-washed Fritillary

Papilio machaon
Parnassius Apollo
Aporia crataegi
Pieris brassicae
Artogeia rapae
Pontia callidice
Anthocharis cardamines
Colias crocea
Gonepteryx rhamni
Leptidea sinapis
Callophrys rubi
Cupido minimus
Maculinea arion
Plebejus argus
Aricia agestis
Cyaniris semiargus
Polyommatus dorylas
Lysandra coridon
Polyommatus escheri
Polyommatus icarus
Apatura iris
Limenitis camilla
Vanessa atalanta
Vanessa cardui
Aglais urticae
Polygonia c-album
Argynnis paphia

High Brown Fritillary	<i>Argynnis adippe</i>
Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>
Marbled Fritillary	<i>Brenthis daphne</i>
Lesser Marbled Fritillary	<i>Brenthis ino</i>
Spotted fritillary	<i>Melitaea didyma</i>
Heath Fritillary	<i>Mellicta athalia</i>
Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>
Great Banded Grayling	<i>Kanetisa circe</i>
Bright-eyed Ringlet	<i>Erebia oeme</i>
Piedmont Ringlet	<i>Erebia meolans</i>
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>
Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>
Pearly Heath	<i>Coenonympha arcania</i>
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>
Large Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata maera</i>
Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus malvae</i>
Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus armoricanus</i>
Marbled Skipper	<i>Carcharodus lavatherae</i>
Dingy Skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>
Large Chequered Skipper	<i>Heteropterus morpheus</i>
Essex Skipper	<i>Thymelicus lineola</i>
Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes venatus</i>
Duke of Burgandy	<i>Hamearis lucina</i>

MOTHS

Hummingbird Hawk	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>
Chimney Sweeper	<i>Odezia atrata</i>
Bagworm species	<i>Psychidae species</i>

DRAGONFLIES

Note that some of the English names of dragonflies have been changed in recent publications. The new name is listed first.

Blue Emperor/Emperor Dragonfly	<i>Anax imperator</i>
Blue Chaser/Scarce Chaser	<i>Libellula fulva</i>
Broad Scarlet/Scarlet Darter	<i>Crocothemis erythraea</i>
Common Winter Damselfly	<i>Sympecma fusca</i>
Common Golden-ringed/Golden-ringed Dragonfly	<i>Cordulegaster boltonii</i>
Broad-bodied Chaser	<i>Libellula depressa</i>
Western Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx xanthostoma</i>

Crickets & Grasshoppers

Great Green Bush-cricket	<i>Tettigonia viridissima</i>
Bog Bush-cricket	<i>Metrioptera brachyptera</i>

BEETLES

Stag Beetle	<i>Lucanus cervus</i>	One dead
Cerulean Chafer	<i>Hoplia caerulea</i>	
Green Tiger-beetle	<i>Cicindela campestris</i>	

OTHER TAXA

Ascalaphid	<i>Libelloides coccajus</i>	A primitive insect related to Antlions
European black slug	<i>Arion ater</i>	

PLANTS

Some of the more charismatic plants in no particular order

Eryngium bourgatii Pyrenean Eryngo
Carduus carlinoides Pyrenean Thistle
Cicerbita plumieri Hairless Alpine Sow-thistle
Lonicera pyrenaica Pyrenean European Honeysuckle
Lonicera xylosteum Fly Honeysuckle
Saponaria caespitosa Tufted Soapwort
Silene nutans Nottingham Catchfly
Rhododendron ferrugineum Alpenrose
Gentianella verna Spring Gentian
Gentianella acaulis Trumpet Gentian
Phyteuma spicatum Spiked Rampion
Phyteuma orbiculare Round-headed rampion
Dianthus deltoides Maiden Pink
Dianthus monspessulanus Fringed Pink
Sempervivum montanum Mountain Houseleek
Sempervivum arachnoideum Cobweb Houseleek
Euphorbia cyparissias Cypress Spurge
Trifolium alpinum Alpine Clover
Trifolium montanum Mountain Clover
Trifolium ochroleucon Sulphur Clover
Ramonda myconi Ramonda
Globularia repens Creeping Globularia
Pinguicula longifolia Long-leaved Butterwort
Pinguicula vulgaris Common Butterwort
Soldanella alpina Alpine Snowbell
Pyrola minor Lesser Wintergreen
Aconitum napellus Monk's-hood
Anemone narcissiflora Narcissus-flowered Anemone
Helleborus foetidus Stinking Hellebore
Helleborus viridis Green Hellebore
R. pyrenaicus Pyrenean Buttercup
Trolius europeaeus Globe-flower
Sideritis hyssopifolia Sideritis
Meconopsis cambrica Welsh Poppy
Aconitum vulparia Wolfsbane leaves
Aquilegia vulgaris Common Columbine
Ranunculus pyrenaicus Pyrenean Buttercup
Saxifraga longifolia Pyrenean Saxifrage
Erinus alpinus Fairy Foxglove
Linaria alpina Alpine Toadflax
Veronica ponae Spiked Pyrenean Speedwell
Iris latifolia Pyrenean Iris
Anthericum liliago St. Bernard's Lily
Paradisea liliastrum St Bruno's Lily
Lilium martagon Martagon Lily
Lilium pyrenaicum Pyrenean Lily
Brimeura amethystinus Pyrenean Hyacinth
Muscari comosum Tassel Hyacinth

Asphodel albus Asphodel
Tofieldia calyculata Tofield's Asphodel
Anacamptis pyramidalis Pyramidal Orchid
Dactylorhiza majalis Broad-leaved Marsh Orchid
Dactylorhiza fuchsii Common Spotted Orchid
Gymnadenia conopsea Fragrant Orchid
Orchis ustulata Burnt Orchid
Platanthera bifolia Lesser Butterfly Orchid
Platanthera chlorantha Butterfly Orchid
Nigritella nigra Black Vanilla Orchid
Vitaliana primuliflora Vitaliana
Paris quadrifolia Herb-paris
Laserpitium siler Sermountain species
Veronica nutans Alpine Speedwell
Leucanthemopsis alpina Alpine Moon Daisy
Saxifraga oppositifolia paradoxa Purple Saxifrage
Astragalus danicus Purple Milk-vetch
Anthyllis montana Mountain Kidney-vetch
Viola cornuta Horned Violet
Globularia nudicaulis Leafless-stemmed Globularia
Thalictrum aquilegifolium Great Meadow-rue
Monotropa hypopitys *Yellow Bird's-nest*

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