

# Autumn Exotica in Andalucia

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

23<sup>rd</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> September 2024

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Tour leaders David Moore & Jon Dunn

Trip report by David Moore

Images kindly shared by our guests

(Images above, clockwise from top left: Desert Orange Tip (John V), Two-tailed Pasha (Fields), Plain Tiger (Neil), Zeller's Skipper (Rod))

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## **Trip Report – Autumn Exotica of Andalusia, 23<sup>rd</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> September 2024**

Guides: David Moore and Jon Dunn

### **Introduction**

This tour is largely designed to take in all the species from North Africa and the Americas which have gained a foothold and established themselves in southern Spain.

Whilst there is not a huge range of butterflies at this time of year, nonetheless there are several species which are continually brooded and are on the wing almost year-round.

Joining us for the tour were Neil & Jan, Rod & Lynn, Harry, Melissa, Fields, John V, John R, and Paul.

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

### **Day 1, 23<sup>rd</sup> September**

Arrivals Day at Malaga generally involves guests using a variety of flights, and it was therefore not until after 14:00h that the entire group had gathered and the tour could officially start.

There is one target species that has its epicentre east of Malaga and that is where we headed with no further ado, arriving at Castell de Ferro after about an hour's drive.

A rather scruffy-looking expanse of waste ground next to the coast doesn't immediately imbue confidence, but this is almost certainly the best place in Iberia to find the delightful **Desert Orange Tip** *Colotis evagore*.

The steep slope contains lots of the larval host plant, caperberry, which thrives in arid environments, and it was up near the top of the site, easily accessed via a graded track across the contour of the hillside, where this growth has its greatest abundance, that the bulk of the butterflies were found.



Desert Orange Tip © Lynn



Desert Orange Tip © Rod

There was a moderate wind blowing, meaning that many of the dozen-and-a-half butterflies seen were seeking shelter in the long grasses growing in the lee of a stone wall.

Given they were not especially keen to take to the air, this meant they were rather more approachable than normal. As a result, the entire group were able to take a close look at this coloniser from North Africa.

Only one other butterfly was recorded in the hour spent at the site – a solitary **Cardinal** *Argynnis pandora* which flew by on the way up the slope.

A couple of hours later, the group had arrived at the 4-star hotel with views towards Gibraltar. A few drinks and a buffet meal were then consumed before a much-needed rest prior to the first full day.

### Day 2, 24<sup>th</sup> September

Unusually, the skies were largely cloudy this morning and, as the group travelled towards Tarifa, the gloom intensified as the Atlantic influence increased. This meant that the first scheduled stop was a very short one.

The track at El Bujeo is normally a good spot for Monarchs given the amount of tropical milkweed growing in the damper areas of this hillside location. Unfortunately, nothing at all was flying and the skies were even darker in the direction the breeze was coming from, so it was decided to move on to the nearby bird observatory that commands excellent views over the Straits of Gibraltar and Morocco beyond.



Although things remained cloudy, at least one butterfly was found, with Paul bumping into a **Wall Brown** *Lasiommata megera* whilst everyone else was watching the bird activity. A steady procession of raptors and vultures were moving overhead, with particularly good views to be had of several **Short-toed Eagle** *Circaetus gallicus*.

To the south-west, there were signs of a few breaks in the overcast conditions so after half an hour the group moved beyond Tarifa to a

lush, grassy site hoping that a bit of patience might pay dividends.

Thankfully, a few sunny intervals arrived and that was all it took for butterflies to become active. One species was impossible to miss – several huge **Monarch** *Danaus plexippus* began to stir and, given the mainly cloudy skies, were very easy to approach as they were keen to stay grounded and soak up a bit of warmth rather than fly around continuously.

Soon after, another of the main targets was spotted. In a damp and particularly grassy area close to the main road were a number of **Zeller's Skipper** *Borbo borbonica*. This is a relatively recent addition to the fauna of Iberia and is usually found in agricultural areas where there is extensive irrigation.

A small dip in the grass seemed to have been earmarked as a lekking area, as four or five individuals were constantly jostling for positions, which was fascinating to watch.





Geranium Bronze © John V

A circuit of the site yielded several other species, with **African Grass Blue** *Zizeeria knysna* being picked up on the shorter turf, and John V finding **Geranium Bronze** *Cacyreus marshalli*. Both **Long-tailed** *Lampides boeticus* and **Lang's Short-tailed Blue** *Leptotes pirithous* were seen in various places and there was also a welcome appearance by **Mediterranean Skipper** *Gegenes nostradamus*, although this was not seen by everybody.

With conditions seemingly better away from the coast, the guide proposed visiting the paddy fields near Benalup as it would free up time on the remaining days.

The journey was relatively straightforward with just a minor delay on the approach to the turn off into the large agricultural area close to the reservoir.

This habitat is unusual in this part of Spain, being damp and relatively flat. This is where the main colonies of Zeller's Skipper can be found, and indeed several more were located very easily along with a handful more Mediterranean Skipper meaning everybody managed to see both these feisty little Hesperids.



Long-tailed Blue © Harry



Northern Banded Groundling © Melissa

Also on the wing was **Bath White** *Pontia daplidice* along with a selection of dragonflies, mostly notably the curious **Northern Banded Groundling** *Brachythemis impartita* which has a penchant for flying around people's feet as they are walking!

In total, 16 species were seen during the course of the day, meaning that 18 had now been recorded following the sightings from the previous day.

### Day 3, 25<sup>th</sup> September

The two largest European species of butterfly were the main targets today, alongside another that is also sizeable.

To get the group underway, a 40-minute drive beyond Castellar de la Frontera to a hilltop location close to a reservoir was necessary.

This site had been provided courtesy of Neil, and although things got off to a slow start, it eventually turned out to be very productive.

A couple of Wall Brown were active around the mirador overlooking the reservoir, and a **Tree Grayling** *Hipparchia statilinus* was settling on a nearby roadside bank.

Not much else was about but as the air warmed and the sun positioned itself higher in the sky, eventually Jon shouted that a **Two-tailed Pasha** *Charaxes jasius* had been seen, circling the many strawberry trees growing in the valley down from the road.



For almost half an hour, many in the group staked out this area, only for another to be seen round the corner. This one settled a few times but only for short periods.



By now everyone had gathered by the small car park and John R pointed out another Pasha which circled briefly before coming down in a nearby tree.

Thankfully, this is where it remained for quite some while. It seemed to be interested in what could only be a small sap run as it was dabbing its proboscis into the bark but above the height where the group could get a proper view.

The next quarter of an hour was very satisfying as the butterfly kept relatively still, even partially opening its wings on a few occasions. Periodically, it would take to the air, only to fly round the car park and alight once more on the same tree.

With the big prize in the bag, the group moved back to Castellar where the Sendero de Monarcas is situated.

This is reputedly the best site for Monarchs in Spain and there were several flying around the copious swan-weed the moment the group got out of the vehicles. Frustratingly, the field which contained the plants was fenced off, but these insects are so large that they were clearly visible from 15 metres away, as was another large butterfly which was darker than the Monarchs – **Plain Tiger** *Danaus chryssipus*.

An earlier conversation with a British ex-pat naturalist had revealed that Plain Tigers had been abnormally scarce in the south of Andalusia during this late summer and autumn, and that proved to be true as this turned out to be the only sighting of the week. In a normal year, one would expect to see many dozens.





Along the sendero itself, the first section contained several more Monarch, and the woodland area provided **Speckled Wood** *Pararge aegeria* and **Brimstone** *Gonepteryx rhamni*. In one of the clearings further up, the first **Sage Skipper** *Muschampia proto* was recorded.

Once back at the car park, the group sat down in the al fresco area of the adjacent bar and all enjoyed a welcome drink before heading back to the hotel just after 4pm.

### Day 4, 26<sup>th</sup> September

The first site to be visited on this penultimate full day was near the town of Manilva, about 40 minutes' drive up the coast.

It had been heavily overcast for the first 30 minutes or so, but happily skies cleared and the group arrived in the car park of this unusual site just after 10am.

In the spring, this canyon is green and lush and whilst there were plenty of robust-looking leaves on the shrubs, the grass had largely dried up, meaning the only butterflies found there were **Meadow Brown** *Maniola jurtina*.



The group walked down to the ancient Roman baths, the waters of which are sulphurous meaning they are milky-white and carry an odour of rotting eggs. No-one went for a dip!

Butterflies were thin on the ground but a **Small Copper** *Lycaena phlaeas* was found on some inula flowers next to the riverbed and a female **Southern Blue** *Polyommatus celina* was seen in one of the dry meadows beside the main track. Dragonflies were particularly obliging throughout the canyon, with excellent views had of **Epaulet Skimmer** *Orthetrum chrysostigma*, and **Violet Dropwing** *Trithemis annulata*, both species common in North Africa but at the very edge of their global range here in the Iberian Peninsula; and **Copper Demoiselle** *Calopteryx haemorrhoidalis*.

It was decided to leave a little earlier than anticipated although, back at the car park, a Cardinal flew by whilst John V spotted a **Large White** *Pieris brassicae*, which ended up being the only one seen during the whole trip.

There was unfinished business on the Plain Tiger front, so the group headed back to the site near Tarifa in the hope that at least one adult may have emerged since the last visit on the first full day.

Sadly, once again no Plain Tigers were seen, but there were plenty more Monarch flying around, plus several more Zeller's and Mediterranean Skippers. Another skipper was found too; this being a first for the trip – **False Mallow Skipper** *Carcharodus tripolinus*, discovered in the long grass at the easternmost point of the site.



A male Southern Blue was also discovered nearby, meaning both sexes had now been seen, and **Painted Lady** *Vanessa cardui* and **Clouded Yellow** *Colias crocea* were also new for the trip.

### Day 5, 27<sup>th</sup> September



The itinerary for this final day was amended in order to spend time at two different botanical gardens fairly close to the hotel.

The first one visited was Parque Princesa Sofia in Linea de la Concepcion, opposite the rock of Gibraltar, which the group had fine views of.

There weren't many butterflies to begin with, a transient Clouded Yellow being the main one of interest. However, as the morning warmed up, a colony of African Grass Blue was found in the

centre of the park and nearby were a handful of Long-tailed Blue as well as another Southern Blue.

The parking ticket only lasted an hour, so the group had to move on and headed to Los Barrios, to the rather inappropriately named Betty Molesworth Botanical Gardens. These turned out to be little more than a normal park, and the only butterfly of interest was a female Swallowtail hovering around some fennel at the southern end.



Accordingly, the group readily moved on to higher elevation close to Montera de Torero. There were far more butterflies at this site,



including several Tree Grayling in the light woodland. Additionally, there was a **Southern Brown Argus** *Aricia cramera* and a couple of Small Copper, one of which was a huge size.

Speckled Wood, Long-tailed Blue, Meadow Brown and even **Southern Gatekeeper** *Pyronia cecilia* were also spotted and, during lunch at the car park, the group were treated to a fly-past by a Two-tailed Pasha.

With much of the afternoon still remaining, it was agreed that a third visit should be paid to the site near Tarifa as that was the likeliest place to find another Plain Tiger.

Once again, Tiger was a no-show, but no-one was complaining as everyone was surrounded by Monarch and yet more Mediterranean and Zeller's Skippers were seen. Paul kept guard at a row of Acacia trees in case a rogue **African Babul Blue** *Azanus jesous* had set up home there but the only butterfly in the canopy turned out to be a Lang's Short-tailed Blue.

After an hour or so, it was time to head back to the hotel for one last evening meal and a few well-earned drinks.



### Footnote and acknowledgements

A total of 30 butterfly species were recorded on the trip, including all the main targets. Obviously, the major disappointment was that only one Plain Tiger was found, but the whole group saw it as it was active for a long while in one place, although the barbed-wire fence separating it from everybody was rather unhelpful.



Monarch were around in good numbers, whilst Zeller's Skipper was also found well into double figures - and alongside Mediterranean Skipper, which was particularly satisfying.

Overall, the bizarre season had once again had a negative impact on butterfly numbers. Two hot, dry springs in a row in Spain had clearly taken their toll and had affected the phenology of some of the butterflies.

The hotel was excellent however, and driving distances relatively small compared to some other butterfly tours. The weather was generally very pleasant with highs of around 26°C and only a few hours of cloud through the week.



Mariposa would therefore like to thank all guests who participated. Their company was convivial, and their efforts in the field much appreciated and to the benefit of all.



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<b>AUTUMN IN ANDALUSIA 23-28 SEPTEMBER 2024</b>							
	<b>Species name</b>	<b>Day 1</b>	<b>Day 2</b>	<b>Day 3</b>	<b>Day 4</b>	<b>Day 5</b>	<b>Day 6</b>
	<b>Butterflies</b>						
1	Southern Brown Argus <i>Aricia cramera</i>					✓	
2	Southern Blue <i>Polyommatus celina</i>				✓	✓	
3	Geranium Bronze <i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>		✓			✓	
4	Lang's Short-tailed Blue <i>Leptotes pirithous</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Long-tailed Blue <i>Lampides boeticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	Holly Blue <i>Celastrina argiolus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	African Grass Blue <i>Zizeeria knysna</i>		✓	✓			
8	Small Copper <i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>			✓	✓	✓	
9	Monarch <i>Danaus plexippus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
10	Plain Tiger <i>Danaus chryssipus</i>			✓			
11	Queen of Spain Fritillary <i>Issoria lathonia</i>						
12	Cardinal <i>Argynnis pandora</i>	✓					
13	Tree Grayling <i>Hipparchia statilinus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
14	Meadow Brown <i>Maniola jurtina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
15	Speckled Wood <i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓	✓	✓		
16	Wall Brown <i>Lasiommata megera</i>		✓	✓	✓		
17	Two-tailed Pasha <i>Charaxes jasius</i>			✓		✓	
18	Red Admiral <i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓		✓		
19	Painted Lady <i>Vanessa cardui</i>				✓	✓	
20	Swallowtail <i>Papilio machaon</i>		✓		✓	✓	
21	Mediterranean Skipper <i>Gegenes nostradamus</i>		✓		✓	✓	
22	Zeller's Skipper <i>Borbo borbonica</i>		✓		✓	✓	
23	False Mallow Skipper <i>Carcharodus tripolinus</i>				✓		
24	Sage Skipper <i>Muschampia proto</i>			✓	✓	✓	
25	Desert Orange Tip <i>Colotis evagore</i>	✓					
26	Bath White <i>Pontia daplidice</i>		✓				
27	Small White <i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Clouded Yellow <i>Colias crocea</i>				✓	✓	
29	Cleopatra <i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>						
30	Brimstone <i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>			✓			
#	Large White <i>Pieris brassicae</i>				✓		
#	Southern Gatekeeper <i>Pyronia cecilia</i>					✓	
	<b>Daily total:</b>	2	16	15	20	20	
	<b>Running total:</b>	2	18	23	28	30	

## Guests' Galleries

All images that follow were kindly shared by tour participants.



Images © Neil



Images © Melissa



Images © Melissa



Images © Lynn



Images © Lynn



Images © Lynn





Images © Rod



Images © Rod



Images © Rod



Images © John V



Images © John V



Images © John R



Images © John R



Images © Paul





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[Autumn Exotica in Andalusia](#)

Alternatively, we have other butterfly tours with remaining availability in 2025 that explore other wonderful areas of Spain!

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