

## NORTHERN SPAIN

30<sup>th</sup> July – 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2013

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### I. Introduction

The Picos de Europa Mountains are one of the prime destinations in Western Europe for butterflies. Here the combination of traditional hay meadows, alpine pastures, woodland glades and rockier, warmer habitats in Cantabria and Leon combine to produce outstanding numbers and range of species. Having previously enjoyed good butterfly-watching here in late August, I visited during the prime time of the year, late July, in what was a late season for emergence. The butterflies enjoyed were outstanding, in addition to a good assemblage of the region's best birds. This report includes a list of both the butterflies and birds observed over the course of a short 3 full-day break in the region.

### II. Logistics

#### (a) Preparatory Work

I was extremely fortunate to receive expert advice from resident Picos de Europa butterfly expert Teresa Farino. Having sent her a list of potential target species, including elusive specialities such as Woodland Brown and Dusky Large Blue, Teresa very kindly advised me of prime sites for some species. As a result, a few sites will be kept in confidence, but most are well-known destinations for butterflies. Birding information on the Picos de Europa is widely available. Given that July is a terrible time for locating woodland species, such as Black Woodpecker, I concentrated my efforts on montane birds – my only birding goal was to gain views of summer-plumaged Wallcreeper at Fuente De.

#### (b) Transport

I flew to Bilbao Airport from Bristol and hired a pre-booked car through Budget. As always, I located each butterfly site beforehand and programmed it's GPS point into a Tom Tom 750 with European mapping, so, on arrival, I could navigate to a parking place at each site and walk. As with all trip reports from 2010 onwards, this report contains exact digital GPS coordinates for each site visited. Roads in north Spain are exceptionally well-maintained, though care must be taken on the Picos' tortuous mountain roads.

#### (c) Accommodation

I stayed at the absolutely fantastic Posada de Tollo, in the small village of Tollo, in the Picos ([www.hotelruralpicosdeeuropa.es](http://www.hotelruralpicosdeeuropa.es)). The hosts were friendly and engaging, the food and wine excellent, and the morning view inspiring. A range of good species were observable from the hotel itself, including Egyptian Vulture and Booted Eagle, Middle-spotted Woodpecker and Spotted Flycatcher.

### III. Daily Notes

#### 30<sup>th</sup> July 2013

I drove from Bilbao along the coast road, the A-8, west towards Santander, noting several Honey-buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*), Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) and White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) before heading inland and into the mountains, down the spectacular Cares Gorge and into the heart of the Picos de Europa. The first Crag Martins (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*) were noted here. In the evening, I checking into my accommodation at Tollo (43.111338,-4.618927), where 2 Cirl Buntings (*Emberiza cirrus*) provided a good welcome.

In the evening, after checking into my accommodation, I drove to the small village of Tudes (43.122357,-4.611812) where I searched for Southern Marbled Skipper. Though I failed to see any, I noted two False Ilex Hairstreak (*Satyrrium esculi*), Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*), Wall Butterfly (*Lasiommata megera*), Heath Fritillary (*Melitaea athalia*) and Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea didyma*). I had excellent views of an Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) and Booted Eagle (*Hieraetus pennatus*), whilst at least 2 Middle-spotted Woodpeckers (*Dendropicus medius*) called from wood pasture surrounding the village.

#### 31<sup>st</sup> July 2013

Under the most crystal clear blue skies, I drove to the Fuente De and took the cable car (43.144256,-4.811261) to the summit. My previous trip had come too late to appreciate the subtle occurrence of mountain butterflies, but immediately, close to the station at the top (43.154265, -4.805284), I noted Northern Wall Brown (*Lasiommata petropolitana*), Common Brassy Ringlet (*Erebia cassioides*) and Large Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus alveus*) – all typical species of high altitude plateaux in this region. I then walked towards the rock face here (43.162412, -4.806960). Butterflies here included several superb specimens of Gavarnie Blue (*Agriades pyrenaicus*), a colony of smart Lefebvre's Ringlet on a gravel slope (*Erebia lefebvrei*), several Large Wall Brown (*Lasiommata maera*) and an airborne Mountain Clouded Yellow (*Colias phicomae*). The highlight by far was superb views of a breeding male Wallcreeper (*Tichodroma muraria*) at its traditional nesting cliff: probably one of the best sites in Europe to find this species in summer.

Between here and back at the cable car station, I had several excellent views of adult and juvenile Alpine Accentors (*Prunella collaris*), six flyover Snowfinch (*Montifringilla nivalis*) in crisp breeding plumage, a single Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) and a truly incredible encounter with an Alpine Chough (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) which, as I sat against a rock, plunged out of the sky to hover just inches above my face, perhaps expecting food.

With this wealth of mountain riches seen well, I headed back down the cable car and drove to Espinama (43.128412, -4.787271). After a pizza and cool beer, I headed up into the rich hay-meadows north of the village (43.131304, -4.783379). These were already being cut, but this actually concentrated species in small verges and uncut glades. As expected, fritillaries thronged here in numbers not seen in Britain for a century or longer, but a wide variety of other species were noted. These were:

Clouded Yellow (dozens in the cut meadows); Wood White (common); Scarce Copper (common); Escher's Blue (1); Short-tailed Blue (several); Common Blue; Chalk-hill Blue; Purple Emperor (1 male); Heath Fritillary; Knapweed Fritillary (several); Dark Green Fritillary (common); High Brown Fritillary (several); Provençal Fritillary (at least 1 good specimen); Marbled White; Large Skipper and Small Skipper.

A pair of Booted Eagle (*Hieraaetus pennatus*) was seen over the village. I returned to unwind at the hotel, where Spotted Flycatchers (*Muscicapa striata*) were busy sorting out the local butterflies as the sun set.

## 1<sup>st</sup> August 2013

Awaking to another superb morning, I noted an Egyptian Vulture over the hotel before driving south, out of the Picos de Europa and into the Cantabrian Mountains. Here I parked on the track to the Embalse de Besande (42.874657, -4.879746). What followed was quite an incredible experience. The heat was blasting down on this medium-altitude montane plateau, and butterflies thronged in their thousands. Birds were scant but included a Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), Honey-buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*) and singing Melodious Warbler (*Hippolais polyglotta*) and Subalpine Warbler (*Sylvia cantillans*).

Dazzled by variety, I located and photographed 54 species along the track leading immediately ENE of the P-215 (42.874475, -4.877826). There were so many butterflies here that I subsequently returned the following day (2<sup>nd</sup> August). Ironically, the one species that had drawn me here – Dusky Large Blue – got away, but I noted the following over the course of two days here:

Apollo (several); Green-veined White; Small White; Clouded Yellow; Berger's Clouded Yellow (1); Brimstone; Blue-spot Hairstreak (common); Ilex Hairstreak (2), Spanish Purple Hairstreak (2), Small Copper (1); Purple-shot Copper (1 female of the race *gordius*); Scarce Copper (common); Purple-edged Copper (1 male); Long-tailed Blue; Lang's Short-tailed Blue; Idas Blue (several); Brown Argus (1), Geranium Argus (1), Turquoise Blue (2), Chalk-hill Blue (common); Common Blue; Red Admiral; Painted Lady; Peacock; Comma; Silver-washed Fritillary; Cardinal (2-3); Dark Green Fritillary; High Brown Fritillary (several); Niobe Fritillary (1); Queen of Spain (1); Marbled Fritillary (2); Lesser Marbled Fritillary (2); Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (2-3); Twin-spot Fritillary (3-4); Violet Fritillary (1); Spotted Fritillary (common); Heath Fritillary; Knapweed Fritillary; Marbled White; Esper's Marbled White (several); Rock Grayling (several); Grayling; Chapman's Ringlet (2-3); Meadow Brown; Dusky Meadow Brown (2-3); Gatekeeper; Dusky Heath (common); Pearly Heath (1); Speckled Wood; Large Wall Brown (several); Lulworth Skipper (2-3); Small Skipper; Large Skipper.

After this sensory overload, I took lunch at Besande and then drove south again, into Leon, to the striking limestone formations known as Las Tuercas (42.757324, -4.243113), SSE of Aquila de Campo. Here, south of the Cantabrian Mountains, the landscape became even hotter, more stark and arid - and the butterflies changed too. Birds in the baking heat were limited to Crag Martin (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*). My luck here was less spectacular than the previous site, and I missed a few specialities including Striped Grayling, Safflower Skipper and Southern White Admiral, but noted and photographed the following:

Swallowtail (1-2); Bath White (several); Clouded Yellow; Berger's Clouded Yellow (1-2); Cleopatra (several); Brimstone; Blue-spot Hairstreak; False Ilex Hairstreak; Long-tailed Blue (common); Silver-studded Blue; Escher's Blue (1); Damon Blue (several); Chalk-hill Blue; Twin-spot Fritillary (several); Esper's Marbled White (common); Rock Grayling (several); Dusky Meadow Brown (several); Spanish Gatekeeper (2-3); Large Wall Brown (several); Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper (1-2); Mallow Skipper (several); Small Skipper.

I then drove back to the Picos, noting, as I travelled, several Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*), and some nice behaviour from White Storks (*Ciconia ciconia*), as they snaffled up frogs in a freshly-cut hay meadow.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2013

I drove this morning to a rich riparian valley bottom in the Picos: the Arroyo de Mostajal (43.095233, -4.850968). Having been drawn here by the prospect of Dusky Large Blue, I failed again on this account but saw plenty of other species including:

Scarce Copper (up to 12 on a flower); Idas Blue (several); Turquoise Blue (1-2); Dark Green Fritillary (common); Twin-spot Fritillary (several fresh individuals); Chapman's Ringlet (superb fresh specimens); Pearly Heath (common); Small Skipper (several).

Driving onwards, a montane valley pass, the Puerto de San Glorio on the N-621 (43.052568, -4.796656) was extremely hot and windy, but I did gain flight views of Mountain Dappled White (*Euchloe simplonia*) as well as Purple-shot Copper (*Lycaena alciphron*) and Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea didyma*). The rest of the day was then spent back at the superb Embalse de Besande (see above) before returning back to the hotel for the evening.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2013

Today, headed back to the airport, I drove up the spectacular and precarious road to the Sierra de Beges (43.243239,-4.653764). Here an evocative mist descended into the head of the valley, and the temperature dropped rapidly. I parked at the reference point, and walked on the well-marked track NNE into the woodland (43.246306, -4.651168). Here I failed to find the enigmatic Woodland Brown, a rare species that Teresa hadn't found either in 2013 at this traditional site. Butterflies in the misty weather were rather limited but the interspersed woodland and glades produced the following:

Swallowtail (1-2); Wood White (several); Long-tailed Blue (several); Short-tailed Blue (several); Painted Lady; Cardinal (1-2); Spotted Fritillary (1); Marbled White; Gatekeeper.

Even in the dank conditions here, the woodland held a few good birds, including good views of Short-toed Treecreeper (*Certhia brachydactyla*) and a fledged family of Western Bonelli's Warbler (*Phylloscopus bonelli*). Middle-spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos medius*) was heard. As I returned to the car, the sun broke through, and 2 pairs of Red-backed Shrikes (*Lanius collurio*) started catching invertebrates in the cut meadows; a glorious reminder of Britain's past. I then drove back to the airport and flew home.

#### IV. BUTTERFLY LIST

All sites mentioned below are described in the main report, where they are each attributed digital GPS references.

1. Swallowtail <i>Papilio machaon</i>	1-2 seen in meadows at the Sierra de Beges.
2. Apollo <i>Parnassius apollo</i>	3-4 seen and photographed at the Embalse de Besande.
3. Large White <i>Pieris brassicae</i>	
4. Small White <i>Artogeia rapae</i>	
5. Green-veined White <i>Artogeia napi</i>	
6. Mountain Dappled White <i>E. simplonia</i>	1-2 seen in flight at the Puerto de San Glorio.
7. Mountain Clouded Yellow <i>C. phicome</i>	1 seen in flight at the summit of Fuente De.
8. Clouded Yellow <i>Colias croceus</i>	
9. Berger's Clouded Yellow <i>C. alfacariensis</i>	1-2 seen at Embalse de Besande and Las Tuerces.
10. Brimstone <i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	
11. Cleopatra <i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>	2-3 at Las Tuerces.
12. Wood White <i>Leptidea sinapsis</i>	
13. Spanish Purple Hairstreak <i>L. roboris</i>	2-3 at Embalse de Besande and 1-2 at Puerto de San Glorio.
14. False Ilex Hairstreak <i>Satyrium esculi</i>	2 at Tudes and 1-2 at Las Tuerces.
15. Ilex Hairstreak <i>Satyrium ilicis</i>	1-2 at Embalse de Besande.
16. Blue-spot Hairstreak <i>Satyrium spini</i>	Extremely common at Embalse de Besande and Las Tuerces.
17. Small Copper <i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>	
18. Scarce Copper <i>Lycaena virgaureae</i>	Very common, especially at Arroyo de Mostajal.
19. Purple-shot Copper <i>Lycaena alciphron</i>	Females ( <i>gordius</i> ) at Embalse de Besande and Puerto de San Glorio.
20. Purple-edged Copper <i>Lycaena hippothoe</i>	1-2 faded males seen at Embalse de Besande.
21. Long-tailed Blue <i>Lampides boeticus</i>	Common at Las Tuerces; Tudes; Embalse de Besande.
22. Lang's Short-tailed Blue <i>Leptotes pirithous</i>	3-4 at Embalse de Besande.
23. Short-tailed Blue <i>Everes argiades</i>	
24. Silver-studded Blue <i>Plebejus argus</i>	
25. Idas Blue <i>Plebejus idas</i>	Confirmed specimens at Embalse de Besande and Arroyo de Mostajal.
26. Geranium Argus <i>Eumedonia eumedon</i>	1-2 at Embalse de Besande.
27. Brown Argus <i>Aricia agestis</i>	
28. Gavarnie Blue <i>Agriades pyrenaicus</i>	Excellent views of small numbers at Fuente De.
29. Damon Blue <i>Agrodiatus damon</i>	Common at Las Tuerces.

30. Escher's Blue <i>Agrodiatus escheri</i>	Single butterflies, elusive, at Las Tuerces and Espinama.
31. Turquoise Blue <i>Plebicula dorylas</i>	1-2 at Embalse de Besande and Arroyo de Mostajal.
32. Chalk-hill Blue <i>Lysandra coridon</i>	
33. Adonis Blue <i>Lysandra bellargus</i>	
34. Common Blue <i>Polyommatus icarus</i>	
35. Purple Emperor <i>Apatura ilis</i>	1 at Espinama.
36. Peacock <i>Inachis io</i>	
37. Red Admiral <i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	
38. Painted Lady <i>Vanessa cardui</i>	
39. Comma <i>Polygonia c-album</i>	
40. Cardinal <i>Argynnis pandora</i>	2-3 at Embalse de Besande; 1-2 at Sierra de Beges.
41. Silver-washed Fritillary <i>Argynnis paphia</i>	
42. Dark Green Fritillary <i>Argynnis aglaja</i>	
43. High Brown Fritillary <i>Argynnis adippe</i>	Several at Espinama and Embalse de Besande.
44. Niobe Fritillary <i>Argynnis niobe</i>	1-2 at Embalse de Besande.
45. Queen of Spain Fritillary <i>Issoria lathonia</i>	1 at Embalse de Besande.
46. Twin-spot Fritillary <i>Brenthis hecate</i>	Several at Embalse de Besande and Arroyo de Mostajal.
47. Marbled Fritillary <i>Brenthis daphne</i>	2 or more at Embalse de Besande.
48. Lesser Marbled Fritillary <i>Brenthis ino</i>	2 or more at Embalse de Besande.
49. Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary <i>C. selene</i>	2-3 at Embalse de Besande.
50. Violet Fritillary <i>Clossiana dia</i>	1 or more at Embalse de Besande.
51. Knapweed Fritillary <i>Melitaea phoebe</i>	Several at Embalse de Besande and Espinama.
52. Spotted Fritillary <i>Melitaea didyma</i>	Common: Besande; Puerto de San Glorio; Tudes; Sierra de Beges.
53. Heath Fritillary <i>Melitaea athalia</i>	
54. Provencal Fritillary <i>Melitaea deione</i>	1-2 confirmed at Espinama; probable at Arroyo de Mostajal.
55. Marbled White <i>Melanargia galathea</i>	
56. Esper's Marbled White <i>Melanargia russiae</i>	Common at Embalse de Besande and Las Tuerces.
57. Rock Grayling <i>Hipparchia alcyone</i>	Several at Las Tuerces and also Embalse de Besande.
58. Grayling <i>Hipparchia semele</i>	
59. Common Brassy Ringlet <i>Erebia cassioides</i>	Several at the summit of Fuente De.
60. Lefebvre's Ringlet <i>Erebia lefebvrei</i>	Localised colony at the summit of Fuente De (see report GPS).
61. Chapman's Ringlet <i>Erebia palarica</i>	Superb views of this endemic at Besande and Arroyo de Mostajal.
62. Meadow Brown <i>Maniola jurtina</i>	
63. Dusky Meadow Brown <i>Hyponephele lycaeon</i>	1-3, very localised, at Embalse de Besande and Las Tuerces.
64. Ringlet <i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>	
65. Gatekeeper <i>Pyronia tithonus</i>	
66. Spanish Gatekeeper <i>Pyronia bathseba</i>	3-4 in hedge-line habitat at Las Tuerces.
67. Small Heath <i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>	
68. Dusky Heath <i>Coenonympha dorus</i>	Common at Embalse de Besande.
69. Pearly Heath <i>Coenonympha arcania</i>	Common at Arroyo de Mostajal; also Embalse de Besande
70. Speckled Wood <i>Pararge aegeria</i>	
71. Wall Brown <i>Lasiommata megara</i>	
72. Large Wall Brown <i>Lasiommata maera</i>	Common on Fuente De summit; Embalse de Besande and Las Tuerces.
73. Northern Wall Brown <i>L. petropolitana</i>	2-3 in a highly localised area on the Fuente De summit (see GPS).

74. Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus malvae</i>	
75. Large Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus alveus</i>	Several on the Fuente De summit.
76. Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper <i>P. armoricanus</i>	1-2 at Las Tuerces.
77. Mallow Skipper <i>Carcharodus alceae</i>	Several at Las Tuerces.
78. Lulworth Skipper <i>Thymelicus acteon</i>	Several at Embalse de Besande.
79. Small Skipper <i>Thymelicus sylvestris</i>	
80. Large Skipper <i>Ochlodes venatus</i>	

## V. BIRD LIST

All sites mentioned below are described in the main report, where they are each attributed digital GPS references.

1. Cattle Egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	
2. Little Egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i>	
3. White Stork <i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	Seen on the A-8 between Bilbao and Santander, and S of Piedresluengas.
4. Honey-buzzard <i>Pernis apivorus</i>	Several on the A-8 between Bilbao and Santander; one at Besande.
5. Black Kite <i>Milvus migrans</i>	Several in the region of Aquila de Campo, Leon.
6. Egyptian Vulture <i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	Single birds in the Picos over the villages of Tudes and Pollo.
7. Griffon Vulture <i>Gyps fulvus</i>	Only in small numbers, 1-2: Cares Gorge; Besande; Fuente De.
8. Sparrowhawk <i>Accipiter nisus</i>	
9. Buzzard <i>Buteo buteo</i>	
10. Booted Eagle <i>Aquila pennata</i>	Pair at Espinama and single bird over Tudes, Picos.
11. Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	
12. Yellow-legged Gull <i>Larus michahellis</i>	
13. Woodpigeon <i>Columba palumbus</i>	
14. Scops Owl <i>Otus scops</i>	One audible in the evenings at Tollo, Picos.
15. Common Swift <i>Apus apus</i>	
16. Middle-spotted Woodpecker <i>D. medius</i>	1-2 calling birds in Tudes and Pollo, Picos, and the Sierra de Beges.
17. Crag Martin <i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	Present in the Cares Gorge; Las Tuerces and over the Sierra de Beges.
18. Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i>	
19. House Martin <i>Delichon urbicum</i>	
20. Tree Pipit <i>Anthus trivialis</i>	
21. White Wagtail <i>Motacilla alba</i>	
22. Dunnock <i>Prunella modularis</i>	
23. Alpine Accentor <i>Prunella collaris</i>	Excellent views of several families at the Fuente De summit.
24. Robin <i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	
25. Black Redstart <i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	
26. Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>	
27. Mistle Thrush <i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	
28. Melodious Warbler <i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>	2-3 singing in dry herbaceous scrub at the Embalse de Besande.
29. Subalpine Warbler <i>Sylvia cantillans</i>	1-2 singing in bushes at the Embalse de Besande.
30. Blackcap <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	
31. Western Bonelli's Warbler <i>P. bonelli</i>	Family party in young woodland at the Sierra de Beges.
32. Chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	

33. Goldcrest <i>Regulus regulus</i>	
34. Spotted Flycatcher <i>Muscicapa striata</i>	
35. Marsh Tit <i>Parus palustris</i>	
36. Coal Tit <i>Parus alter</i>	
37. Wallcreeper <i>Tichodroma muraria</i>	Superb views of male at traditional site on Fuente De (see report).
38. Short-toed Treecreeper <i>C. brachydactyla</i>	Good views of 1-2 birds in young woodland at the Sierra de Beges.
39. Red-backed Shrike <i>Lanius collurio</i>	1-2 pairs collecting food at the Sierra de Beges.
40. Jay <i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	
41. Magpie <i>Pica pica</i>	
42. Alpine Chough <i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>	Superb views of 'tame' birds atop the Fuente De.
43. Raven <i>Corvus corax</i>	
44. House Sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i>	
45. Snowfinch <i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>	Good views of 6 summer-plumaged adults flying at Fuente De.
46. Chaffinch <i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	
47. Serin <i>Serinus serinus</i>	
48. Greenfinch <i>Carduelis chloris</i>	
49. Goldfinch <i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	
50. Linnet <i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	
51. Cirl Bunting <i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	1-2 pairs and fledged young around the village at Pollo.