Spring Butterflies of Andalusia

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

2nd-9th May 2024



Tour leaders David Moore, Pau Lucio & Juan Pablo Cancela

Trip report by David Moore

Images kindly shared by our guests

(Images above, clockwise from top left: Spanish Fritillary (Mike), Common Tiger Blue (Malcolm), Spanish Festoon (Martina), Southern Blue (Barrie)



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Introduction

This tour covered a range of sites from Cabo de Gata in the south east to Castellar de la Frontera in the west, taking in some of the best locations for spring butterflies in this southernmost region of Spain.

Joining us for the tour were Chris & Sheila, Mike, Martina, Barrie, Don, Dudley & Jean, Martin, Bill, Malcolm, Aidan & Emma, Harry and Phil.

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

Day One, 2nd May

Arrivals day is sometimes hectic, especially at an airport as busy as Malaga, but thankfully everyone's flights were broadly on time, meaning the group could get away before 15:00, and little over an hour later we had arrived at Castell de Ferro, on the coast east of the city of Motril.



This site is rather underwhelming from a visual perspective, being an area of waste ground with a range of plants that thrive in arid conditions, of which one is caperberry, hence the reason for the visit.

Desert Orange Tip *Colotis evagore*, is essentially an African butterfly that has gained a foothold in southern Spain over the years, although its presence cannot be guaranteed in spring, as the species cannot tolerate periods of cold weather. Pleasingly, there were several on the wing here, both males and females, and the group took turns to photograph those individuals which settled both on the grasses and the caperberry flowers, mainly in the sheltered area at the top of the hill.

In addition, a small number of **African Grass Blues** *Zizeeria knysna*, were seen at the lower end, no doubt attracted by the medick growing there.

Lang's Short-tailed Blue Leptotes pirithous, was also a good find, with Swallowtail Papilio machaon and Southern Blue Polyommatus celina also present.

The group then made their way to the first hotel in the coastal town of Retamar and enjoyed a much needed buffet meal after a long and tiring travel day.



Day Two, 3rd May

After the exertions of travelling the previous day, a late start and a short walk over to a scrubby tract of land opposite the hotel allowed guests to recharge their batteries.

This large site is very arid but plays host to numerous jujube bushes, which is the larval host plant of **Common Tiger Blue** *Tarucus theophrastes*.

Martina was the first to spot one of these tiny but adorably marked insects, and the butterfly settled on the ground allowing everyone to get close. Many more were seen over the course of the next hour or so before the group moved on to a dry riverside to see the rare White-headed Ducks as well as a small group of Greater Flamingo.

The afternoon was spent near Cabo de Gata, at a dry track where butterfly numbers were rather disappointing. The commonest species was undoubtedly **Spanish Gatekeeper** *Pyronia bathseba*, but only a handful of **Spanish Marbled Whites** *Melanargia ines* were on the wing.



A rather unexpected find was **Blue-spot Hairstreak** *Satyrium spini*, seen happily nectaring from some yellow flowers. **Sage Skipper** *Muschampia proto* was less surprising, but equally welcome. Other notables were **Lulworth Skipper** *Thymelicus acteon*, and **Black-eyed Blue** *Glaucopsyche melanops*.

With numbers poor, it was decided to stop at one of the local parks on the way back to the hotel. This paid dividends when **Geranium Bronze** *Cacyreus marshalli* was soon spotted, closely followed by a small group of **Long-tailed Blue** *Lampides boeticus* around an area where wild pea was growing.

The other surprise for the non-birders in our number was seeing flocks of wild Monk Parakeets flying around the park, with their noisy chattering making it feel more like the South America than Europe.

Green-striped White © Barrie

Day Three, 4th May

First stop today was a coastal site just north of the village of Villaricos. This site is again fairly arid and given the dry spring in 2023 it was soon clear that few butterflies had managed to complete their cycle to become adults this year. One that had was **False Mallow Skipper** *Carcharodus tripolinus,* which the group photographed collectively. The only other butterfly of note was a solitary Desert Orange Tip, so a decision was made to decamp to the second site a little earlier

than planned.

Whilst eating lunch in the car park, a **Green-striped White** *Euchloe belemia* was briefly seen, before everyone made their way up the track towards the Roman aqueduct.

Sadly, there weren't a great many butterflies flying along this path, although most of the group got acquainted with Black-eyed Blue, which was the commonest butterfly during the walk.

Long-tailed Blue was also seen albeit in small numbers whilst a **Lang's Short-tailed Blue** *Leptotes pirithous* was found on the leaves of a shrub.



Both male and female **Cleopatra** *Gonepteryx cleopatra* were sighted, but overall this site visit was on the disappointing side, involving a 2km walk in warm conditions for probably no more than 100 butterflies.

Day Four, 5th May



To describe this day as transformative would be an understatement. The group left their base in Retamar just after 09:00h and travelled west towards Motril, then north in the direction of Granada, turning off the autopista at Padul to visit a site that was visually far removed from what had been experienced in the previous two days.

The signs were there prior to arrival; the roadsides were green and full of flowers, and the site itself was a joy to behold, bedecked with a cornucopia

of flowering plants and shrubs.

Unsurprisingly, there were huge numbers of butterflies active throughout the site, with **Clouded Yellow** *Colias crocea*, **Western Marbled White** *Melanargia occitanica*, Swallowtail and Spanish Marbled White being the most obvious.

It was hard to concentrate on single specimens given the sheer numbers but the group managed to track a few desirables down, chief among which was **Spanish Fritillary** *Euphydryas desfontainii*, which was located by Juan Pablo in an area where the rocky terrain abruptly gave way to long grass.

Perhaps even more impressive was Phil spotting a male **Sooty Orange Tip** *Zegris eupheme*, and managing to get an image of this fast-flying, nomadic Pierid.



Lunch was taken in this wonderful setting, with butterflies constantly on the wing around us, which was a delight after their relative paucity further east.

After finishing lunch, the group took a punt and travelled to a site west of Granada where **Spanish Zephyr Blue** *Plebejus hespericus* had been unexpectedly seen the previous year. There were none to be found this time, sadly, proving that the butterfly season was not as advanced as at the same stage in 2023.

The final stop was about 15 miles away, where Pau knew there were Montagu's Harrier to be seen. The site, although largely agricultural, also has a river running through it which leads to damp patches at the side of the tracks.



In these areas were multiple **Southern Marbled Skipper** *Carcharodus baeticus,* imbibing greedily from the moist areas. Sage Skipper was also seen as well as **Rosy Grizzled Skipper** *Pyrgus onopordi,* which was a new species for the trip.

The biggest surprise was on the way out, when Pau suddenly stopped his vehicle, having seen a **Monarch** *Danaus plexippus*, nectaring near the adjacent hedgerow. Obviously, everyone got out and a few managed to record this on their cameras

before this giant butterfly swooped over the hedge and was lost from view. Seeing one this far inland augured well for later in the week.

An hour or so later, the group arrived at their second base on the outskirts of Antequera after what had been a highly enjoyable and productive transit day.

Day Five, 6th May

The morning dawned rather cloudy but the group still headed to a site east of Antequera as the weather forecast indicated a progressive improvement as the day went on.

There were occasional breaks in the cloud, enough for a few butterflies to take to the wing, chief among them being **Black-veined White** *Aporia crataegi*, which are extremely common at this site.

It was a long and patient wait, as the main target, Spanish Fritillary, is a warmth-loving species which is unlikely to be seen in anything other than sunny conditions.

It took until lunchtime for skies to clear sufficiently for normal activity to commence, and there were several new species which availed themselves of the improved



conditions, including the tiny **Lorquin's Blue** *Cupido lorquinii*, which resembles a Small Blue but for the deep blue upperside of the males.



Another very welcome newcomer was **Provence Orange Tip** Anthocharis euphioides. This most charming of spring butterflies is always a delight to see, like a lemon-hued Orange Tip dancing around without a care.

Another new species for the week was **Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper** *Pyrgus armoricanus,* with both **Wood White** *Leptidae sinapis* and **Large Wall** *Lasiommata maera* also recorded for the first time.

However, a much more desirable species was also about to make its first appearance. A handful of **Spanish Festoon** *Zerynthia rumina* were seen flying amongst the grasses. Although a weak flyer sporting seemingly dull colours in flight, this butterfly transforms into

a veritable beauty when settled, with a series of red spots complementing the yellow ground colour with its black lattice pattern.

Eventually, with the sun now shining strongly, the main target began to emerge from its hiding places. Several Spanish Fritillary were seen near the bottom of the hill, with some stopping regularly to refuel on the widespread yellow hawkbit flowers.



This is not a butterfly that ever occurs in large numbers, but everybody finally got to see some, with between half a dozen and a dozen in total collectively recorded.

Remaining at a single site for an entire day is not normally on the agenda when on tour, but the importance of Spanish Fritillary, the wide range of other species, and the stunning habitat made it entirely justified in this instance.

Day Six, 7th May



Having succeeded with *desfontainii*, it was now the moment to devote time to tracking down the other rare and coveted member of the fritillary family – **Aetherie Fritillary** *Melitaea aetherie*.

The most reliable area for this species is near to the town of Ubrique, but the journey there was over two hours in duration and remarkably, once there, only a handful were seen and indeed some of the group missed out altogether despite our best efforts.

Nonetheless, this flowery roadside location was populated by several other species, with Swallowtails and Spanish Marbled

Whites being the most visible. The week's first **Berger's Clouded Yellow** *Colias alfacariensis* was also seen, with the *beckeri* form of **Marsh Fritillary** *Euphydryas aurinia* being another notable find.

To add to the frustration, the bar where the vehicles were parked remained closed, taking away the possibility of a welcome cold drink to go with lunch in the warm temperatures. Lightning struck for the second time upon arrival at the next site, with the bar adjacent to the Sendero de Monarcas also being shut, although this time the target butterfly species didn't disappoint.



All along the track there were good numbers of Monarch present, although even greater excitement was generated when those who had gone ahead spotted a **Plain Tiger** *Danaus chryssipus*, a species that does not normally appear until midsummer.

This butterfly appeared to be in mint condition, suggesting that it had very recently emerged. Other finds here were **Comma** *Polygonia c*-*album* and **Large Tortoiseshell** *Nymphalis polychloros*.

The return journey was a longish one but the seven new species seen had now taken the week's total to 58, which is very creditable in early May.

Day Seven, 8th May

The original plan to head for the Malaga coast to look for **Two-tailed Pasha** *Charaxes jasius* was unfortunately scuppered by the weather this morning.

Cloud and high winds meant the guides didn't wish to subject guests to another long journey without the likely guarantee of a reward, so mindful of the levels of fatigue left over from the previous day, it was decided to simply drive 2km uphill from the hotel to take a look at scrubby terrain near to the local quarry.

This relatively dry area attracts species not commonly seen in the more lush parts, with Spanish Gatekeepers being especially common here.



Sadly, there was no sign of **False Baton Blue** *Scolitantides abencerragus*, with the likelihood that this early species' flight season was already over.

There was some compensation with the appearance of the week's first **Southern Gatekeeper** *Pyronia cecilia*, but for the main it was just the routine species that were on the wing, and not in great numbers due to the strong winds.



With conditions not conducive to butterfly spotting, the option was taken to visit the nearby World Heritage site at El Torcal in the afternoon.

This impressive upland limestone feature provides spectacular geology, not to mention sweeping views, and confiding Iberian Ibex, and was enjoyed by all. There were plenty of the commoner butterflies amongst the grassy areas, including the week's first **Green-veined White** *Pieris napi*.

The two new species for the day meant that the final group total was 60, which would be almost impossible to better at this time of year in any European country outside Spain.

Footnote and acknowledgements

This tour was generally a successful one, although numbers of butterflies in the south east of Andalusia were again diminished due to a second successive warm and dry winter/spring.

Fortunately, the more western parts in the second half of the trip had received much more rain and were consequently lush and full of flowers. Butterfly numbers were excellent here.

The main target species were all recorded except for Twotailed Pasha, which sadly became a casualty of the windy weather on the final full day.

Aetherie Fritillary numbers near Ubrique were also disappointing, but Juan Pablo discovered a new site nearer to Antequera and all the group eventually managed to see this rare butterfly.

Mariposa would therefore like to thank all 15 guests in the group for their efforts in tracking down the 60 species seen, as well as for their convivial company throughout the week, remaining in good spirits even after one day which was spent largely on the road to see the iconic local duo of Monarch and Aetherie Fritillary.



There is no doubt that this is the best destination in

Europe to see such a range of scarce and desirable spring butterfly species at this time of year, and we are thankful that the weather remained almost entirely conducive to finding them.

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	SPRING BUTTERFLIES OF	AND	ALUSI	4 2-9	MAY 2	2024			
	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Days seen
	Butterflies								
1	False Mallow Skipper Carcharodus			\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark		\checkmark	
	tripolinus								
2	Mallow Skipper Carcharodus alceae								
3	Southern Marbled Skipper Carcharodus baeticus				\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
4	Dingy Skipper Erynnis tages								
5	Rosy Grizzled Skipper Pyrgus onopordi				\checkmark	\checkmark			
6	Southern Grizzled Skipper <i>Pyrgus</i> malvoides								
7	Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper Pyrgus armoricanus					~			
8	Sage Skipper Muschampia proto		\checkmark		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
9	Red-underwing Skipper Spialia Sertorius			\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark			
10	Lulworth Skipper Thymelicus acteon		\checkmark				\checkmark	\checkmark	
11	Southern Brown Argus Aricia cramera	\checkmark							
12	African Grass Blue Zizeeria knysna	\checkmark	√ 				\checkmark	-	
13	Common Tiger Blue <i>Tarucus</i> theophrastus		√	\checkmark					
14	Holly Blue Celastrina argiolus			\checkmark			✓		
15	Lorquin's Blue <i>Cupido lorquinii</i>			-		√	-		
16	Black-eyed Blue <i>Glaucopsyche melanops</i>		\checkmark	\checkmark	✓	\checkmark			
17	Lang's Short-tailed Blue Leptotes pirithous	✓	-	√		_	✓	✓	
18	Long-tailed Blue Lampides boeticus		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	✓	\checkmark	√	
19	Adonis Blue Polyommatus bellargus		•	•	✓ ✓	•	•	✓ ✓	
20	Southern Blue Polyommatus celina	\checkmark			√	7	7	\checkmark	
21	Chapman's Blue <i>Polyommatus thersites</i>	•			•	•	•	•	
22	False Baton Blue <i>Pseudophilotes baton</i>								
23	Panoptes Blue Pseudophilotes panoptes			\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark		\checkmark	
24	Small Copper Lycaena phlaeas				\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
25	Provence Hairstreak Tomares ballus								
26	Chapman's Green Hairstreak Callophrys avis								
27	Green Hairstreak Callophrys rubi								
28	Cardinal Argynnis Pandora								
29	Marsh Fritillary Euphydryas aurinia						✓		
30	Spanish Fritillary Euphydryas desfontainii				~	~			
31	Queen of Spain Fritillary Issoria lathonia								
32	Provençal Fritillary Melitaea deione)						\checkmark		
33	Meadow Fritillary Melitaea parthenoides								

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Days seen
34	Spotted Fritillary Melitaea didyma								
35	Aetherie Fritillary Melitaea aetherie						\checkmark		
36	Knapweed Fritillary Melitaea phoebe			\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark			
37	Monarch Danaus plexippus				\checkmark		\checkmark		
38	Two-tailed Pasha Charaxes jasius								
39	Small Tortoiseshell Aglais urticae				\checkmark				
40	Large Tortoiseshell Nymphalis polychloros						~		
41	Comma Polygonia c-album						\checkmark		
42	Red Admiral Vanessa atalanta		\checkmark	\checkmark		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
43	Painted Lady Vanessa cardui		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
44	Iberian Scarce Swallowtail Iphiclides feisthamelii			~	√	√	✓	~	
45	Swallowtail Papilio machaon	\checkmark			\checkmark		\checkmark	\checkmark	
46	Spanish Festoon Zerynthia rumina					\checkmark	\checkmark		
47	Provence Orange Tip Anthocharis euphenoides					~	~	~	
48	Western Dappled White Euchloe crameri				\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
49	Desert Orange Tip Colotis evagore	\checkmark		\checkmark					
50	Sooty Orange Tip Zegris eupheme				\checkmark				
51	Berger's Clouded Yellow Colias alfacariensis						~	~	
52	Clouded Yellow Colias crocea	\checkmark		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
53	Cleopatra Gonepteryx cleopatra			\checkmark			\checkmark		
54	Brimstone Gonepteryx rhamni				\checkmark	\checkmark			
55	Wood White Leptidea sinapis					\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
56	Large White Pieris brassicae				\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
57	Green-veined White Pieris napi							\checkmark	
58	Southern Small White Pieris mannii								
59	Small White Pieris rapae	\checkmark							
60	Bath White Pontia daplidice	\checkmark		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
61	Small Heath Coenonympha pamphilus				\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark		
62	Large Wall Lasiommata maera					\checkmark		\checkmark	
63	Wall Lasiommata megera		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
64	Speckled Wood Pararge aegeria	\checkmark		\checkmark			\checkmark		
65	Spanish Gatekeeper Pyronia bathseba		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark		\checkmark	\checkmark	
66	Meadow Brown Maniola jurtina				\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
67	Spanish Marbled White Melanargia ines	\checkmark	\checkmark		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
#	Blue-spot Hairstreak Satyrium spini		\checkmark					\checkmark	
#	Green-striped White Euchloe belemia			\checkmark	\checkmark			\checkmark	
#	Western Marbled White Melanargia occitanica				√			~	
#	Black-veined White Aporia crataegia				\checkmark	\checkmark			
#	Plain Tiger Danaus chrysippus						\checkmark		
#	Southern Gatekeeper Pyronia cecilia							\checkmark	

	Species name	Day	Day	Day	Day	Day	Day	Day	Days
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	seen
#	Geranium Bronze Cacyreus marshalli		\checkmark						
#									
#									
#									
	Daily total:	11	15	22	34	33	37	34	
	Running total:	11	22	30	45	51	58	60	

The following list of bird species seen during the week was kindly compiled by Barrie:

	Common Name	Scientific Name
1	Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna
2	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos
3	Pochard	Aythya ferina
4	White-headed Duck	Oxyura leucocephala
5	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa
6	Swift	Apus apus
7	Pallid Swift	Apus pallidus
8	Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus
9	Stock Dove	Columba oenas
10	Woodpigeon	Columba palumbus
11	Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur
12	Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto
13	Common Coot	Fulica atra
14	Black-necked Grebe	Podiceps nigricollis
15	Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus
16	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus
17	Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta
18	Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula
19	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos
20	Slender-billed Gull	Chroicocephalus genei
21	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus
22	Audouin's Gull	Ichthyaetus audouinii
23	Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis
24	Gull-billed Tern	Gelochelidon nilotica
25	Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis
26	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia
27	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus
28	Black Vulture	Aegypius monachus
26	Short-toed Eagle	Circaetus gallicus
27	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus
28	Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus
29	Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus
30	Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus
31	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo
32	Ноорое	Upupa epops
33	Roller	Merops apiaster
34	European Bee-eater	Coracias garrulus

35	Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus
36	Monk Parakeet	Myiopsitta monachus
37	Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus
38	Iberian (Azure-winged) Magpie	Cyanopica cooki
39	Magpie	Pica mauritanica
40	Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax
41	Jackdaw	Corvus monedula
42	Crow	Corvus corone
43	Raven	Corvus corax
44	Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus
45	Great Tit	Parus major
46	Thekla Lark	Galerida theklae
47	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata
48	Swallow	Hirundo rustica
49	House Martin	Delichon urbicum
50	Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica
51	Western Bonelli's Warbler	Phylloscopus bonelli
52	Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita
53	Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla
54	Western Orphean Warbler	Curruca hortensis
55	Sardinian Warbler	Curruca melanocephala
56	Western Subalpine Warbler	Curruca iberiae
57	Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes
58	Starling	Sturnus vulgaris
59	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor
60	Blackbird	Turdus merula
61	Robin	Erithacus rubecula
62	Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos
63	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros
64	Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius
65	Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra
66	Western Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe hispanica
67	Black Wheatear	Oenanthe leucura
68	Rock Sparrow	Petronia petronia
69	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus
70	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba
71	Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs
72	Greenfinch	Chloris chloris
73	Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis
74	Common Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra
75	Serin	Serinus serinus
76	Corn Bunting	Miliaria calandra
77	Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia

Guests' Galleries

All images that follow were kindly shared by tour participants.



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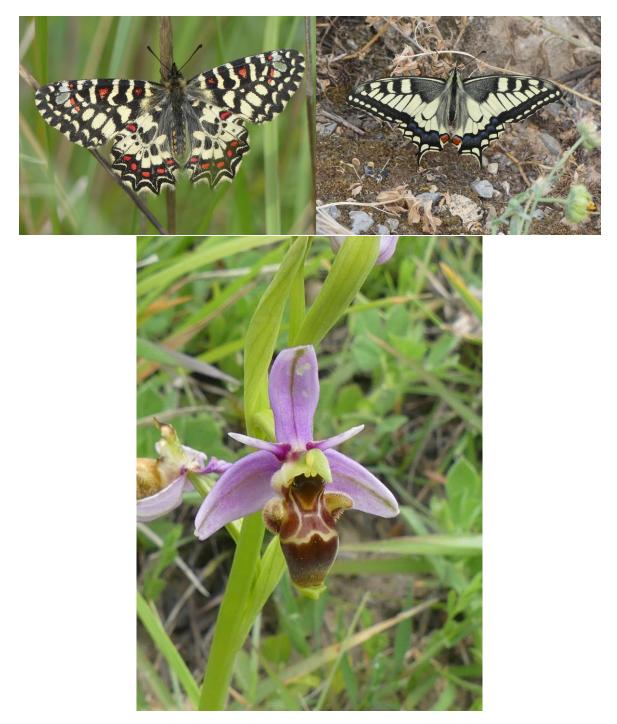
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