

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 01-Jan-20 09:33 AM GMT

Day 2 in the Dolomites was a return to the Sella Pass, which had been so stunning back in July 2016. The weather was equally beautiful this day, even being so high up it still reached around 20 degrees at midday.



Sella Pass View 1



Sella Pass View 2

And there were some butterflies too, a selection of mostly tatty Ringlet species, plus a Mountain Fritillary. Despite posting the pictures on the UK Butterfly Forum at the time, I'm still not sure about the ID on them. Let me know if you have any idea!



Mountain Fritillary



Mystery "erebia" 1 (underside)



Mystery "erebia" 1 (topside)



Mystery "erebia" 2



Mystery "erebia" 3



Mystery "erebia" 4



Mystery "erebia" 5

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 01-Jan-20 09:44 AM GMT

Day 3 in the Dolomites was a cable car up to Rosengarten from Vigo di Fassa, followed by a walk to Gardeccia and back.



View from the Rosengarten cable car station



View at Gardeccia

I did see a larger Fritillary that looked different from Queen of Spain, but it was flying quickly, so I couldn't identify it. Also seen were Water Ringlet and Common Brassy Ringlet.

The Water Ringlet (*erebia pronoe*) was a brand new species for me!



Water Ringlet

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 01-Jan-20 09:48 AM GMT

The final half day in the Dolomites was not really a proper day, as we had to leave early in the morning. But I did stop off near to the hamlet of Halser, halfway back to Bolzano where I was catching the train. Here I saw a number of lowland species in the scrub, including Silver Studded Blue.

The onward journey was to the third and final location of my holiday in Italy, Lake Garda, specifically based in Limone sul Garda. Here's the wonderful view from the hotel when we arrived at 4pm.



View from Limone sul Garda

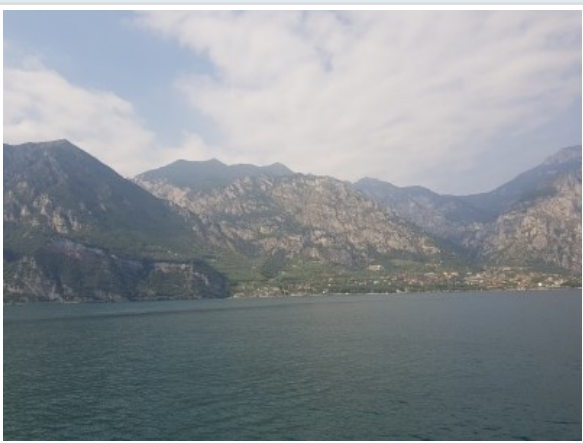
Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 01-Jan-20 09:54 AM GMT

Day 1 at Lake Garda was spent catching the ferry to Malcesne, followed by a cable car up to the top of Monte Baldo.



View from the top of Monte Baldo



View from the Malcesne to Limone ferry

I had wondered if I might see Ottoman Brassy Ringlet, which has a very isolated colony here, but it was very late in the season, so no luck. I did see Chalkhill Blue, Clouded Yellow, and Queen of Spain Fritillary though, amongst a number of other common butterflies.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 01-Jan-20 09:57 AM GMT

Day 2 at Lake Garda was spent relaxing in the hotel, reading in the sunshine. Incredibly, a Two-Tailed Pascha landed right close to my sunbed, long enough for me to identify it, but sadly not long enough to photograph it.

I also had a stroll around the olive groves at the back of the hotel, and saw Swallowtail, more Geranium Bronze, and a Great Banded Grayling.

However there was a further mystery butterfly, a big black one that I chased down a road for over two minutes. It sadly didn't stop, and I suspect it might have been a Dryad (*minois dryas*), which would have been a new species for me. But it will forever remain a mystery sadly.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 01-Jan-20 03:18 PM GMT

So that brings me to the end of my European butterfly adventures so far. It is 11 years since my first conscious sighting of that first non-UK butterfly, the Long Tailed Blue in Tuscany in Italy. And it is three and half years since my first dedicated trip to the Italian Dolomites.

Since then I've been on further dedicated butterfly spotting holidays to Croatia, the Spanish Pyrenees, Southern Greece, Switzerland, Northern Greece and Central Spain. Of the current official list of 459 European butterfly species, I've seen 243, leaving 214 left to see, excluding the two (Madeiran Large White and Brown's Grayling) that are presumed to be extinct.

I'm booked on two holidays in 2020, which I hope will be confirmed as definitely running soon. One is to the Central Italian Alps with a company called Greentours. The other is a two week holiday to Bulgaria, North Greece and North Macedonia with a company called Wild Echo. If they do run as scheduled, based on previous tour reports, my expectation is that I will see up to 62 new species in total, over the two trips. (The reality is I'll most likely see somewhere between 25 and 40 new species, as not all species are seen each year).

But assuming I see the maximum possible number of new species in 2020, I've analysed where the remaining 152 species can be seen, in order to optimise my efforts to see them in future years. The analysis is quite interesting, with most being species restricted to only a very few places in Europe:

- 42 can be seen in Spain – Either specialist species of the Sierra Nevada, Picos de Europa and the Pyrenees, or early Spring butterflies not seen on any/most of the currently advertised organised butterfly holidays;
- 17 are endemic (or near endemic) to the Canary Islands;
- 2 are endemic to Madeira;
- 2 are endemic to the Azores;
- 12 are endemic (or near endemic) to Sardinia and/or Corsica;
- 8 are endemic (or near endemic) to Cyprus;
- 5 are endemic (or near endemic) to Crete;
- 22 are endemic (or near endemic) to Scandinavia;
- 1 is endemic to Ireland;
- 19 are endemic (or near endemic) to the Greek mainland or the Greek Islands;
- 2 are endemic to Sicily;
- 3 are endemic (or near endemic) to Romania;
- 5 are endemic to Italy;
- 12 can be seen only in the Alps, (Italy, France, Switzerland, Austria or Slovenia)

The above clearly gives an idea of where my butterfly holidays will need to be focused from 2021 onwards.

Spain (probably three or four trips), the Canary Islands, Corsica/Sardinia, Cyprus, Crete and the Alps (a number of trips) would potentially tick off another 96 species.

Six specific trips to Madeira, the Azores, Ireland, Sicily, Romania and Italy would allow me to see 15 more species. (A lot of trips for very few new species, albeit in some special places).

But the really difficult pockets of species are the 41 species of Scandinavia, Greece and the Greek Islands. Scandinavia is a big place, underexplored, with only localised small pockets of most of the species, even if widely distributed. The weather in summer is also highly variable, and I've read that some of the species can sometimes even skip a summer if the weather is poor enough. With the Greek species, much of the problem is the fact that each species is located on only one (or very few) islands, requiring some sort of bespoke island hopping trip. That and the mainland species I still need to see are extremely rare, local, and scattered across pretty much the whole mainland!

What does all this mean? Mainly that I probably only have three or four holidays left, after 2020, where I rack up more than 10 new species in a week. And that, if I really want to complete my European butterfly species list, I'm going to have to be making huge efforts over a further 10 to 20 years!

In reality, I've never much been a "lister." If you go back to my very original post in this thread, when I started this diary, I pointed out that it is the places you visit, by looking for butterflies, that is so special. Wild, mainly unspoiled places, flower rich meadows, stunning scenery.

So I suspect I'll never complete the full list. Indeed I can't really imagine ever making such huge efforts on the Greek Islands or Scandinavia. Perhaps I'll reach something like 400 out of the 459 European species? If I did, I would have seen some very special places, and made myself very happy in the process.

And actually, what probably interests me even more, is the conservation of some of the species. Land use in Europe is changing rapidly. Old traditional farming practices and wildflower rich meadows are being wiped out in many parts of eastern Europe by modern practices. Conversely, in many other areas, across the whole of Europe, agriculture is being completely abandoned, and scrub growth will eventually turn flower rich wildflower meadows into secondary forest. Climate change isn't helping either, with some very localised species having nowhere to go as their habitat becomes unsuitable.

What also interests me is educating other people about all these conservation issues, using butterflies as the medium for that education. I've been very lucky to have shared my holidays with some truly excellent guides, who have taught me lots, not just about butterflies. Maybe one day I'll consider trying my hand at guiding?

We shall see. This final post for now is simply pondering on an uncertain medium and long term future. Both for European butterfly species and for me.

Anyhow, in the short term, I'm looking forward to my two holidays in 2020, and you can be sure to read about them here, when I return from them.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by David M, 06-Jan-20 09:24 PM GMT

Wonderful effort, Paul. I didn't think you'd be able to write all this up in such a relatively short space of time and it's taken me a while to fully catch up given the speed with which you've finished things lately.

I particularly like your summary at the end, some of which I've commented on below (hope you don't mind):

[quote=selbypaul post_id=150093 time=1577891911 user_id=10004]...42 can be seen in Spain - Either specialist species of the Sierra Nevada, Picos de Europa and the Pyrenees, or early Spring butterflies not seen on any/most of the currently advertised organised butterfly holidays

Doesn't this just prove how attractive Spain is for butterflies? I really had my eyes opened when I first visited in 2018 and they have widened ever since

[quote]...In reality, I've never much been a "lister." If you go back to my very original post in this thread, when I started this diary, I pointed out that it is the places you visit, by looking for butterflies, that is so special. Wild, mainly unspoiled places, flower rich meadows, stunning scenery.

It's impossible not to do at least a mental list, because otherwise you don't remember what you've seen or what's new. However, as you say, the sheer beauty of the (often largely ignored) landscapes/habitats where butterflies are commonly found trumps all else. Who needs Prozac when you have an alpine meadow full of insects on a warm, summer morning?

[quote]...And actually, what probably interests me even more, is the conservation of some of the species. Land use in Europe is changing rapidly. Old traditional farming practices and wildflower rich meadows are being wiped out in many parts of eastern Europe by modern practices. Conversely, in many other areas, across the whole of Europe, agriculture is being completely abandoned, and scrub growth will eventually turn flower rich wildflower meadows into secondary forest. Climate change isn't helping either, with some very localised species having nowhere to go as their habitat becomes unsuitable.

Yes. This, for me, was something that developed unintentionally alongside my enthusiasm for butterflying on the Continent. Knowledge of different climates, land use, agricultural practices, etc gave me a greater understanding of the issues that affect butterflies and how difficult it can often be to formulate plans to conserve them. That's why I joined EBG and decided to learn more.

[quote]...Anyhow, in the short term, I'm looking forward to my two holidays in 2020, and you can be sure to read about them here, when I return from them.

I shall indeed look forward to that, Paul.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 09-Jan-20 06:03 PM GMT

Thanks David for the very kind words.

I've really enjoyed writing the diary actually. When going through some of my old photos from 2016 and 2017, taken before I became an "amateur expert" at identification, it turns out I had photos of two species I hadn't realised I had seen, plus another two I'd seen at earlier dates than I had realised.

So it has been a labour of love!

In many respects the diary wasn't written for people like you - no offence!!! I know how much you know and appreciate European butterflies and the habitats they live in. But I'm amazed when I meet some UK butterfly enthusiasts just how little they know about European butterflies. Indeed I count myself as one of those people pre-2016.

So I hope readers of the diary will be enthused by the scenery and the possibilities. Whether they decide to plan their own holidays, or they book with companies such as Greenwings, Naturetrek, or the other companies that offer organised tours, I cannot encourage people enough. They will be shocked at the comparable paucity of the best UK sites. They will enjoy sunshine, good food, great company with likeminded enthusiasts, and expert advice from guides like yourself.

Finally, I cannot emphasise enough the importance of the threats to some European butterfly species posed by all the threats I mentioned in my previous post, and other threats too.

Ratzer's Ringlet, such a rare species in a limited area on the Swiss/Italian border, threatened by climate change and collectors.

Piedmont Anomalous Blue, found in only a couple of Italian valley's, threatened by scrub encroachment.

Chelmos Blue and Odd Spot Blue, such very rare species now in a very small area of Greece, probably on the road to extinction in Europe due to collection.

Danube Clouded Yellow, extinct in most European countries already, and probably on its way out of Romania and Poland soon too, as agricultural practices continue to intensify (or land abandoned).

Canary Large White, found now only properly now on La Palma, extinct on Gomera, and probably soon to be extinct on Tenerife. Likely to be down to introduced disease from the main Large White species, the suspected reason for the Madeiran Large White going extinct.

I could go on, listing some of the many species undergoing rapid decline in both abundance and range. But I don't want to depress people. The thing I want to focus on is the importance of research, hard work, and habitat restoration on a landscape scale. The declines can be stopped and even reversed. But it needs more interested people, doing more research, doing more work, donating more money.

Here's hoping!

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by David M, 12-Jan-20 10:41 AM GMT

[quote=selbypaul post_id=150186 time=1578592985 user_id=10004].In many respects the diary wasn't written for people like you - no offence!!! I know how much you know and appreciate European butterflies and the habitats they live in. But I'm amazed when I meet some UK butterfly enthusiasts

just how little they know about European butterflies. Indeed I count myself as one of those people pre-2016.

None taken, Paul. 😊 Your diary is different to other trip reports (my own included) which largely focus on the butterflies. You have concentrated a good deal on the overall experience, which is fundamentally the most important thing of all.

I think a lot of people are a bit intimidated by travelling to the continent to look for butterflies. My early trips were easy because they were to France, where I used to live whilst at university (and of course it helps to know the language). Things might have been different had I not been in that position.

In addition, there are quite a few who would prefer not to be part of a group. I was like this myself in the beginning, and it was only when I saw Roger Gibbons' name down as Chief Guide in the French Alps in 2014 that I decided to take the plunge.

Like you rightly say, these trips introduce you to like minded people and plenty of sets of eyes. You DO actually see much more as part of a group because others find things that you have not seen yourself.

[quote]..They will be shocked at the comparable paucity of the best UK sites..

Absolutely. There are as many species flying along a 1km forest track by the hotel in Rimplas in the French Alps in early July as there are in the whole of the UK (I think we actually hit 70 on one trip). Again, this might be too much for some especially as the majority will be species not found in Britain.

I'd agree with your own comments that people should still give it a try, either on their own or as part of a group. Once you've dived in it's very hard to get out!

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 14-Jan-20 05:46 PM GMT

[quote] None taken, Paul. 😊

Phew!

[quote] Once you've dived in it's very hard to get out!

So very true!

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 06-Aug-20 08:43 PM GMT

As my last main post (on 1st January) suggested, in 2020 I had two main European butterfly holidays planned. I also had two other European holidays in the diary, which I hoped might each also include the possibility of at least half a day of butterflying.

Even before Covid-19 hit, the first of my holidays for the year had to be cancelled. Sadly, my partner had to have an urgent operation to remove an infected cyst, ending hopes of seeing Aустat's Blue in Lanzarote in January.

My trip to the Italian Alps in late June was right on the margins of being possible to go ahead. Had it been two weeks later, with the Air Bridges opening up, it may have run. Sadly not.

My three country two-week Balkan holiday in early July always looked at risk, given the number of different regimes and borders involved, so that cancellation was inevitable.

This left me with a dilemma in early July. Lots of annual leave stored up, but no proper organised wildlife holidays running. And a real feeling that I needed to get away from the same 2 mile radius around my house that I'd stuck to for five months!

Plus the call of European butterflies was strong. My 7 brilliant holidays described had got them into my blood. I couldn't imagine having to wait until 2021.

I am therefore hugely grateful to Matt, the owner of Greenwings, who I was in contact with throughout June and July, and who offered me the possibility of joining one of their guides on an exploratory trip to one of the places they have always considered running a holiday to. Specifically, the area around Mallnitz in Austria, with the hope of seeing the Austrian endemic White Speck Ringlet (*erebia claudina*), amongst other things.

After some basic research about the Covid-19 related travel issues specific to Austria, I jumped at the chance, and just six days before the agreed dates, we booked the flights, and I booked my required Covid-19 test.

The next five days were a real stress. Timing the Covid-19 test to be a maximum of four days before flying, yet guaranteeing a result in time is tricky. Not only in there a chance of the result taking longer than 48 hours to be received, but a small percentage of tests come back as inconclusive. So there was a real risk the holiday would be scuppered that way.

Then, three days before I was due to fly into Salzburg, Ryanair cancelled the flights, as they were not full enough to be viable. I then had a frantic night of trying to find alternative airports to fly to, eventually settling on Munich in Germany, followed by a 225 minute train journey to Mallnitz.

Thankfully, all these arrangements stayed in place, and so on Friday 17th July, my alarm went off at 3.30am, and I set off for Heathrow, from Sheffield. Heathrow was about 20% full compared to normal at that time of year, and whilst everyone was in masks, I was one of only three people I saw who were taking the extra precaution of a Face Shield.



Masked Up!

Interestingly, because of the limited flights from the UK to that part of Europe, the flight was completely full, not a single spare seat! Quite an interesting experience having not been closer than two metres to anyone other than my partner for five months!

Munich airport itself was literally desolate. Nearly completely empty. And thankfully, the train from Munich to Mallnitz was also very quiet too. So that was good.

At 6pm, nearly 15 hours after waking up, I arrived in Mallnitz, and the mountains of Austria. The stresses of the last week instantly disappeared. I met my guide for the week, Yiannis Christofides at the station, and we walked the short distance to our hotel for the week. Other than us, the hotel was empty, which was good for safety, although obviously sad for the hotel owners.



The view from my hotel bedroom

Yiannis had already had a day and a half recceing some of the area. The weather had been cold and showery, and he'd hardly seen a butterfly. The forecast wasn't particularly good for the next six days either. What would the week ahead bring....?

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by Wurzel, 08-Aug-20 08:22 PM GMT

Looking forward to finding out what you were able to find 🤔🇩🇪 – particularly as my holiday was effectively cancelled 😞

Have a goodun and stay safe

Wurzel

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by David M, 09-Aug-20 02:33 PM GMT

I should point out that I've already been tipped off regarding one species you saw, Paul, but nevertheless I'm still very eager to see it. 😊

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by Padfield, 09-Aug-20 03:47 PM GMT

I'm looking forward to seeing what you found too, Paul! If it's *claudina*, that's one butterfly I've always wanted to see but never had the opportunity. I'm tempted to photoshop a similar *Erebia* with some little white dots ...

I think a lot of people have gone through your experience this year, of cancelled trips and perpetual doubt. Well done for getting this one in!

Guy

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 09-Aug-20 06:39 PM GMT

The first proper day of the holiday dawned grey, gloomy and cold. The forecast was for rain from about lunchtime to about dinnertime, so Yiannis and I set off as early as we could. The plan was for a lower level walk along the valley directly to the west of Mallnitz.

Even as we set off at 9am, there was already spots of rain in the air. By the time we'd reached the first main meadow, alongside the river, light rain was constant. The rain became heavier throughout the day, although we persisted, following the road as it wended up the valley. We eventually decided to turn around as the road ended and turned into a footpath, as we were both drenched, and actually really cold. It must have been only 8 degrees!

So very much a washout in terms of butterflies. But we did see some really interesting flowers, including Grass of Parnassus and a large number of orchids and bellflowers. Any of you who has been on a holiday guided by Yiannis will know how brilliant a botanist he is. The lack of butterfly distractions was a real opportunity to absorb some of this knowledge.



Grass of Parnassus

I guess that, in a normal year, such a washout of a cold day on the first day of a holiday would have been a real downer. However, given the cancellations and difficulty in getting away to Europe this year, it really wasn't. The stunning alpine scenery, even in cloud and mist, was still a sheer joy.



View 1



View 2

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 09-Aug-20 08:54 PM GMT

Day 2 also started cool and gloomy. Thankfully no rain was forecast today, and the cloud was forecast to break up from around lunchtime. Our plan was to reach a high meadow that Yiannis had reached two days earlier in the cold, which he felt was promising if it was warm enough. This involved walking up the Dosen valley to the east of Mallnitz, and then heading into the hills.

Again we set off early, at 9am. And whilst still cool, it was warmer than the day before. And just 10 minutes up the quiet road, we saw our first two butterflies, giving us hope. These were a single Large Skipper, and a single Meadow Brown.

This hopeful start turned out to be a false dawn. There were some absolutely stunning pristine meadows either side of the quiet road, and Yiannis and I spent a good two hours walking at a slow pace hoping to see some interesting Blue's, Skipper's or Fritillary's. Literally no butterflies seen, despite it warming up. As we left the road, and joined a track, we saw three Large Wall Brown. (These turned out to be the most common butterfly of the whole holiday).

We then reached the first proper higher meadow, which was a pine forest clearing from about five years ago. There was lots of grass amongst the old detritus, and a few flowers, and the sun made its first appearance of the holiday. Cue the butterflies. This meadow held the odd Heath Fritillary, a single Mazarine Blue, a couple of Almond Eyed Ringlet, a single Bright Eyed Ringlet. Also a *pyrgus* of some sort, but the only photo I got was blurred, so it was unidentifiable.



The first meadow

We kept climbing on a narrow forest track, seeing some more interesting wildflowers. In a dappled clearing we saw more Mazarine Blue and good numbers of Heath Fritillary. Also a really nice Mountain Green Veined White, a Sooty Copper (form *subalpinus*), Large Ringlet, Mountain Small White, Pearl Bordered Fritillary and Red Admiral.



Mountain Green Veined White



Large Ringlet

A further 15 minute climb, and we reached the large meadow that Yiannis had suggested was promising. This was at about 1900 metres.



Looking downhill in the main meadow



The same location, looking uphill

Mazarine Blue's were plentiful here, as were Sooty Copper. But best of all was a single Moorland Clouded Yellow. I didn't get a photo, but I did get a good view, a new species for me.

We had lunch here, and the sun really began to shine in spells. An Alpine Heath joined us for lunch, taking a liking to my rucksack.



Alpine Heath

After lunch, we spent around two hours in the meadow, doing our best to systematically scour it, as we slowly rose a further 50 or so metres. There were a number of very grey looking "Large Blue types" making me wonder if it was Scarce Large Blue. Looking at the photos later, it was pretty easy to confirm as "just" Large Blue. But I think they are the form *obscura*?



Large Blue – possibly form obscura?

More Large Wall Brown were seen, also Mountain Argus and Dingy Skipper.

I then got sight of another different looking *erebia*, one that was much fresher than the various Almond Eyed Ringlet and Large Ringlet seen. Moving in closer, I saw the distinctive white spots on the upperside of the hindwing. It could be nothing else. A White Speck Ringlet (*erebia claudina*)! Our main target species for the holiday, and an Austrian endemic. Also, a second brand new species for me.

I shouted Yiannis, who didn't believe me at first, and took a good number of photos, before it briefly disappeared. We spent a good 30 minutes chasing it, and took a good number of pretty decent photos, of what I think was ultimately only two individuals.



White Speck Ringlet (upperside)



White Speck Ringlet (underside)

Just before we left the meadow, I saw a Dusky Grizzled Skipper, only my 2nd sighting of one of these.

We then needed to make our way down the hill and re-trace our steps back to the hotel, for dinner. Fascinatingly, despite it now being warmer and brighter, the pristine roadside meadows were again empty. Not a single butterfly seen. We were very puzzled about this dearth at lower altitudes.

All in all though, a fantastic day. Two brand new species included in the 23 species we saw in total, and most importantly, the main target species for the holiday. Also, it was clear the weather was improving. Well worth the long climb and roughly 15 miles walked!

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by Padfield, 09-Aug-20 10:00 PM GMT

Excellent! If it rained every day from then on your trip would have been worthwhile! I don't know why, but I just find that a brilliant butterfly – even though I could photoshop *pharte* into it with a few clicks! 😊

Guy

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 10-Aug-20 07:51 AM GMT

[quote=Padfield_post_id=157112_time=1597006806_user_id=665] Excellent! If it rained every day from then on your trip would have been worthwhile! I don't know why, but I just find that a brilliant butterfly – even though I could photoshop *pharte* into it with a few clicks! 😊

Guy

I totally agree on both counts Guy. I'm a big fan of eredia in general. Specifically their genetic diversity and ability to survive in pretty hostile habitat. But for all their diversity, most European eredia are pretty much along the same theme – brown with orange/red patches, and various sized black spots, sometimes with a white centre.

Yet the White Speck Ringlet, with its bright white spots, has somehow evolved quite differently, making it completely unmistakable. A very special butterfly indeed.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 10-Aug-20 07:53 AM GMT

[quote=Wurzel_post_id=157052_time=1596914545_user_id=9821] Looking forward to finding out what you were able to find 🤔🇩🇪 – particularly as my holiday was effectively cancelled 😞

Have a goodun and stay safe

Wurzel

Sorry to hear that Wurzel. I know how that feels, for sure. I hope the write up of my trip, and the various other trip reports from David, Guy and others gives at least some enjoyment and maybe inspiration for next year.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by Wurzel, 10-Aug-20 08:18 PM GMT

Cheers Paul 😊 I will definitely get a lot of enjoyment from some voyeuristic butterflying – especially with such delights as White Speck Ringlet and Alpine Heath 😊😊🇩🇪 As for the inspiration – I'll have to hold off on that until my girls have left home as until then it will be family holidays abroad 😊

Have a goodun

Wurzel

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by David M, 10-Aug-20 08:58 PM GMT

You got it, Paul! 🍷

Doesn't matter whether it's 1 or 101.

That is a real localised species of *erebia*, almost approaching the status of Guy's beloved *christi*.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by Andy02, 11-Aug-20 11:42 AM GMT

Paul

Do you have contact details for your guide. Off to a nearby area in Austria this weekend

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 11-Aug-20 08:44 PM GMT

{quote=Andy02-post_id=157175-time=1597142539-user_id=19563} Paul

Do you have contact details for your guide. Off to a nearby area in Austria this weekend

Hi Andy

I'll email you later tonight or tomorrow

Best Wishes

Paul

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by Andy02, 11-Aug-20 09:05 PM GMT

Thanks Paul

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 16-Aug-20 09:47 PM GMT

For Day 3, the weather forecast was for potentially the best day of weather all week, and this turned out to be correct. Crystal clear blue skies in the morning, with light cloud bubbling up during the day, turning from warm to scorching hot.

We rightly made the decision that this was probably the best day to head up on the cable car to the top of Ankogel, with a peak at 2700m. To get there involved a brief 10-minute bus journey from Mallnitz train station to the bottom cable car station. Then the 15-minute cable car to the top.

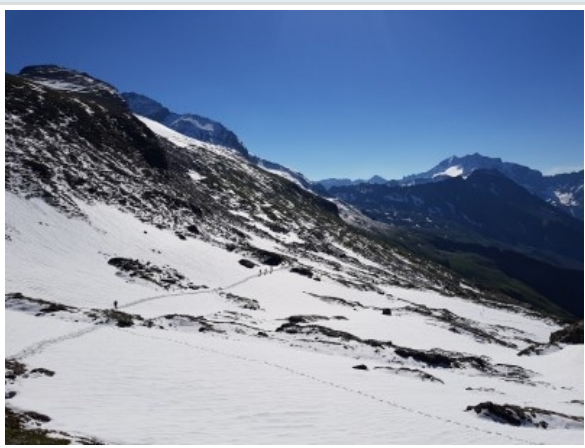


The view at 9am as we walk from the hotel to catch the bus

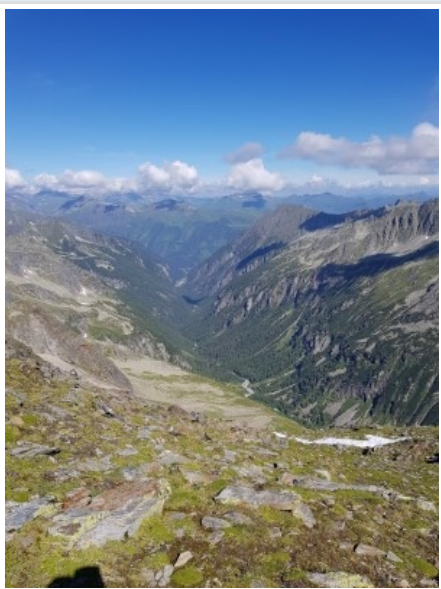
Yiannis had been keenly looking forward to this day, as he had a botany report suggesting the top would be carpeted in alpine flowers by this time of year. However, Austria seems to have had a very late summer in 2020, and it was clear that most of the specialist alpine flowers at the top had not yet emerged. Even worse than that, the very cold weather two to four days earlier had included around a metre of fresh snowfall that was only beginning to melt that morning.



View from the top of the Ankogel cable car station



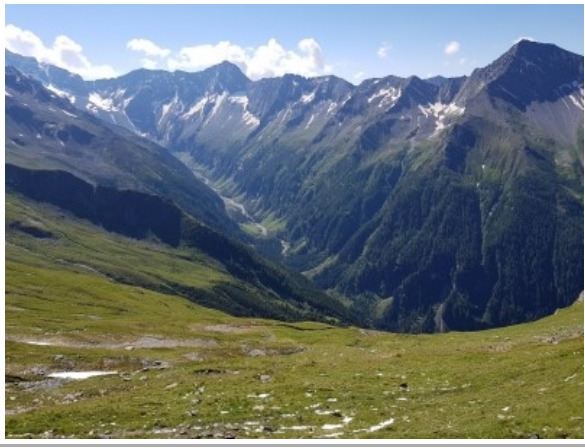
View across the thick fresh snowdrifts



Looking down from the top of Ankogel into the main Mallnitz valley

It meant that the walking at the very top was treacherous. Slippery, and in places of snowdrift, deceptively deep. The views were stunning though, and we stayed for around an hour at the very top, taking in these views, and searching for any alpine plants in places where the snow had melted.

We then began the slow and steep descent, dropping 800 metres in around 2 hours. I had really hoped to see specialist alpine butterflies such as Peak White, Small Apollo, Mountain Clouded Yellow, Shepherds Fritillary etc. No such luck, none of these were seen. For the first hour of descent, the only butterfly seen was a solitary Mountain Small White. It was becoming ever clearer that the late summer meant that none of the high-altitude butterflies had emerged, even though it was now the 20th July.



View from slightly lower down

As we neared the middle cable car station, a few *erebia* did appear. This included Bright Eyed Ringlet, Blind Ringlet and Woodland Ringlet. We stopped for lunch just below this middle cable car station, having decided to walk all the way down to the bottom.



Woodland Ringlet

This next section, as we descended from 1900m to 1260m, was probably the richest habitat for butterflies all week. This included Bright Eyed Ringlet, lots and lots of Almond Eyed Ringlet, Lesser Mountain Ringlet, large numbers of Heath Fritillary, Pearl Bordered Fritillary, Alpine Grizzled Skipper, Essex Skipper, Small Skipper, Small White, Small Blue, Large Blue, Mazarine Blue, Common Blue, Large Wall Brown, Northern Wall Brown, Alpine Heath and Small Heath.



Lesser Mountain Ringlet



Almond Eyed Ringlet

The highlight however was a section of the ski slope, which we walked down, which had good numbers of Titania's Fritillary. This is only my second time of seeing this species.



Titania's Fritillary

When we reached the bottom cable car station, we had intended to catch the bus back to Mallnitz. We missed it by five minutes however, and so instead of waiting an hour, we walked on. Here, in the baking heat, we saw a few Small White and also a single Dark Green Fritillary and Clouded Yellow. Again, like yesterday, the lower altitudes seemed to have very little flying.

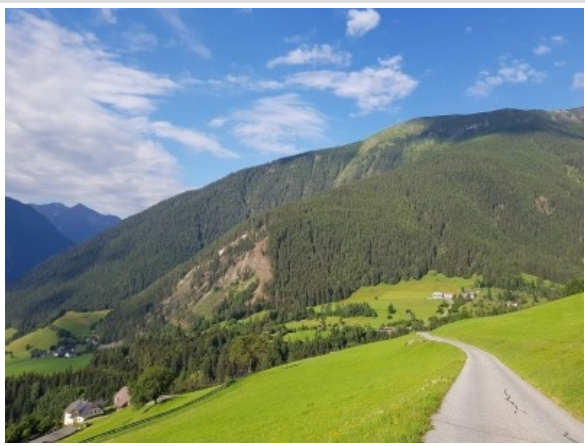
In total we must have walked upward of 20 miles all day, some of it long stretches of very steep downhill, and in scorching hot temperatures. My knees and feet were shattered, and very glad of a rest at dinnertime, and then bed! But it had been a wonderful day of stunning views, and some good butterflies too, if slightly disappointing at the very high altitudes.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 17-Aug-20 08:05 PM GMT

Day 4 began sunny again, clouding over at midday, and then becoming sunny again later in the afternoon. It was very hot and muggy towards the end of the day, and there was a thunderstorm that evening.

We decided to walk further down the Dosen valley, to the lake directly up the valley, instead of heading up left to the meadows of day 2.



Setting off for the day, about 20 minutes up the road from the hotel

This meant that the first 90 minutes of walking on the quiet road were a repeat of Day 2, with the pristine meadows either side of the road. Interestingly, whilst there were still very few butterflies, we saw a freshly emerged Marbled White, and a few freshly emerged Ringlet.

It was clear that some of the summer butterflies were only just emerging at these lower altitudes. I speculated that perhaps there had been some earlier

emergences, but that they'd pretty much been wiped out by prolonged cold wet weather in the two weeks previously. And also that the medium altitude species, that seemed in better numbers hadn't had the earlier emergence, only just emerging in the week we were there.

We walked onwards to the end of the road, and onto the track that continued in the same direction. Here we saw a fresh Scarce Copper, a number fresh Sooty Copper, and some Mazarine Blue. Twenty minutes through some woods, and we emerged into a more open grassy area, where in the Dolomites I'd have expected Shepherd's Fritillary. No such luck. In fact there was very little other than Small Tortoiseshell, and a pair of Olive Skipper and an Eros Blue (thanks to Guy Padfield for the later identification of this last two).



Two Olive Skipper



Eros Blue, Photo 1



Eros Blue, Photo 2

We continued walking gradually uphill in this wide and mostly open valley. In small sections there were colonies of Large Wall Brown. Also a number of Pearl Bordered Fritillary.



One of the less open sections of the valley



A more open section

Eventually we came to a lake, where we had lunch. In the distance I spotted an Orange Tip! I realise we were at 1600 metres altitude, but this was incredibly late given it was the 21st July, highlighting once again how late the season was.



The lake at lunchtime

We then re-traced our steps, all the way back to the hotel for dinner. Other than the odd additional species such as Almond Eyed Ringlet and Heath Fritillary, we saw the same species as earlier in the day.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 17-Aug-20 08:59 PM GMT

For Day 5, we tried branching out further, to an alternative valley. So we caught the bus headed west (for 45 minutes) to Innerfragant, and the funicular railway most of the way up to the Molltaler Glacier.

The funicular railway itself is impressive, being completely underground and taking around 15 minutes to go from 1250 metres to 2780 metres. My biggest regret of the holiday is that we didn't have more time up here. We could have spent at least two hours just around the station at this height. And we could have headed higher again on cable car or ski lift to the glacier itself. But we were time limited, as there was only one bus back to Mallnitz

at 3pm.



View 1 from the top of the Funicular Railway



View 2 from the top of the Funicular Railway

The plan was to walk all the way downwards, taking four and half hours. However we were soon distracted, not just by the alpine plants, but also by a fresh and unusual *erebia*. At the time I thought we'd found a De Lesse's Ringlet, which would have been a new species for me. But it turned out to be a Silky Ringlet. Still a good sighting, and only my 2nd ever.

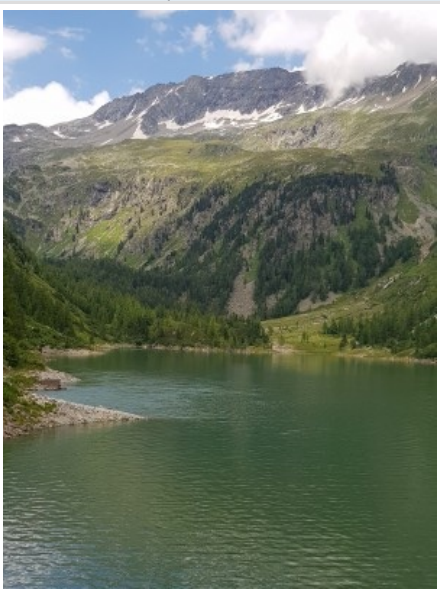


Silky Ringlet (upperside)



Silky Ringlet (underside)

This 40 minute delay meant we had to move quite quickly down quite a rough and steep path down towards Lake Wurtenspeicher, which is 1700 metres altitude at the dam. It was exceptionally hot and muggy, despite it now being overcast, having started off sunny in the early morning. There were few butterflies around. Northern Wall Brown, Almond Eyed Ringlet, Blind Ringlet, Lesser Mountain Ringlet, Sooty Copper and Mazarine Blue, all just odd individuals of each species.



Lake Wurtenspeicher



Northern Wall Brown



Sooty Copper (form subalpinus)

We had a brief lunch by the lake, and then walked the road down the remaining 500 metres of altitude. The road was closed to all but service traffic, and was a series of about 25 hairpins.



View back down to the bottom of the Funicular Railway, from the top of the hairpin road

The sun came out however, and actually it turned out to be the second most productive stretch of habitat all week. Certainly in terms of numbers of individual butterflies. There were many Heath Fritillary, plus Pearl Bordered Fritillary, Large Ringlet, Large Skipper, Dingy Skipper, Large Wall Brown, Small White, Mountain Green Veined White and Almond Eyed Ringlet. The highlight though were two Apollo.



Mountain Green Veined White



Apollo

We made the bus with 20 minutes spare, and soon we were back in Mallnitz. We definitely didn't do this area justice in terms of searching out all the species the massive variation in habitat over the 1500 metres of habitat we traversed.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 17-Aug-20 09:38 PM GMT

Day 6 was my last day. I had to catch the train to Munich airport at 6pm, but it meant I had pretty much the full day butterflying. Yiannis and I decided to retrace our steps from Day 1, which had been a washout, as the weather forecast was good. This was the valley to the west of Mallnitz.

And the weather did indeed turn out to be warm and mostly sunny. It threatened rain at midday, but the clouds that bubbled up simply burned off.



The valley to the west of Mallnitz



Looking back down the valley



Walking back to Mallnitz

However, once again, as we'd found for the whole holiday, pristine meadows hardly had any butterflies. Here's an example from 1200 metres. Full of creeping thyme, and all sorts of other fantastic wildflowers, and virtually no butterflies to be seen!



Wild Thyme in a flower rich meadow

We did find a woodland glade, full of thistles. This had Heath Fritillary, Silver Washed Fritillary, High Brown Fritillary, Niobe Fritillary and Pearl Bordered Fritillary. All but the latter were absolutely fresh, and appeared to have emerged that very day. It felt like I was leaving on the day all the summer butterflies were finally emerging!



Silver Washed Fritillary



Niobe Fritillary



Black Veined White

We arrived back at the hotel at 5pm, I changed, and walked the short distance to the hotel. I said my goodbyes to Yiannis, who had been a truly superb guide and companion for the week, and began the three and half hour long train journey to Munich airport. The train was nearly completely empty again, which was good.

I stayed overnight in the Novotel at the airport, and caught the 7am flight back to Heathrow, allowing me to drive back to Sheffield by midday.

Despite the very late season, and the consequential disappointing number of butterflies, the species count ended up okay at 56 species for me, and 60 for Yiannis, who ultimately had 3 extra days in the field.

Most important, there were two brand new species for me during the week. Moorland Clouded Yellow, and the Austrian endemic White Speck Ringlet.

As an experimental trip with potential for inclusion as a future Greenwings holiday, Yiannis and I learned a lot. We both agreed that it wouldn't be possible without a minibus. And the timing of the holiday would still need to be refined, given the highly unusual season. But it has clear potential, with a good variety of *erebia* and Fritillaries, lots of pristine flower meadows, and all sorts of high altitude habitat we barely explored.

My huge thanks again to Yiannis Christofides and to Greenwings for making this trip possible.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 17-Aug-20 09:50 PM GMT

And so, after eight cancelled holidays in 2020, the fact I managed to get in a week in Austria, and to see two new species, seems quite a victory under the circumstances. I'm pleased to say that I didn't catch Covid-19 whilst out there. And I feel exceptionally lucky to have had the chance to go, with so many other people not so lucky.

I'm now down to 212 European species to see, and currently have four holidays booked in 2021, with the potential to see 45 to 80 new species on those holidays.

I'm actually relatively hopeful on the health front. Six months into the Covid-19 crisis, the world's doctors have managed to improve treatments to the point of halving the death rate. There is every reason to believe it will be halved again over the next 8 months, ahead of my first 2021 trip. This is even before we consider vaccines. In amongst the bad news, it is hard for many people to spot this good news.

The big worry of course is whether the era of cheap aviation is over forever, or at least for a few years. Even if the large airlines recover, many of the small ones will go bankrupt or be forced to merge, reducing competition. It may be much trickier and much more expensive to fly to some of the destinations we previously took for granted. I guess there is always the train or car!

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by David M, 18-Aug-20 10:33 AM GMT

An excellent, candid account once again, Paul.

It's sure been a strange season at altitude in Europe, but you saw a handful of species that are on my wish list, particularly *claudina*, which is probably in my top ten.

As for your concluding comments, I hope you are right. There was inevitably going to be a rise in cases as national lockdowns were progressively eased, and I hope the increasing daily numbers of those infected won't see us returning to hundreds of deaths per day like we had in April, May and June.

I remain more optimistic regarding cheap air travel than you appear to be. We have already seen a surge in bookings for foreign holidays in 2021 and Easyjet & Ryanair will have already benefited from that as their schedules for summer have been out for a few weeks now (usually, they don't release them until September/October). I'd like to see a more pragmatic approach if a vaccine isn't available by next summer though. Surely there must be a way whereby people can take a test prior to travelling and can provide evidence that they are not carrying the infection?

Let's hope by next spring, which is over 6 months away, that the situation will have improved markedly.

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 18-Aug-20 05:35 PM GMT

David M wrote:

An excellent, candid account once again, Paul.

It's sure been a strange season at altitude in Europe, but you saw a handful of species that are on my wish list, particularly *claudina*, which is probably in my top ten.

As for your concluding comments, I hope you are right. There was inevitably going to be a rise in cases as national lockdowns were progressively eased, and I hope the increasing daily numbers of those infected won't see us returning to hundreds of deaths per day like we had in April, May and June.

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Let's hope by next spring, which is over 6 months away, that the situation will have improved markedly.

Thanks as ever for your kind comments David, much appreciated.

I hope you are right about cheap air travel continuing, fingers crossed!

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by David M, 18-Aug-20 09:20 PM GMT

I'm intrigued as to your planned destinations in 2021, Paul. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to drop me a PM....



Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 19-Aug-20 08:13 AM GMT

David M wrote:

I'm intrigued as to your planned destinations in 2021, Paul. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to drop me a PM....



I've sent you an email, as PMs seem to get stuck in the "outbox" 😊

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by David M, 20-Aug-20 08:20 PM GMT

Gotcha, Paul. Many thanks. Your plans for 2021 are enviable and I look forward to reading about them on here. 😊

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by Wurzel, 20-Aug-20 08:22 PM GMT

A cracking array of butterflies again Paul – some real envy inducing species for me – lots of 'I'd love to see that one' 🍷🍷😄
Maybe next year things will be back to a more stable new normal? 😊

Have a goodun and stay safe

Wurzel

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 21-Aug-20 06:13 AM GMT

David M wrote:

Gotcha, Paul. Many thanks. Your plans for 2021 are enviable and I look forward to reading about them on here. 😊

I don't normally like to wish away time. But it's always the same at this time of year, wishing that the next years holidays weren't so far away!

Re: European Butterflies – A personal diary

by selbypaul, 21-Aug-20 06:14 AM GMT

[quote=Wurzel post_id=157533 time=1597951328 user_id=9821] A cracking array of butterflies again Paul – some real envy inducing species for me – lots of 'I'd love to see that one' 🍷🍷😄

Maybe next year things will be back to a more stable new normal? 😊

Have a goodun and stay safe

Wurzel

Thanks Wurzel. That's exactly what I'm like reading other people's posts!