Romania in Spring

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

18th-25th May 2024



Tour leaders János Oláh & David Moore

Trip report by David Moore

Images kindly shared by our guests

(Images above, clockwise from top left: Common Glider (Don), Scarce Fritillary (David), Poplar Admiral (Andrew), Danube Clouded Yellow (János)



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Introduction

This new tour was designed to take in the best of the spring butterflies that Romania has to offer, and included an opportunity to observe wild Carpathian Brown Bears in the latter part of the trip.

There were three bases: near the town of Dej, followed by a spell in the beautiful Rimetea Valley. The location for the bears was in the Hargita Mountains, which also included further wonderful butterfly locations.

Joining us for the tour were Andrew, Ainslie, Don & Julian.

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

Day 1, 18th May

All guests arrived promptly, but unfortunately Don's luggage did not, meaning a series of phone conversations were required in order to ensure this could be recovered the next day.

In spite of this setback, the group got away in mid-afternoon and had time for a site visit prior to arriving at the hotel. This site was one where our principal tour leader, János, had recorded **Bavius Blue** *Pseudophilotes bavius*, although we had been informed that it had been one of the warmest springs in recent memory in Romania and there was a strong chance the flight season may have already been over.



So it proved, although there were masses of the larval host plant, Salvia, growing on the steep banks of the site. However, there were plenty of other butterflies to keep the group occupied, with highlights being Large Blue Phengaris arion, Pale Clouded Yellow Colias hyale, Osiris Blue Cupido osiris, Eastern Baton Blue Pseudophilotes vicrama, Turquoise Blue Polyommatus dorylas, and Chestnut Heath Coenonympha glycerion.

The warm sunshine and splendid views were enjoyed by all before settling down for the evening meal in the hotel on the outskirts of Dej.

Day 2, 19th May

An hour or so from Dej is a humid, mainly deciduous tract of woodland, and it was here the group headed to first today.

Parking was at a petrol station next to a busy main road, an outwardly unprepossessing location! However, what happened subsequently was way beyond everybody's expectations.

The principal target species, **Violet Copper** *Lycaena helle*, was found in the first clearing the group arrived in and not long after, the dozen or so of these butterflies were joined by **Chequered Skippers** *Carterocephalus palaemon*.





Then, having seen something in the canopy, the group began to concentrate on a **Common Glider** *Neptis sappho*, which began by settling high up in the trees but allowed everyone some close approaches when it came down to the ground looking for moist areas on the track a little later.

The big moment came later on, when János announced he'd seen a **Woodland Brown**Lopinga achine. When the entire group concentrated upon the area where it had first

been sighted, four immaculately fresh examples of this rare and beautiful insect were recorded in total.

There was time for more surprises, with David noticing a handful of **Black Hairstreak** *Satyrium pruni* flying around the bramble flowers next to a bank of blackthorn. Julian also called out that there was a **Lesser Purple Emperor** *Apatura ilia* flying on the fuel station forecourt. Sure enough, this male was patrolling the concreted area, with a particular penchant for settling on the damp, oily stains which littered the area near the edge of the site. The dubious tastes of the various emperors are renowned, with various



animal scats, rotting carcases and Vietnamese fermented fish pastes all known to attract them, and to that we can now add chemical highs...

To say it had been a good morning's work was something of a massive understatement!



The afternoon was spent in a series of lightly wooded meadows just off the main highway. Once again, there were plenty of butterflies about, with **Green-underside Blue** *Glaucopsyche alexis* among the first to be sighted. Both **Marsh Fritillary** *Euphydryas aurinia* and **Heath Fritillary** *Melitaea athalia* were seen in a sheltered area at the lower end of the site, and **Woodland Ringlet** *Erebia medusa* made its first appearance of the trip, alongside several more Black Hairstreaks.

A total of 32 species were seen during the day, bringing the overall tally to 38.

Day 3, 20th May

It was down to serious business this morning as the group set out to find the tour's main target species, **Danube Clouded Yellow** *Colias myrmidone* as well as Don's luggage, which had finally arrived at the airport by this juncture.



Upon arrival at the site, the vehicle slowed down to take a look at the sign which notified observers of the importance of the habitat and had a large image of *myrmidone*. Whilst doing this, a yellow butterfly began flying beside the sign, and it soon became clear that it was indeed the first Danube Clouded Yellow, which meant the vehicle made an impromptu stop and everyone got out.

With it being relatively early, this male was not as hyperactive as *Colias* individuals normally are. It settled several times before disappearing and the group decided to take a longer look at this habitat as there were several other species flying here.

Berger's Clouded Yellow Colias alfacariensis were flying alongside their more deeply coloured cousins whilst plenty of Green Hairstreak Callophrys rubi were doggedly going about their business in the shrub-laden meadows. Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary Boloria selene were doing likewise, giving everybody a reminder of home, although Lesser Spotted Fritillary Melitaea trivia reminded all that we were a long way from Britain.

A couple of new *Hesperids* were encountered. The territorial **Tufted Marbled Skipper** *Carcharodus floccifera* was seen defending territory, whilst **Safflower Skipper** *Pyrgus carthami* were busily flying around the sward no doubt looking for mates as well as nectar sources.

Probably over two dozen *myrmidone* were seen, meaning that the day was very much a successful one. The dozen newcomers took the group tally to a nice, round half century after just two full days,



and the group were now moving on to stay in the Hungarian speaking town of Rimetea, where the next couple of days would be spent.

Day 4, 21st May



The day dawned warm and gloriously sunny, and the group wasted no time getting to the first of the day's sites, which was a mere 15 minutes down the road.

This was a series of meadows, most of which were damp but there were two that were drier, which meant there was a fair variety of species seen over the course of the hour and a half spent there.

First to appear was **Geranium Argus** *Eumedonia eumedon* which was around in serious numbers. Also ubiquitous were **Marsh Fritillary** *Euphydryas aurinia*, most of which were in

excellent condition, along with the week's only examples of **False Heath Fritillary** *Melitaea diamina*.

There was another welcome newcomer in the drier area of the site – a beautiful male **Large Copper** *Lycaena dispar*, stood out like a beacon as it flitted from flower to flower amongst the myriad of other Lycaenids.

On the way out there was a damp area near the roadside, and it was here we saw our first **Scarce Fritillary** *Euphydryas maturna* which gave an impressive display as it was clearly in no mood to move away from the moist earth it had discovered.

Further Scarce Fritillaries awaited us later in the day, but in between times, János recommended we stop near our accommodation as there was a good chance of finding the rare **Spinose Skipper**

Muschampia cribrellum. Astonishingly, this search was successful within just a matter of mere minutes, as David suddenly warned Andrew to remain still as one was puddling on the damp track immediately behind him.

This beautifully fresh specimen remained in situ for a good while, allowing the group to take a long look at it. A mint fresh **Cardinal**, *Argynnis pandora*, which was taking minerals nearby, was

largely ignored in the face of this European skipper rarity!

So, excitement over, the group pressed on to a damp track within mixed woodland, where by far the commonest species was the engaging Scarce Fritillary. This butterfly loves moist, humid conditions, and all these boxes were ticked with many damp stretches of track attracting them in good numbers, as well as the umbelliferous flowers of which they are also fond.

Flying with them were several **Clouded Apollo**Parnassius mnemosyne, although these were much flightier and consequently more difficult to photograph.



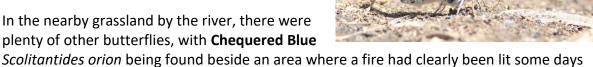
Other notable finds were **Map** Araschnia levana, **Hungarian Glider** Neptis rivularis, and **Poplar Admiral** Limenitis populi, the latter causing particular excitement when seen further up the track in the company of several Common Gliders which were frequent companions at this location.

There was time for one final stop at the other end of the valley, and János immediately took a bucket from



his vehicle, liberally dousing the gravel in the car park with water. This paid dividends some minutes later, as a very handsome Marbled **Skipper** Carcharodus lavatherae paid a visit as did Berger's Clouded Yellow Colias alfacariensis, a selection of further Pierids, and Pyrgus skippers too.

In the nearby grassland by the river, there were plenty of other butterflies, with Chequered Blue



Unsurprisingly given the range of habitats visited, the day's count was a phenomenal 59 species, over 20 of which were new. At the halfway point of the tour the group had now seen 71 different species, including many highly desirable ones.

Day 5, 22nd May

earlier.



This was a transit day, and was the only period during the tour when the weather was largely overcast.

En route to the Hargita Mountains, our first stop was in a forested area where, in spite of the overhead cloud, many Large Coppers were seen basking serenely amongst the grasses. Reverdin's Blue Plebejus argyrognomon was also seen in small numbers whilst both Heath Fritillary Melitaea athalia and Small Pearl-bordered

Fritillary *Boloria selene* became very active whenever the watery sun made an appearance.

After lunch, the weather brightened up somewhat, so the group headed to a hillside near Valeru to search for Fenton's Wood White Leptidae morsei. This proved challenging, as this genus scarcely ever settles, but after some false alarms, finally one was seen with its falcate wing edge, this being the definitive field characteristic.

The main event, unusually for a butterfly tour, came in the early evening when the group headed up to a local hide in the hope of seeing Carpathian Brown Bear. These hopes were almost immediately fulfilled when an adult female was seen before the group had walked up the track!

What followed over the next two hours was truly memorable, with two adult females, two yearling cubs and, unexpectedly, two recently born cubs all active in the large field beyond the hide.



There were also two Red Fox present that had surreptitiously made their way into the area,

although they were careful, understandably, not to get too close to the young cubs for fear of upsetting the 150kg mother nearby.

Day 6, 23rd May

This penultimate full day was spent locally, and included another site for Danube Clouded Yellow.



First stop though was a damp set of meadows near an agricultural area where it was hoped that Large Heath Coenonympha tullia would be flying. Unfortunately, it was not, but the group did record the first examples of Small Copper Lycaena phlaeas of the week.

At the next stop, traversing the rugged track in the vehicle took time, but the rewards were excellent as both male and female *myrmidone*

were seen side by side, puddling on a damp section at the side of the track.

Nearby, another Map Butterfly was seen, as well as the week's only **Duke of Burgundy** Hamaeris lucina. There was also our first **Swallowtail** Papilio machaon spotted in the drier field further along the track. **Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper** Pyrgus armoricanus also put in its first appearance, whilst the supporting cast included **Orange Tip** Anthocharis cardamines, **Blackveined White** Aporia crataegi, **Queen of Spain Fritillary** Issoria lathonia, **Sooty Copper** Lycaena tityrus, and a selection of other species besides.



Later that day, Don decided to pay a second visit to the bear hide and enjoyed a repeat of the previous evening's performance.

Day 7, 24th May



It was time to head back to Rimetea, for one last evening at the accommodation used earlier in the week, plus another opportunity to search for butterflies in this wildlife-rich valley.

It made sense to stop at the entrance to the valley where the group had spent time earlier in the week. Once again János watered the gravel on the car park and once again a Marbled Skipper flew in shortly afterwards. Perhaps it was the same one!

A **Scarce Swallowtail** *Iphiclides podalirius* was finally spotted, having been strangely absent all week up to this point, but the level of excitement over this paled into insignificance when Andrew and

David stumbled upon a mating pair of Spinose Skipper. Both were sure to record this pairing as this is a rarely seen event.

Another skipper provided almost equal excitement soon after. A large, chunky specimen perched on a knapweed flower soon revealed itself to be **Yellow-banded Skipper** *Pyrgus sidae*. Unfortunately, it was active in an extremely damp area which was impassable so close approaches weren't possible, but it remained in sight for three or four minutes before flying off.





A stroll in the same

moist woodland as three days earlier provided another opportunity for the group to see Scarce Fritillary, and for Don and Julian to get some images of Clouded Apollo. On the subject of photography, Andrew got lucky and managed to bag an image of a Hungarian Glider, much to the envy of David who had been cursing the two he'd seen for not settling.

Then, after six days of absence, **Holly Blue** *Celastrina argiolus* was eventually seen in one of the deciduous trees. Another Lycaenid newcomer was **Eastern Short-Tailed Blue** *Cupido decoloratus*, found on the opposite side from the woodland on a damp, grassy track.

The four new species today took the total to 81, which is extremely impressive for a European tour starting in mid-May.

Day 8, 25th May

The group said goodbye to their hosts in Rimetea and headed for the airport. This was to drop Don off as he had an early flight. The rest then headed up to a grassy hillside north of Cluj in search of more butterflies.

Again, several Common Gliders were recorded, although the best moment was when a Poplar Admiral kept returning to a patch of bare earth near the tree-line. Sadly, it decided to leave before anyone could get close enough for an image.

The reason this location had been chosen is because it is a site where **Tessellated Skipper** *Muschampia tessellum* had been recorded. Sadly, there was no sign of any here this afternoon, and



after an hour and a half of searching, the time had come to return to the airport to catch homebound flights, which thankfully didn't suffer from any undue delays.

Footnote and acknowledgements



This inaugural Romanian tour proved to be very successful. The abnormally warm spring had led not only to earlier than normal butterfly emergences, but also to sizeable numbers of many species on the wing during the week of the visit.

The first morning set the scene, with a remarkable array of desirable butterflies in a very small area of woodland, and as the week went

by, many more rare species were seen in good numbers.

The weather was sunny and warm virtually throughout, with just one morning during transit between two accommodation bases being cloudy.

It was a shame to miss out on Bavius Blue due to the early season, but to compensate there were good numbers of Danube Clouded Yellow as well as some surprise appearances from

Poplar Admiral, Woodland Brown and Spinose Skipper.

Overall, it was a wonderful week, with the bear encounter being a particular highlight. Mariposa would like to thank all guests for their efforts and for their convivial company, as well as thanking the chief guide, János, whose knowledge of the area and whose energy were instrumental in making this such a fine trip.



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ROMANIA IN SPRING 18-25 MAY 2024									
	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	Butterflies								
1	Dingy Skipper <i>Erynnis tages</i>		√	\	✓		✓	✓	
2	Mallow Skipper Carcharodus alceae		✓					✓	
3	Tufted Marbled Skipper Carcharodus			√	√				
	floccifera								
4	Hungarian Skipper Spialia orbifer		✓						
5	Spinose Skipper <i>Muschampia cribrellum</i>				✓			✓	
6	Safflower Skipper Pyrgus carthami			√	✓				
7	Yellow-banded Skipper <i>Pyrgus sidae</i>							✓	
8	Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus malvae</i>	✓	✓	√	✓		✓	✓	
9	Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus</i> armoricanus						✓		
10	Large Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus alveus</i>			√					
11	Large Chequered Skipper Heteropterus Morpheus								
12	Chequered Skipper Carterocephalus		√		√			√	
	palaemon				•			•	
13	Essex Skipper <i>Thymelicus lineola</i>								
14	Small Skipper Thymelicus sylvestris								
15	Lulworth Skipper Thymelicus acteon								
16	Large Skipper Ochlodes sylvanus	√	√		✓	✓		√	
17	Southern Festoon Zerynthia polyxena								
18	Clouded Apollo Parnassius mnemosyne				✓			√	
19	Scarce Swallowtail <i>Iphiclides podalirius</i>							✓	
20	Swallowtail <i>Papilio machaon</i>						✓		
21	Wood White <i>Leptidea sinapis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	√	✓	
22	Fenton's Wood White Leptidea morsei					√			
23	Orange-tip Anthocharis cardamines			√	√	√	√	√	
24	Black-veined White Aporia crataegi	√							
25	Large White Pieris brassicae				√		√	√	
26	Small White Pieris rapae			√					
27	Green-veined White Pieris napi				√		√	√	
28	Eastern Bath White Pontia edusa								
29	Eastern Pale Clouded Yellow Colias erate								
30	Clouded Yellow Colias crocea				✓				
31	Danube Clouded Yellow Colias			✓			✓		
	myrmidone								
32	Lesser Clouded Yellow <i>Colias</i>								
33	chrysotheme Pale Clouded Yellow Colias hyale	,	,		,	,	,	,	
	Berger's Clouded Yellow Colias	✓	✓	,	√	√	√	√	
34	alfacariensis			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
35	Brimstone Gonepteryx rhamni				√	√	√	√	
36	Duke of Burgundy <i>Hamearis lucina</i>				-	-	√	-	

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
37	Small Copper Lycaena phlaeas						✓	√	
38	Violet Copper <i>Lycaena helle</i>		√						
39	Large Copper Lycaena dispar				√	√	√	√	
40	Scarce Copper Lycaena virgaureae								
41	Sooty Copper Lycaena tityrus		√		√	√	√	√	
42	Purple-shot Copper Lycaena alciphron								
43	Purple-edged Copper Lycaena hippothoe								
44	Lesser Fiery Copper Lycaena thersamon								
45	Green Hairstreak Callophrys rubi			✓	✓	√	√	√	
46	Black Hairstreak Satyrium pruni		√						
47	Ilex Hairstreak Satyrium ilicis								
48	Sloe Hairstreak Satyrium acaciae	√							
49	Small Blue Cupido minimus			√	√	√		√	
50	Osiris Blue Cupido Osiris	√			√				
51	Short-tailed Blue <i>Cupido argiades</i>								
52	Eastern Short-tailed Blue Cupido							√	
	decoloratus								
53	Provençal Short-tailed Blue Cupido								
	alcetas								
54	Holly Blue <i>Celastrina argiolus</i>							✓	
55	Eastern Baton Blue Pseudophilotes	✓			✓		✓		
	vicrama								
56	Bavius Blue Pseudophilotes bavius								
57	Chequered Blue Scolitantides orion				✓				
58	Green-underside Blue <i>Glaucopsyche</i>		✓		✓			✓	
	alexis								
59	Large Blue Phengaris arion	✓							
60	Alcon Blue Phengaris alcon								
61	Zephyr Blue Kretania sephirus	_	_	_		_			
62	Silver-studded Blue <i>Plebejus argus</i>	√	√	✓	√	√		√	
63	Idas Blue <i>Plebejus idas</i>				_	_			
64	Reverdin's Blue <i>Plebejus argyrognomon</i>				✓	✓		✓	
65	Brown Argus <i>Aricia agestis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
66	Mazarine Blue Cyaniris semiargus			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Turquoise Blue <i>Polyommatus dorylas</i>	✓			✓			✓	
68	Chapman's Blue Polyommatus thersites	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
69	Common Blue Polyommatus icarus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
70	Adonis Blue <i>Lysandra bellargus</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	
71	Nettle-tree Butterfly <i>Libythea celtis</i>								
72	Silver-washed Fritillary Argynnis paphia								
73	High Brown Fritillary Fabriciana adippe								
74	Queen of Spain Fritillary Issoria lathonia				√		✓	√	
75	Lesser Marbled Fritillary Brenthis ino								
76	Marbled Fritillary Brenthis daphne								
77	Twin-spot Fritillary Brenthis hecate								

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
78	Pearl-bordered Fritillary <i>Boloria</i>				√			√	
	euphrosyne								
79	Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary <i>Boloria</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	selene								
80	Weaver's Fritillary Boloria dia								
81	Silver-washed Fritillary Argynnis paphia				,			,	
82	Scarce Fritillary Euphydryas maturna		,		√	,	,	√	
83	Marsh Fritillary Euphydryas aurinia	,	√		✓	√	√	✓	
84	Glanville Fritillary Melitaea cinxia	√	√	•		√	√		
85	Knapweed Fritillary Melitaea phoebe	✓	✓	√	√	✓	✓		
86	Lesser Spotted Fritillary Melitaea trivia			✓	✓			✓	
87	Spotted Fritillary Melitaea didyma								
88	False Heath Fritillary Melitaea diamina		_		√				
89	Heath Fritillary Melitaea athalia		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
90	Red Admiral <i>Vanessa atalanta</i>					✓		✓	
91	Painted Lady Vanessa cardui		✓		✓			✓	
92	Peacock Inachis io								
93	Small Tortoiseshell Aglais urticae								
94	Comma Polygonia c-album				√	✓			
95	Map Araschnia levana				✓		✓	✓	
96	Camberwell Beauty Nymphalis antiopa								
97	Common Glider Neptis sappho		√		√	✓		√	✓
98	Hungarian Glider Neptis rivularis				✓			✓	
99	Lesser Purple Emperor Apatura ilia		✓						
100	Speckled Wood Pararge aegeria		✓		✓	✓		✓	
101	Wall Brown Lasiommata megera				✓	✓	✓	✓	
102	Large Wall Brown Lasiommata maera		✓	√				✓	
103	Woodland Brown Lopinga achine		✓						
104	Pearly Heath Coenonympha arcania		✓	>	√			✓	
105	Chestnut Heath Coenonympha glycerion	✓	✓	\	✓	✓	✓	✓	
106	Small Heath Coenonympha pamphilus	√	✓	\	✓	√	✓	√	
107	Meadow Brown <i>Maniola jurtina</i>	√	✓		√				
108	Woodland Ringlet Erebia medusa		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
109	Black Ringlet <i>Erebia melas</i>								
110	Marbled White Melanargia galathea								
					_			_	
#	Marbled Skipper Carcharodus lavatherae				✓			✓	
#	Poplar Admiral <i>Limenitis populi</i>				✓				✓
#	Mountain Argus Aricia artaxerxes				✓				
#	Geranium Argus Eumedonia eumedon				✓				
#	Cardinal Argynnis pandora				✓			✓	
	Daily total:	18	32	28	59	30	34	54	
	Running total:	18	38	50	71	73	77	81	

Guests' Galleries

All images that follow were kindly shared by tour participants.



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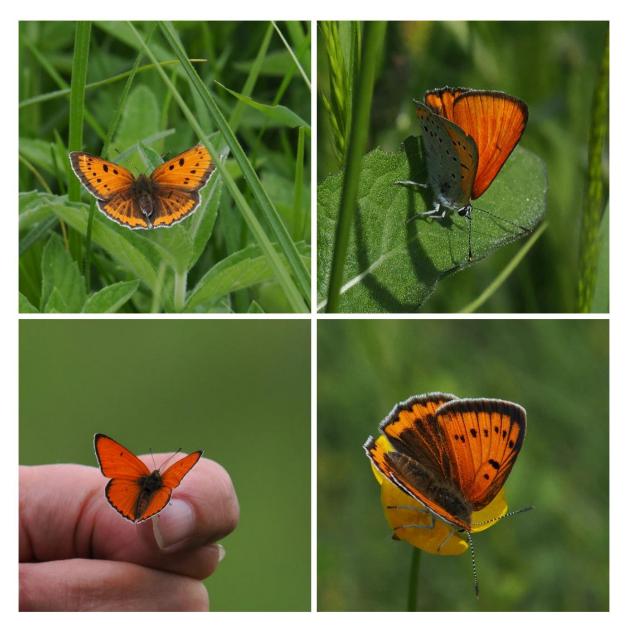
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And finally... If you like the sound of Romania in Spring, we're afraid next year's tour is already fully booked, but we'll be announcing the dates for this deservedly popular tour for 2026 soon... If you'd like to reserve a place in the meantime, please drop us a line on info@mariposanature.com

In the meantime, we have other butterfly tours operating in 2025 that explore other wonderful parts of Europe! Our full calendar is available to peruse on our website:

https://www.mariposanature.com/calendar