

Natural History Tour in Southwestern Bulgaria and Northern Greece

10 – 16 July 2020

Trip report written by tour guide, Simeon Gigov



Dusky Large Blue, Sofia Area

Not long after the coronavirus lockdown came to an end in Europe, we were contacted for a tailor-made trip for butterflies, dragonflies and a few target species of birds by Peter Maaskant, Jan-Joost Bouwman and Petrus Schets from the Netherlands. The 7-days trip was arranged for the period 10-16 July and was targeting mostly butterflies and dragonflies of SW Bulgaria and Lake Kerkini in Northern Greece, as well as several species of birds.

The first day we spent around Sofia, where our main target was the Dusky Large Heath, which we managed to locate quickly around their favourite host plant *Sanguisorbium officinalis*. Other highlights here were Nickerl's Fritillary, Heath Fritillary, Dark Green Fritillary, Balkan Copper, Purple-shot Copper, as well as the Vagrant Emperor dragonfly.

The second day was dedicated to species of the subalpine and alpine areas of Rila Mountain. The cable lift took us directly to 2400 m a.s.l. and we directly started looking for ringlets and fritillaries of the high mountains. Unfortunately, this year the season was late and very few of them were on their wings. We still managed to see some important targets, such as the Bulgarian and Dewy Ringlets, Balkan Fritillary, Dusky Grizzled Skipper and Northern Wall Brown.

Day three was mostly spent in the Kresna Gorge, which produced plenty of targets, such as the Balkan Marbled White, Eastern Wood White, Southern Small White, Lesser Fiery Copper, Chequered Blue, Little Tiger Blue, Short-tailed Blue, Common Glider, Lattice Brown, Oriental Meadow Brown, The Hermit, Oberthuered Grizzled Skipper, Orbed Red-underwing Skipper and many others. Several

dragonflies, like the Sombre Goldenring, Small Pincertail, White-tailed and Southern Skimmers, also added to a good list of target species. Some good species of birds also contributed for an awesome day in the wild – Golden Eagle, Golden Oriole, Olivaceous Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Black-eared Wheatear, Cirl Bunting, etc. Our long search of the calling Eurasian Scops Owl didn't produce a sighting. In the evening though, we had several Kotschy's Geckos in our hotel in Melnik.

On day four we started very early, trying to avoid the long queues at the border crossing with Greece. The coronavirus situation was changing the border crossing conditions with Greece almost every day, but we happily managed to cross the border quickly and without any complications. And it wasn't in vain the morning hours we spent birding around Lake Kerkini and managed to see most of our targets – Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants, Purple Heron, Glossy Ibis, Black Kite, Turtle Dove, Black-headed Bunting, Masked Shrike, Woodchat Shrike, etc. Today most of our efforts were focused on finding dragonflies and we did – Lesser Emperor, Balkan Goldenring, Bladetail, Yellow-spotted Emerald, Red-veined Darter, Keeled Skimmer, Scarce Chaser, Black Pennant, and the beautiful Odalisque damselfly. Good species of butterflies were also around – Freyer's Grayling, Marbled Fritillary and Southern White Admiral, but one of the biggest highlights of the day was one of the largest insects of Europe – the Anatolian Predatory Bush Cricket.

The morning of the fifth day we spent in the area of Rupite, where we managed to see the Western Rock Nuthatch (8867th or so bird species in Peter's Life List). Here we also managed to add to our list Banded Darter dragonfly and Lesser Spotted Fritillary and Oriental Marbled Skipper from the butterflies. The rest of the day was dedicated to one of the best butterfly areas in Bulgaria – the Slavyanka Mountain and it certainly didn't disappointed us – Mountain Small White, Blue-spot Hairstreak, Lang's Short-tailed Blue, Large Blue, Meleager's Blue, Anomalous Blue, Phalakron Anomalous Blue, Chapmann's Blue, Phalakron Blue, Nettle-tree Butterfly, Southern Comma, Woodland Grayling, Balkan Grayling, Sandy Grizzled Skipper and many others. An Eastern Spectre dragonfly and a Bronze Glandular Bush Cricket also added to the great day in the mountain.

Most of our sixth day of the trip was dedicated to the southern part of the Pirin Mountain, where after a long search we managed to find one female Balkan Blue (probably one of the rarest species in Bulgaria). Of course many other target species were located here like Apollo, Great Sooty Satyr, Ottoman Brassy Ringlet, Bright-eyed Ringlet, Arran Brown, Cardinal Fritillary, Mazarine Blue, Escher's Blue, Turquoise Blue, Ripart's Anomalous Blue, Higgins's Anomalous Blue, False Eros Blue, Scarce Copper, etc.

We spent the last day of the trip in the Eastern part of the Rila Mountain, but as it was mostly cloudy, we decided to continue to the area around Sofia. We still managed to see some good species of butterflies like Dryad, Large Ringlet and Large Blue, as well as birds like Hazel Grouse, Crested Tit, Willow Tit, Firecrest, Spotted Nutcracker, Ring Ouzel (ssp. *alpestris*), etc. Sofia welcomed us with stormy clouds and rain, but at the end we managed to find a place with enough sun to keep butterflies and dragonflies on their wings. What first draw our attention here were the Eurasian Souseliks in the meadows nearby. Here we also saw Isabelline Wheatear, Woodchat Shrike, Cirl Bunting and European Serin. A short walk around a little lake produced Lesser Emperor, Dawny Emerald and Balkan Goldenring dragonflies and the long desired – Lulworth Skipper. An excellent finish of great trip!

**Southern Comma, Slavyanka Mountain****Balkan Blue, Pirin Mountain****List of Butterflies:**

1. Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon*);
2. Scarce Swallowtail (*Iphiclides podalirius*);
3. Apollo (*Parnassius apollo*);
4. Black-veined White (*Aporia crataegi*);
5. Large White (*Pieris brassicae*);
6. Small White (*Artogeia rapae*);
7. Southern Small White (*Artogeia manii*);
8. Mountain Small White (*Artogeia ergane*);
9. Green-veined White (*Artogeia napi*);
10. Bath White (*Pontia daplidicae*);
11. Clouded Yellow (*Colias croceae*);
12. Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni*);
13. Wood White (*Leptidea sinapis*);
14. Eastern Wood White (*Leptidea duponcheli*);
15. Sloe Hairstreak (*Satyrium acacia*);
16. Blue-spot Hairstreak (*Satyrium spini*);
17. White-letter Hairstreak (*Satyrium w-album*);
18. Small Copper (*Lycaena phlaeas*);
19. Scarce Copper (*Lycaena virgaureae*);
20. Sooty Copper (*Lycaena tityrus*);
21. Purple-shot Copper (*Lycaena alciphron*);
22. Lesser Fiery Copper (*Lycaena thersamon*);
23. Balkan Copper (*Lycaena candens*);
24. Lang's Short-tailed Blue (*Leptotes pirithous*);
25. Little Tiger Blue (*Tarucus balkanicus*);
26. Short-tailed Blue (*Everes argiades*);
27. Holly Blue (*Celastrina argiolus*);
28. Little Blue (*Cupido minimus*);
29. Dusky Large Blue (*Maculinea nausithous*);
30. Large Blue (*Maculinea arion*);
31. Chequered Blue (*Scolitantides orion*);
32. Eastern Baton Blue (*Pseudophilotes vicrama*);
33. Silver-studded Blue (*Plebejus argus*);
34. Brown Argus (*Aricia agestis*);
35. Balkan Blue (*Agriades dardanus*);

36. Mazarine Blue (*Cyaniris semiargus*);
37. Escher's Blue (*Polyommatus escheri*);
38. Chapman's Blue (*Polyommatus thersites*);
39. Anomalous Blue (*Polyommatus admetus*);
40. Ripart's Anomalous Blue (*Polyommatus ripartii*);
41. Phalakron Anomalous Blue (*Polyommatus eleniae*);
42. Higgin's Anomalous Blue (*Polyommatus nephoiptamenos*);
43. Turquoise Blue (*Polyommatus dorylas*);
44. Meleager's Blue (*Polyommatus daphnis*);
45. Adonis Blue (*Polyommatus bellargus*);
46. Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*);
47. Phalakron Blue (*Polyommatus andronicus*);
48. False Eros Blue (*Poliomatus eroides*);
49. Nettle-tree Butterfly (*Libythea celtis*);
50. Southern White Admiral (*Limenitis reducta*);
51. White Admiral (*Limenitis camilla*);
52. Common Glider (*Neptis sappho*);
53. Peacock Butterfly (*Inachis io*);
54. Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*);
55. Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*);
56. Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*);
57. Queen of Spain Fritillary (*Issoria lathonia*);
58. Comma Butterfly (*Polygonia c-album*);
59. Southern Comma (*Polygonia egea*);
60. Cardinal Fritillary (*Argynnis pandora*);
61. Silver-washed Fritillary (*Argynnis paphia*);
62. Dark Green Fritillary (*Argynnis aglaja*);
63. Marbled Fritillary (*Brenthis daphne*);
64. Balkan Fritillary (*Boloria graeca*);
65. Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (*Clossiana selene*);
66. Knapweed Fritillary (*Melitaea phoebe*);
67. Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea didyma*);
68. Lesser Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea trivia*);
69. Heath Fritillary (*Melitaea athalia*);
70. Nickerl's Fritillary (*Melitaea aurelia*);
71. Marbled White (*Melanargia galathea*);
72. Balkan Marbled White (*Melanargia larissa*);
73. Woodland Grayling (*Hipparchia fagi*);
74. Balkan Grayling (*Hipparchia senthes*);
75. The Hermit (*Chazara briseis*);
76. Great Sooty Satyr (*Satyrus ferula*);
77. Dryad (*Minois dryas*);
78. Great Banded Grayling (*Kanetisa circe*);
79. Arran Brown (*Erebia ligea*);
80. Large Ringlet (*Erebia euryale*);
81. Bulgarian Ringlet (*Erebia orientalis*);
82. Ottoman Brassy Ringlet (*Erebia ottomana*);
83. Bright-eyed Ringlet (*Erebia oeme*);
84. Dewy Ringlet (*Erebia pandrose*);
85. Meadow Brown (*Maniola jurtina*);
86. Oriental Meadow Brown (*Hyponephele lupine*);

87. Ringlet (*Aphantopus hyperantus*);
88. Gatekeeper (*Pyronia tithonus*);
89. Eastern Large Heath (*Coenonympha rhodopensis*);
90. Small Heath (*Coenonympha pamphilus*);
91. Pearly Heath (*Coenonympha arcania*);
92. Chestnut Heath (*Coenonympha glycerion*);
93. Speckled Wood (*Pararge aegeria*);
94. Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*);
95. Large Wall Brown (*Lasiommata maera*);
96. Northern Wall Brown (*Lasiommata petropolitana*);
97. Lattice Brown (*Kirinia roxelana*);
98. Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus malvae*);
99. Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus armoricanus*);
100. Sandy Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus cinarae*);
101. Dusky Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus cacaliae*);
102. Orbed Red Underwing Skipper (*Spialia orbifer*);
103. Mallow Skipper (*Carcharodus alceae*);
104. Tufted Marbled Skipper (*Carcharodus flocciferus*);
105. Oriental Marbled Skipper (*Carcharodus orientalis*);
106. Dingy Skipper (*Erynnis tages*);
107. Lulworth Skipper (*Thymelicus action*);
108. Essex Skipper (*Thymelicus lineola*);
109. Small Skipper (*Thymelicus sylvestris*);
110. Large Skipper (*Ochlodes sylvanus*);

List of Dragonflies:

1. Banded Demoiselle (*Calopteryx splendens*);
2. Beautiful Demoiselle (*Calopteryx virgo*);
3. Odalisque (*Epallage fatime*);
4. Southern Emerald Damselfly (*Lestes barbatus*);
5. Blue-tailed Damselfly (*Ischnura elegans*);
6. White-legged Damselfly (*Platycnemis pennipes*);
7. Migrant Hawker (*Aeschna mixta*);
8. Emperor Dragonfly (*Anax imperator*);
9. Lesser Emperor (*Anax parthenope*);
10. Vagrant Emperor (*Anax ephippiger*);
11. Eastern Spectre (*Caliaeschna microstigma*);
12. Green-eyed Hooktail (*Onychogomphus forcipatus*);
13. Bladetail (*Lindenia tetraphylla*);
14. Balkan Goldenring (*Cordulegaster heros*);
15. Sombre Goldenring (*Cordulegaster bidentate*);
16. Downy Emerald (*Cordulia aenea*);
17. Yellow-spotted Emerald (*Somatochlora flavomaculata*);
18. Broad-bodded Chaser (*Libellula depressa*);
19. Scarce Chaser (*Libellula fulva*);
20. Black-tailed Skimmer (*Orthetrum cancellatum*);
21. White-tailed Skimmer (*Orthetrum albistylum*);
22. Keeled Skimmer (*Orthetrum coerulescens*);
23. Southern Skimmer (*Orthetrum brunneum*);

24. Banded Darter (*Sympetrum pedemontanum*);
25. Ruddy Darter (*Sympetrum sanguineum*);
26. Red-veined Darter (*Sympetrum fonscolombii*);
27. Southern Darter (*Sympetrum meridionale*);
28. Scarlet Darter (*Crocothemis erythraea*);
29. Black Pennant (*Selysiothemis nigra*);



Black Pennant, Lake Kerkini