

Butterfly Trip Report

Netherlands National Parks, July 2023

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Our trip took place from 17th to 27th July, and was primarily a family holiday but was arranged to take in some potential butterfly habitat in four national parks. We stayed in two locations, each handy for two parks. The first stay was at Otterlo for easy access to [Hoge Veluwe](#) and [Veluwezoom](#) parks (both primarily heathland with inland dune habitat), and the second near to [Weerribben-Widen](#) (wetland) and [Dwingelderveld](#) (heathland) parks.

The first two parks are in the east of the country, an hour and a half from the west-coast ferry ports, with the other two being in the northeast, a further hour's drive away.

National Parks in the Netherlands are effectively very large, flat, nature reserves with good public access and visitor centres, often with adjacent holiday park accommodation. Hoge Veluwe requires payment to enter and is surrounded by a high fence, to ensure paid access and also because it contains introduced large free-roaming animals (including wolves). The other three parks have free access.

Cycling is the easiest way to explore properly as the parks are very large and have excellent cycle path networks, cycling being a primary mode of transport in the Netherlands. Hoge Veluwe provides free-to-use bikes at the entrance points. Most of the butterfly sites I describe here are easy to access without a bike if targeting these locations specifically.

My own references in planning the trip other than general online research were Bob Gibbons' excellent (albeit ageing) book "A Guide to the National Parks and other Wild Places of Britain and Europe" and [this](#) article on Large copper at Weerribben.

Hoge Veluwe

The first visit was to Hoge Veluwe, which is not home to notably rare butterflies but provided my first encounter with Sooty copper, *Lycaena tityrus*, a female in the Braamsveld area of the park.

Other species seen there included Silver-studded blue and Grayling, although we saw only one of the former in contrast to hundreds at Dwingelderveld (described later).

More common species encountered were Holly blue, which I learned is happy as a heathland species in these parks, frequent Small coppers on Ragwort, Large skipper, and an egg-laying Red admiral.

This park is adjacent to a large military base and distant Chinook helicopters are a constant presence.



Sooty copper female, Braamsveld, Hoge Veluwe





Veluwezoom

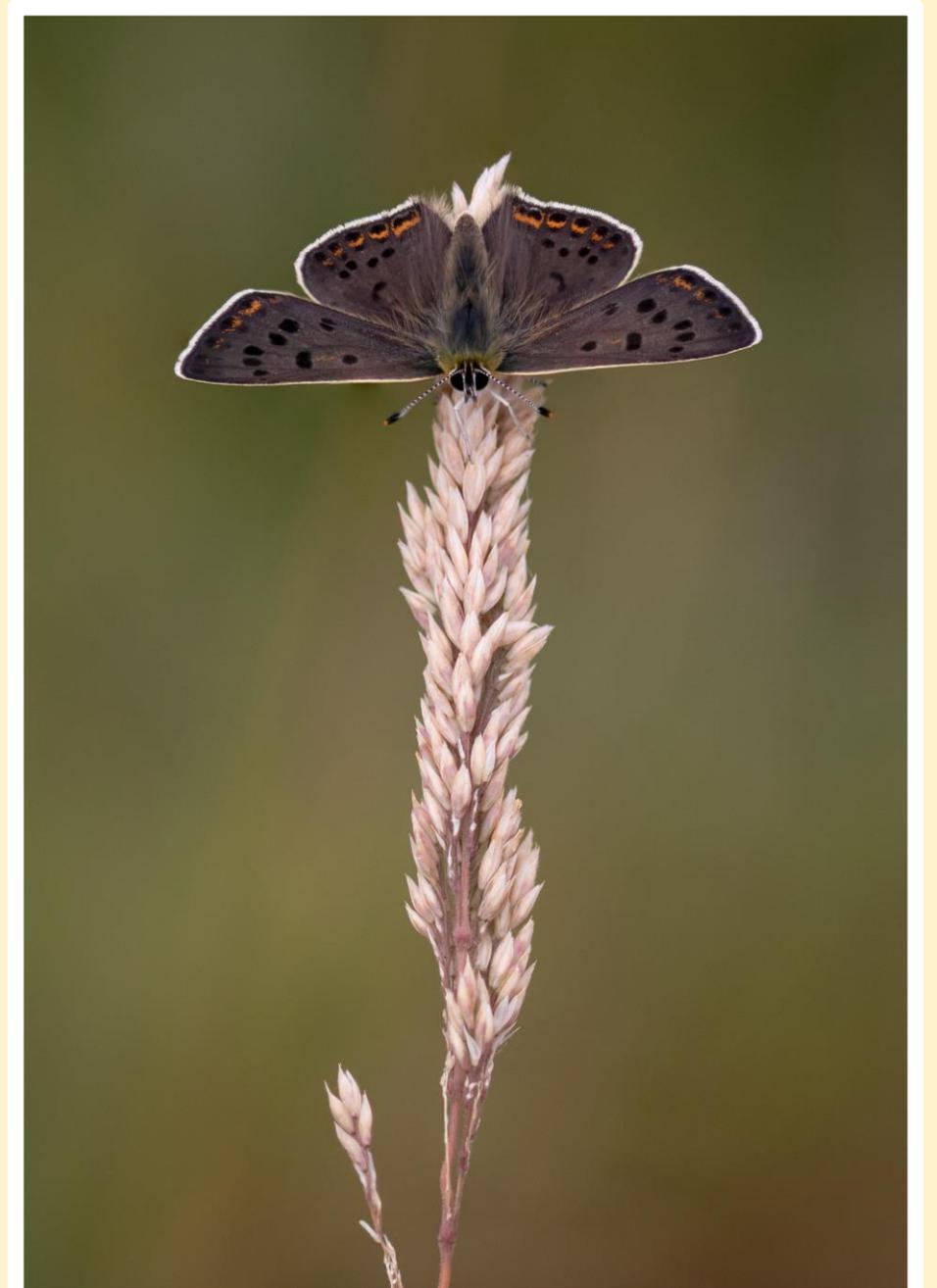
Having seen a female, I was keen to find a male Sooty copper, which we duly achieved on our next excursion, to Veluwezoom. We chose to access from the west side at Terlet where there is a parking area. In the event, we saw our butterflies on a road verge just outside the park near the car park. Here we found male Sooty coppers and Queen of Spain fritillary as well as Burren green and Purple-barred yellow moths.



Queen of Spain Fritillary, Terlet



Sooty copper male, Terlet



Veluwezoom



Burren green moth, Calamia tridens, Terlet



Roadside habitat at Terlet outside Veluwezoom

Dwingelderveld

Dwingelderveld is home to the Alcon blue, *Phengaris alcon*, called Gentian blue locally. It uses Marsh gentian, *Gentiana pneumonanthe*, as its foodplant. Marsh gentian is a rare plant in itself, so the butterfly is of course even more of a rarity.

I had hoped to see this species as the field guides indicated that we would be there during its flight period, but at this lowland site we appeared to be a little too late to see the adults. However it was fascinating to see the eggs on the flowers. They must be about the easiest eggs to see of any European species, being large, white and on the outside of the flower buds or the opened blue petals, often several eggs in a batch. There was evidence that some eggs had hatched, with holes already eaten in the petals.



Alcon blue eggs, Dwingelderveld



Dwingelderveld

The location for the main site that we visited here is at the north of the park, just south of a large and very-visible radio telescope dish at a facility called ASTRON. There is a public car park just to the north of this building, accessed through the village of Lhee.

Other species seen there included Holly blue (seen egg-laying on bell heather), Brimstone and Gatekeeper, but most notably high densities of Silver-studded blue. Walking through the heath would in some areas disturb butterflies at every step.

Silver-studded blues could also be seen on the heathland next to the main path north-east of the visitor centre at Benderse.



Alcon blue habitat, Dwingelderveld



Silver-studded blue male, Dwingelderveld



Silver-studded blues, Dwingelderveld

Weerribben

Weerribben is an altogether different experience from the three heathland parks, being North-west Europe's largest wetland, accessed via canals and towpaths. The main target here was, of course, the Dutch Large copper, called locally the Fire Butterfly, *Lycaena dispar batavus*.

I had researched where to look, which influenced our choice of starting point at Ossenzijl, but we started by hiring a boat from De Kluft camp site to explore generally. The small electric boats allow the easiest access into the wetland channels.

Travelling down the canals we could see that the water docks (the larval foodplant) were extensively marked with bright orange-painted bamboo canes, which seemed to be a good clue. Whether this was part of egg/larvae monitoring or marking the plants to prevent them being cut along with the reeds, or for some other purpose, I couldn't say.

Rather than rely on expert fieldcraft our discovery of Large copper turned out to be the result of seeing two excited photographers by the towpath, pointing cameras into a patch of reeds as we sailed towards Kalenberg (at a distance marker showing 9.4, presumably marking 9.4km from some reference point). We moored our boat and went along the towpath to investigate, but before I'd even reached the photographers I was met by two male Large coppers in combat, who then proceeded to pose together.

Presumably there are many other sites in this huge wet landscape where it is possible to see this species, but this site is on the equivalent of the main 'street' (a canal) between villages. Frequent passers-by in boats and on the towpath were intrigued by the intense interest in whatever was in the reeds.



Large copper males, Weerribben



Large copper site, Weerribben



Large copper males, Weerribben



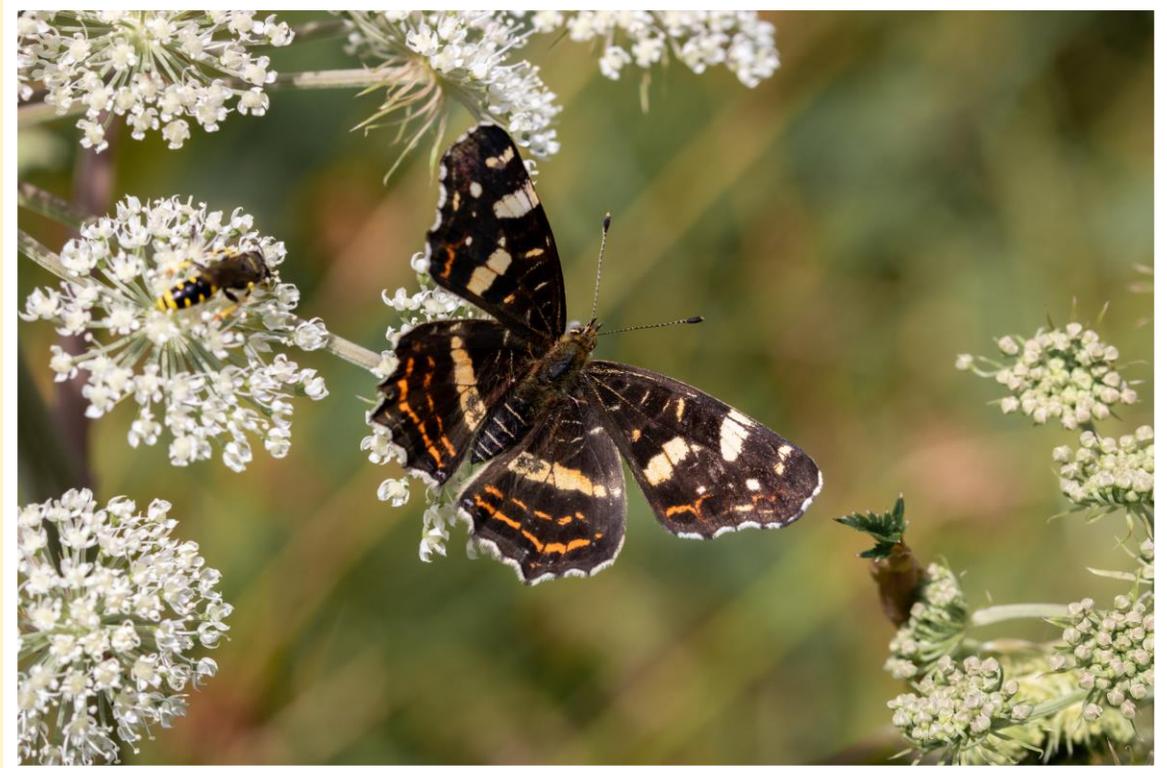
General sightings

Outside of the national park visits we saw a few other species, but it was notable that there didn't seem to be any species that were ubiquitous, with even Meadow brown, Ringlet, Speckled wood, Gatekeeper, Common blue, Small heath and the common whites seemingly very local and only seen at one or two sites each.

Individuals of Red admiral, Peacock, Painted lady, Comma, and Silver-washed fritillary were each seen just once or twice.

Brimstone, Holly blue, Brown argus, Small copper and Small and Essex skippers were a little more widespread, seen in two or three areas each, but still relatively local.

Map butterfly was seen at just one site in Drenthe, east of the Boswachterij Gees nature reserve.



Map butterfly, Drenthe



The author in Large copper wonderland! Weerribben national park.