

Spring Butterflies of Central & North Spain

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

22nd-29th April 2024



Tour leaders David Moore, Jon Dunn & Juan Pablo Cancela

Trip report by Jon Dunn

Images kindly shared by our guests

(Images above, clockwise from top left: Western Marbled White (Derek), Bath White (Ken), Iberian Sooty Copper (Margaret), Spring Ringlet (John V))



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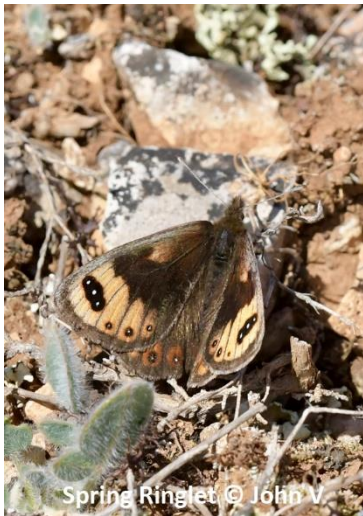
Introduction

This tour covered a range of sites from the Montes Universales in Central Spain to the foothills of the Pyrenees in the northeast of the country, incorporating some of the best locations for spring butterflies in this area of Spain.

Joining us for the tour were Chris & Sheila, Mike & Melanie, John V, Frank & Margaret, John & Brenda, Chris I, Derek, and Ken.

What follows is a daily diary for the week, followed by species list, and galleries.

22nd April. Arrival day.



Spring Ringlet © John V

Our group assembled in good order at the organised airport surroundings of Valencia and we were soon seamlessly on the road, heading inland towards our base for the opening portion of the week, staying with our regular friends in the beautiful fortified medieval town of Albarracin.

With the sun shining, we made a calculated stop *en route* to Albarracin in the open countryside near Terriente. Here, in a stony landscape punctuated by small scrubby shrubs and carpeted with small patches of vibrant blue and yellow spring wildflowers, we spread out in search of one of the tour's main target species – Spring Ringlet, one of the most beautiful of the *Erebia* ringlet family. While it was sunny, there was nonetheless a stiff breeze blowing, so the first few sightings of

this enigmatic species were somewhat fleeting, as the butterflies were swiftly blown past us whenever they took to the air.

Our patience was, however, in due course rewarded with several individuals tracked down to where they had settled amongst the stony debris at ground level, and were quietly basking in the calmer conditions of this sheltered microclimate. In due course, everyone had had the opportunity to admire at least one insect at close quarters.

Berger's Clouded Yellow were the other notable species of this afternoon's butterflying – here the weather conditions were playing into our hands for this normally rather unapproachable species was, on several occasions, happy to rest and nectar at close range to its admirers.

In due course we made our way to our comfortable hotel for a welcome rest and a drop of nectar ourselves over the first evening meal of the week.



Berger's Clouded Yellow © Jon

23rd April. Noguera & Monterde de Albarracin.

After temperatures had dropped to below freezing overnight, we awoke to a morning of scattered cloud and a fresh northerly wind. Not ideal conditions for butterflies to be active, and these conditions were to deteriorate further by the close of play that afternoon.



Queen of Spain Fritillary © John

Our morning was spent in the valley at Noguera, where sheltered nooks deflected the wind and created warmer pockets in the weak sunshine. We'd no sooner arrived there than Derek spotted a Small Heath, and this species was to prove the commonest of all in the next two hours. Numbers of them gradually increased as the morning wore on and the air temperature rose and, by lunchtime, we'd also added Small Copper and Queen of Spain Fritillary to our tally.

After lunch, we spent a further hour here, concentrating on some sheltered meadows where we hoped we might encounter Iberian Sooty Copper. In the event, this was to evade us today, though with the rising temperatures further Small Copper were, encouragingly, on the wing. Jon found the first of two Rosy Grizzled Skipper we were to encounter during the afternoon and, with cloud building and the temperature falling once more, this individual was torpid and posed obligingly for photos and a chance for guests to appreciate the finer points that differentiate it from Southern Grizzled Skipper.

We headed to a lower elevation at Monterde de Albarracin, hoping we would find less cloud here and a warmer temperature for the remainder of the afternoon. Apart from ten minutes of sunshine shortly after our arrival, this hope proved to be forlorn and, by the time we headed back to our hotel, the clouds were beginning to send spots of rain down upon us. We made the most of our time in the field, seeing several Common Blue – unsurprisingly given the conditions, most of these were roosting on vegetation – and, in a Long-tailed Blue found by Sheila, we had one more new butterfly in what had proved to be a somewhat challenging day.



Small Copper © Derek

24th April. Los Monegros.

Bath White © Ken

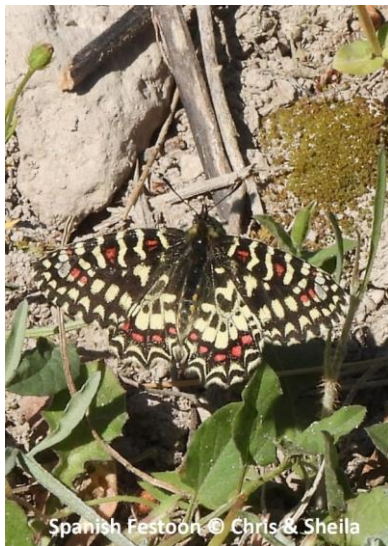
Taking into account the rather dismal weather forecast for the coming days, the guides took the decision to bring forward our visit to the arid hills and valleys of Los Monegros to today, rather than heading here on our transit day to the Pyrenees. This meant we would hit Los Monegros on a day with the best sunshine, thereby hopefully maximising what would be on the wing, and in so doing would free up a morning for butterflying back in the Montes Universales on transit day.

The price that had to be paid for this was a long day with some significant travel, though this was rather eased by the superb Spanish road network and light midweek traffic.

Arriving at Los Monegros around midday, we focused our initial attention on the hilltops and ridges of the area, hoping to encounter a hill-topping Spanish Greenish Black-tip. This site had been productive in this regard on our prior visit here, and indeed David's European Butterflies Group colleagues had seen eight insects here a few days earlier this year. Our hopes were therefore high, albeit tempered by a fairly stiff breeze that was whipping up the hillsides.



Western Marbled White © Chris I



Spanish Festoon © Chris & Sheila

Straight out of the vehicles we saw the first of what would prove to be many Western Dappled White of the day, and further *Pierids* were to follow – Western Marbled White, a new one for several of the group, in pristine condition; Bath White; Clouded Yellow; and several Berger's Clouded Yellow, the latter annoyingly close enough to Spanish Greenish Black-tip's colour in flight to raise hopes from a distance. Nonetheless, while we were delighted to encounter several hill-topping Swallowtail, not a sniff of a hill-topping Black-tip could we find. Returning to the vehicles, we sat in the sunshine and watched the many newly emerged and shiny Adonis Blue while we ate our lunch, before heading to a lower elevation for the afternoon.

Our first roll of the dice here was to explore the lower slopes and valleys beneath the hills, where the guides had seen egg-laying female Black-tips in the past. There was plenty of *Boleum asperum*, the larval foodplant, but despite another hour of searching, no adult butterflies were forthcoming. Spanish Festoon, varying in condition from very worn to freshly emerged, were a pleasant distraction.

Undeterred, we moved on to a network of sheltered ruderal fields. Our luck improved here, with several sightings of Sooty Orange Tip though, frustratingly, none of these highly mobile insects was in the mood for settling. Provence Orange Tip was more considerate, while Mallow, Marbled, and Southern Marbled Skipper all posed nicely. Jon found an amenable Panoptes Blue, while Mike discovered a fresh Spotted Fritillary. Other sightings included Knapweed Fritillary, and our first Cleopatra.



Panoptes Blue © John V

Thursday 25th April. Calomarde.

The forecast for today was, frankly, miserable – the whole of Europe was blanketed beneath a vast area of low pressure that extended right down from the sub-Arctic across northern Africa too, and Spain was far from exempt from this – we could expect cloudy skies and low temperatures all day, and the prospect of light rain showers too.



Wall Brown © Derek

We had, of course, to make the most of the day, but nonetheless set out in the morning for the sheltered gorge site of Calomarde without unduly high expectations. An Egyptian Vulture seen from the carpark at Albarracin was perhaps a propitious omen of some decent birds, and we were treated at Calomarde to excellent views of soaring Griffon Vulture, low-flying Crag Martin, and small parties of vocal Red-billed Chough.

Butterflies, at least to begin with beneath the thick cloud, were harder to come by. A few Wall Brown were about the extent of it until Juan Pablo found a torpid, roosting male Provence Orange Tip, steadfastly asleep on a crucifer. This extremely obliging insect posed well for everybody to enjoy a rare opportunity to photograph its usually hyperactive kind with time on their hands.

A brief break in the clouds and some weak sunshine warmed things up, and we extended our stay here by an hour to make the most of this as butterflies began to spring to life. Foremost amongst these was a pristine Rosy Grizzled Skipper that, after showing well for everybody, decided to particularly bless Margaret by settling for a little while on her hair!

We moved to a stony hillside site for our picnic lunch, somewhere the guides had previously enjoyed good views of Spring Ringlet, but the cold air temperature was to scupper any chance of a repeat showing today. No butterflies of any kind were forthcoming, and so once we'd eaten we moved to a lower altitude, to the green surroundings of the source of the River Tagus. Here, had the weather only been warmer, we might have expected to find some butterfly activity but, in



Provence Orange Tip © Ken

the afternoon with darkening clouds massing overhead, Small Heath was about the sum of what we could find for ourselves. Eventually we voted with our feet, returning to our vehicles just as the first spots of rain began to fall.

We'd worked hard today, attempting to make the best of the disappointing weather conditions. It was only at checklist in the evening that we discovered that a copper, photographed by John but unbeknown to the rest of us, had been our first Iberian Sooty Copper! We would need to do something about that on the following morning...

Friday 26th April. Noguera. Transfer to Berdun.

Having brought ourselves some breathing space back in Montes Universales with our earlier foray to Los Monegros, we were able to take advantage of a somewhat warmer morning than we'd endured hitherto, meaning conditions were auspicious for a return to Noguera, with Iberian Sooty Copper firmly on our minds.



This was also our transfer day up to the foothills of the Pyrenees, so we loaded our luggage into the vehicles, said our farewells at our friendly Albarracin hotel, and set off for Noguera. Our butterfly tactics were to pay off handsomely, with several confiding and very fresh Iberian Sooty Coppers encountered in the course of the morning, much to everyone's delight, including an aberrant individual found by Frank and Margaret with somewhat elongated spots on the hindwing underside.

Additional new species seen before we headed north were a couple of Green-veined White, and a Green Hairstreak found by Chris, while Speckled Wood were to prove numerous here.

The drive north to Berdun was smooth and uneventful, the Spanish road network being unbeset by roadworks or heavy traffic, and we reached our comfortable new home for the next three nights in the late afternoon. Casa Sarasa is owned and operated by one of our tour leaders, Peter Rich, so we knew we were assured of a warm welcome. Given how cold the weather was right across Europe at the moment, including in the Pyrenees, the warmth of that welcome delightfully extended to a roaring fire in the well-appointed lounge and library area where we gathered to do our checklist of the day's sightings!



Dinner was agreed by all to have been absolutely delicious, and we retired to our rooms full of anticipation of what we would find the following day in an area of Spain with almost entirely different butterflies to those we'd been seeing to this point.

Saturday 27th April. Berdun area.

We had planned on staying in the immediate area of Berdun today, partly to minimise travel after a long day on the road the previous afternoon, and in large part because the countryside surrounding Casa Sarasa is so richly endowed with butterflies... but, in the event, this also proved to be a blessing on account of the poor weather conditions, which were once again rather trying to say the least.

Several of us had awoken during the night to the sound of thunder and torrential rain overhead and, while all of us awoke in the morning to the more pleasant sound of Nightingales singing outside our windows, we were also greeted by the sight none of us wished to see – dark, rain-filled clouds massing overhead, and the trees and bushes of the garden whipping in a stiff breeze. This was not auspicious weather in which to search for butterflies, and we duly delayed departure from Casa Sarasa until mid-morning, at which point we hoped some hardy insects might be stirring.

Our destination was a series of meadows and woodland margins set between the River Aragon and some nearby hills – a promising mosaic of habitat that we knew supported a good variety of species. They were not, however, immediately evident – our first hour in the field yielded just a single female Common Blue, and an extremely bedraggled and miserable Rosy Grizzled Skipper that Jon found clinging to the flower of a fine Lady Orchid *Orchis purpurea*. The latter orchid was our second of the day, following a single Yellow Bee Orchid *Ophrys lutea* we'd found earlier.



Iberian Scarce Swallowtail © Derek

With torrential rain beginning to fall, we returned the short drive back to Casa Sarasa for our lunch, before trying again at the morning's site. We'd no sooner arrived with the first glimmers of sunshine warming the backs of our necks before distant rumbles of thunder intensified and drew closer, and with rain falling heavily again, we beat a retreat back to Casa Sarasa and the log fire our host Peter had kindly set in the lounge. The highlights of these two excursions, orchids

aside, had been birds – a Black Kite seen well in the late morning, and a Montagu's Harrier in the early afternoon.

With heavy pouring outside it felt like this was the juncture to call time on the day, but Juan Pablo, undaunted, remained in the field seeing what he could find. His persistence was rewarded by first a change in the weather, with the sun finally breaking persistently through the cloud and, with it, butterflies taking to the wing. He called David to alert him to the presence of ten Panoptes Blue... so we hastily piled back into the vehicles and rushed to join him.

The first butterfly found by Chris R upon emerging from David's vehicle was, to everyone's delight, a Panoptes Blue, and one in good condition. John V, who had been wanting to photograph this one for years, was particularly pleased! We walked along the track that threaded through the fields and into the hills from here, and began to see more butterflies taking to the wing, including in their number some new species.

From here on the butterflies came thick and fast, presumably as relieved as we were to see the sun. Fine views ensued of, amongst others, egg-laying Iberian Scarce Swallowtail, and several Spanish Festoons and their *Aristolochia* larval foodplant in flower.



Spanish Festoon © John B

We returned, one final time today, to Casa Sarasa... this time feeling we'd finally triumphed over the vicissitudes of the fickle storm clouds that had threatened to derail the day. The fire was still burning in the lounge and, after another delicious dinner, we retired there to drink coffee and swap travellers' tales we'd accumulated over the years all around the world. Much hilarity ensued!

Sunday 28th April. Valle de Hecho



Weaver's Fritillary © Chris I

Our final full day of butterflying dawned, mercifully, clear and bright – a hugely welcome development. We headed thirty minutes easy drive away from Casa Sarasa to the Valle de Hecho, an area that had proved fruitful butterfly-watching territory in the past and had served David and Jon well with Spanish Fritillary. This was to be our main target today, but we were of course completely open to other options should they present themselves.

The hours until lunchtime were spent thoroughly combing the hillside upon which Spanish Fritillary had been previously seen. Heath Fritillary was found, and Weaver's Fritillary was seen by a few guests too, but no Spanish Fritillary was forthcoming. More familiar faces cropped up – more Panoptes Blue chief amongst them.

After a lovely picnic lunch we divided forces – Jon heading deeper into the valley to see if he could locate Green-underside Blue, and the rest of the group exploring the area around THE hillside, with Spanish Fritillary very much still on our minds. Reconvening after an hour, Spanish Fritillary continued to elude us, but Jon had good news – the valley, bathed in sunshine, abounded with life. We duly took the vehicles up the valley, and explored the new hotspot on foot.

Butterflies were immediately forthcoming, though the wildflowers here were also admired, not least some gorgeous, deep blue Pyrenean Trumpet Gentian *Gentiana occidentalis*. Green-underside Blue was found by several guests and everybody had the chance to admire and photograph this pretty lycaenid. The same could be said for



Weaver's Fritillary, for a particularly obliging individual decided to roost, well-camouflaged, on an old seed-head, perfectly showing off its gorgeous violet-hued hindwing undersides. Glanville Fritillary was also found and posed obligingly for us.

As cloud was building in Valle de Hecho, we returned to Berdun to explore a new area for us to the west of the village. Deep, hot valleys and lushly vegetated valley bottoms were to prove a winning combination. Here we found ourselves surrounded by many Brimstone and a few Cleopatra too, still more Panoptes Blue, Iberian Scarce Swallowtail, Provence Orange Tip, and Dingy Skipper, and some new butterflies besides – a couple of tired and tatty Large Tortoiseshell, and fresher Holly Blue.

Monday 29th April – departure day

It's always a sad day when a tour comes to an end (though for some who would be joining David and Juan Pablo in Andalucia in the coming week, this sadness was postponed a while yet!), and with today our departure day, we had the journey back to the airport at Valencia as time for reflection on the week just gone. The weather in April can, of course, be fickle anywhere in Europe, but Spain and our guests had been particularly unlucky in this regard during our Spring Butterflies of Central & Northern Spain tour. Indeed, the whole of Europe, from northern Scandinavia to the southern Mediterranean extremities, and even North Africa, had been beset this past week with persistent low pressure and cold, wet weather. There were frosts in the north, and much of southern Europe had struggled for day temperatures above 10C.

This had not been ideal for butterflies, either for activity of those already emerged, or for precipitating the emergence of those still in the late pupal state. Nor was this state of affairs ideal for the butterflies' gathered admirers – but it is testament to the spirit and keen eyes of our guests that we made the best of the situation and, with a sterling team effort, recorded as many species as we did during the course of the week. 48 species is a

respectable return anywhere in Europe at this time of year, and our tally for the week still included some of the Iberian Peninsula's particular spring specialities.

We'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone in the group for their contributions, both in the field and during the social times in the evenings, to locating the species we recorded and maintaining our high spirits throughout the week. We look forward immensely to travelling with you again in the future.

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SPRING BUTTERFLIES OF CENTRAL & NORTHERN SPAIN 22-29 April 2024

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	Butterflies							
1	Mallow Skipper <i>Carcharodus alceae</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓
2	Dingy Skipper <i>Erynnis tages</i>						✓	✓
3	Rosy Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus onopordi</i>		✓		✓		✓	
4	Southern Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus malvoides</i>					✓		✓
5	Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus armoricanus</i>							
6	Red-underwing Skipper <i>Spialia sertorius</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
7	Lulworth Skipper <i>Thymelicus acteon</i>							
8	Southern Brown Argus <i>Aricia cramera</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
9	Brown Argus <i>Aricia agestis</i>							
10	Holly Blue <i>Celastrina argiolus</i>							✓
11	Small Blue <i>Cupido minimus</i>							
12	Green-underside Blue <i>Glaucopsyche alexis</i>							✓
13	Black-eyed Blue <i>Glaucopsyche melanops</i>							
14	Lang's Short-tailed Blue <i>Leptotes pirithous</i>							
15	Long-tailed Blue <i>Lampides boeticus</i>		✓					
16	Short-tailed Blue <i>Cupido argiades</i>							
17	Adonis Blue <i>Polyommatus bellargus</i>			✓				
18	Common Blue <i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
19	Chapman's Blue <i>Polyommatus thersites</i>							✓
20	Baton Blue <i>Pseudophilotes baton</i>							
21	Panoptes Blue <i>Pseudophilotes panoptes</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
22	Small Copper <i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
23	Iberian Sooty Copper <i>Lycaena bleusi</i>				✓	✓		
24	Green Hairstreak <i>Callophrys rubi</i>					✓		✓
25	Weaver's Fritillary <i>Boloria dia</i>						✓	✓
26	Pearl-bordered Fritillary <i>Boloria euphrosyne</i>							✓
27	Marsh Fritillary <i>Euphydryas aurinia</i>							
28	Spanish Fritillary <i>Euphydryas desfontainii</i>							
29	Queen of Spain Fritillary <i>Issoria lathonia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
30	Heath Fritillary <i>Melitaea athalia</i>							
31	Provençal Fritillary <i>Melitaea deione</i>							
32	Glanville Fritillary <i>Melitaea cinxia</i>						✓	✓
33	Spotted Fritillary <i>Melitaea didyma</i>			✓				
34	Knapweed Fritillary <i>Melitaea phoebe</i>			✓				
35	Small Tortoiseshell <i>Aglais urticae</i>				✓			
36	Large Tortoiseshell <i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>							✓
37	Comma <i>Polygonia c-album</i>							
38	Camberwell Beauty <i>Nymphalis antiopa</i>							
39	Red Admiral <i>Vanessa atalanta</i>							
40	Painted Lady <i>Vanessa cardui</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
41	Iberian Scarce Swallowtail <i>Iphiclides feisthamelii</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓
42	Swallowtail <i>Papilio machaon</i>	✓		✓				
43	Spanish Festoon <i>Zerynthia rumina</i>			✓			✓	✓
44	Orange Tip <i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>						✓	✓
45	Provence Orange Tip <i>Anthocharis euphenoides</i>			✓	✓			✓
46	Western Dappled White <i>Euchloe crameri</i>	✓		✓				

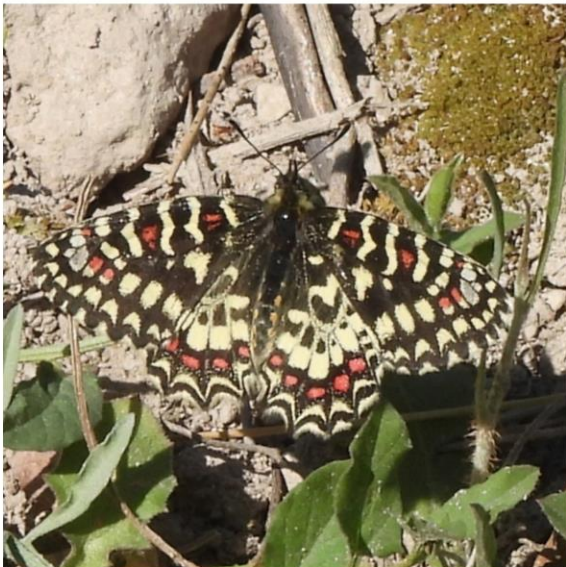
	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
47	Sooty Orange Tip <i>Zegris eupheme</i>			✓				
48	Spanish Greenish Black Tip <i>Euchloe bazae</i>							
49	Berger's Clouded Yellow <i>Colias alfacariensis</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
50	Clouded Yellow <i>Colias crocea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
51	Cleopatra <i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>			✓				✓
52	Brimstone <i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>						✓	✓
53	Wood White <i>Leptidea sinapis</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Large White <i>Pieris brassicae</i>			✓			✓	✓
55	Green-veined White <i>Pieris napi</i>					✓		✓
56	Small White <i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Bath White <i>Pontia daplidice</i>			✓				✓
58	Duke Of Burgundy <i>Hamearis lucina</i>							
59	Small Heath <i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		✓		✓	✓		
60	Large Wall <i>Lasiommata maera</i>							✓
61	Wall <i>Lasiommata megera</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Speckled Wood <i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
63	Spring Ringlet <i>Erebia epistygne</i>	✓						
64	Meadow Brown <i>Maniola jurtina</i>							
65	Western Marbled White <i>Melanargia occitanica</i>			✓				
#	Southern Marbled Skipper <i>Carcharodus baeticus</i>			✓				
#	Spanish Marbled White <i>Melanargia ines</i>			✓				
	Daily total:	11	12	27	19	12	19	32
	Running total:	11	18	32	35	37	42	48

Guests' Galleries

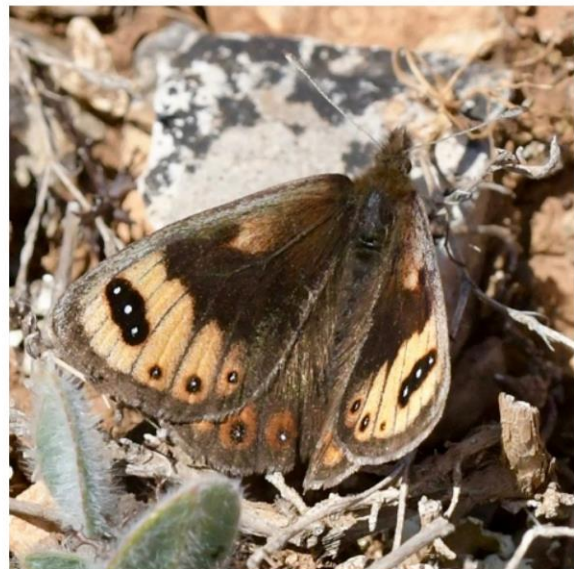
All images that follow were kindly shared by tour participants.



Images © Chris & Sheila



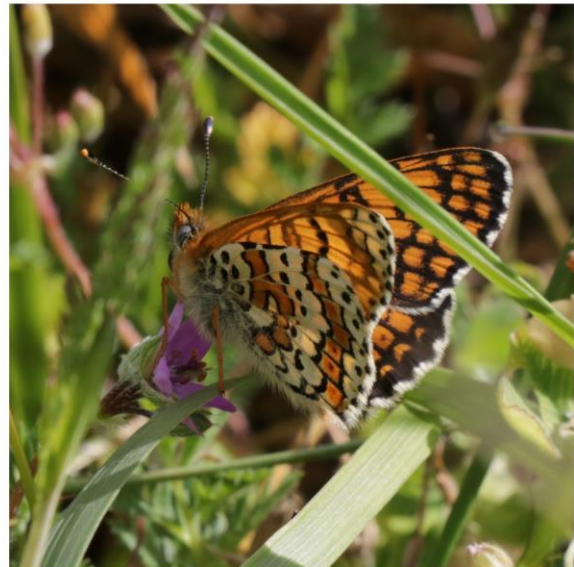
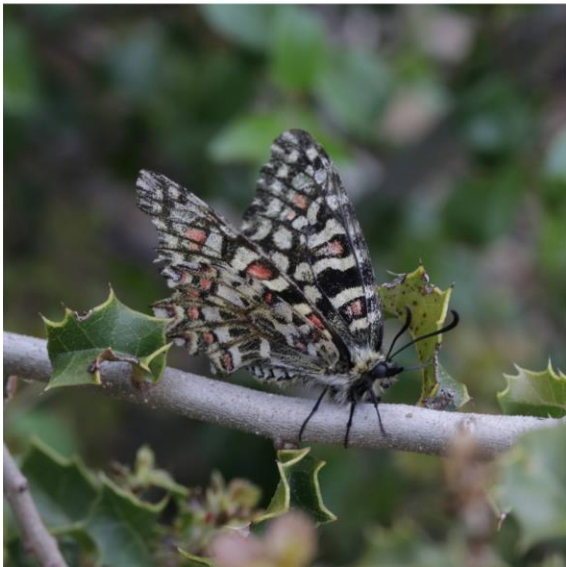
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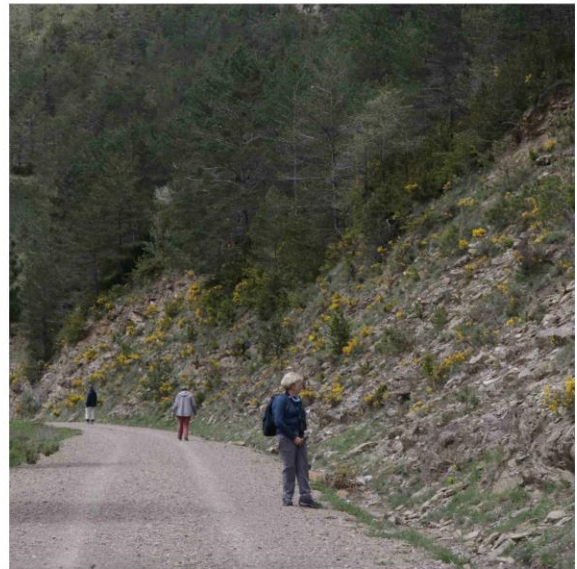
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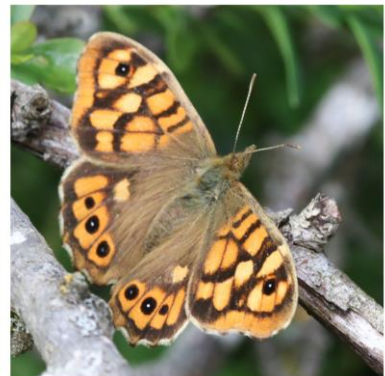
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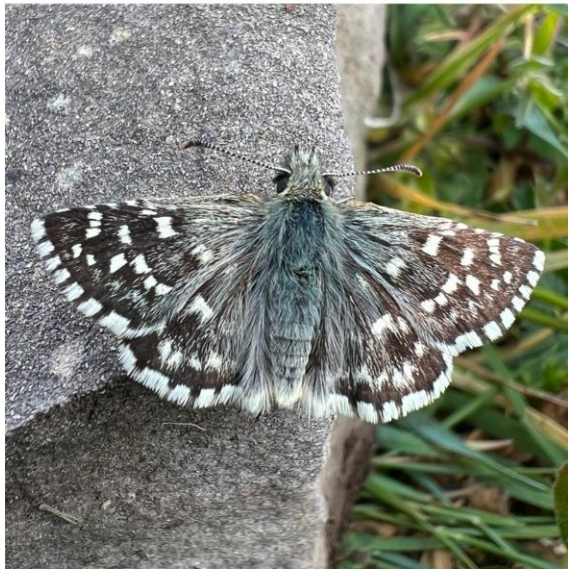
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