

France - Butterflies of La Brenne

Naturetrek Tour Report

3 - 8 July 2008



Group photo courtesy of Dave Pearson

Report compiled by Tony Williams



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Summary

This was the first Naturetrek trip to Brenne specifically for butterflies, in fact it was the first organised by any British tour operator. Despite unfavourable weather for most of the four days we saw a good variety of wildlife. In all we saw 52 of the 98 species of butterfly known to occur in Brenne and nearly all of the 52 were well seen by all participants. Highlights included good views of Purple Emperor and good numbers of rarities such as Large and Alcon Blues, and Woodland Brown. We also saw a good variety of species absent or very rare in Britain including: Marbled, Violet and Heath Fritillaries, Ilex Hairstreak, Oberthur's Grizzled and Mallow Skippers and many of my own favourite – Large Chequered Skipper. All participants found the travel arrangements, particularly the use of the train, easy and comfortable.

Day 1

Thursday 3rd July

The general opinion was that the train journey from London to Poitiers was comfortable and easy, and that the complementary breakfast on the Eurostar was very good.

The guide met up with the group in front of Poitiers station after the TGV connection from Lille had arrived on time, at 4.10pm. After a few short introductions we were soon in the minibus and on our way for the 1½-hour journey to our small family run 'Logis de France' hotel in Mézières-en-Brenne. We saw two male harriers as we drove along – one a definite Montagu's the other probably a Hen. Once in Brenne we stopped off for a quick look over a small lake with breeding Whiskered Terns and had a quick view of an adult Purple Heron. Our route took us past a few large lakes and alongside the Chérine National Nature Reserve, with various bird species identified from the minibus, including three Black Kites.

We arrived at the hotel around 6.15pm, found our rooms and had a pre-dinner drink. Then we enjoyed a very pleasant evening meal while talking about plans for the rest of the holiday. We stayed the night at the Bouef Couronné in Mézières-en-Brenne.

Day 2

Friday 4th July

We were all ready to leave at 9am, though the weather wasn't especially good, with much cloud cover. We drove a few kilometres to a field near the Chérine National Nature Reserve, which is grazed by Konik horses belonging to the LPO (French equivalent of the RSPB).

This provided us with the fresh horse droppings we wanted to collect. Here we soon saw our first butterflies of the trip: Small and Essex Skippers, Meadow Browns and Marbled White (which would prove to be the most numerous butterfly species during our trip).

From there we headed eastwards to the Forêt de Lancosme, stopping to look at various birds on the way; highlights were a pair of Black-winged Stilts, two Great White Egrets, the omnipresent Red-backed Shrike and Honey Buzzards.

Our next stop near a crossroad in the forest coincided with breaks in the cloud and butterflies started emerging. Here we watched several Marbled Fritillaries, a few Silver-washed Fritillaries, many Ringlets and a couple of White Admirals, among others. We then moved another few kilometres in able to place our horse droppings on two suitable spots on the ground, hoping that they might attract a few interesting butterflies. We then went for a short walk along a couple of woodland rides. The temperature was rising, the sun starting to show, and butterflies were becoming more abundant. So far, 2008 had been a late year for butterflies, which now proved to be to our advantage as we found some 15 Woodland Browns at what is a very late date for this species. Some were seen very well, and we were able to admire this very rare species at length and get good photo opportunities. Other species of interest were: Large Skipper, the exquisite yo-yoing Large Chequered Skipper and many Heath Fritillaries. We did, however, fail to have any decent views of either of the Purple Emperors (lack of sunshine), two species that occur commonly in the area.

We picnicked in the Forest before checking our dung piles (nothing much to show) and moving on to the western side of the Brenne. This was decided as the weather forecast for the next few days wasn't fantastic and it would be best to try and make sure of two special species during the trip, Large and Alcon Blues, while there was sun.

After half an hour's drive we arrived at Fonterland (near Pouligny-St-Pierre) and were welcomed by Denis Vandromme, the landowner and farmer who with his wife produces goat's cheeses and, as a sideline, manages his land for butterflies. Within minutes of arrival we were watching Large Blues and went on to see many more species such as Violet (or Weaver's) Fritillaries, Ilex Hairstreak, both Short-tailed and Provençal Short-tailed Blues, Brown Argus and Lulworth Skipper. We didn't stay for as long as we might have liked as we wanted time to look for Alcon Blue on our way back to the hotel.

After a 10-min drive we parked on the side of the road then walked across a couple of private meadows to arrive at the Alcon Blue meadow. After an initially frustrating search we managed to find and have good views of four Alcon Blues, the first to be seen this year. A pristine Swallowtail at the site was a bonus.

Once that was over it was a short drive to the hotel. We arrived at 6.05pm in time for a rest, shower and drink before another delicious evening meal.

Day 3

Saturday 5th July

This morning there was a planned pre-breakfast visit to the Cistude lake hide next to Chérine National Nature Reserve, a 5-min drive away.

We left the hotel just after 6.30am and saw a few interesting birds, including a family of Black-necked Grebes close-to and heard Savi's Warbler before returning for breakfast. The weather wasn't at all promising for butterflies with overcast skies and light, intermittent rain. The weather hadn't improved much by the time we left the hotel at 9am, so we headed for the La Touche LPO reserve near Lingé to look at nesting Whiskered Terns from a hide.

With clearing skies we then moved on to 'l'étang Massé' for a walk along a private path hoping to find Purple Hairstreak. We did eventually see a couple (well, two of us had glimpses!) along with good views of our first Walls and a Great Banded Grayling – both common here at the right time of year.

Then on to the Parc Naturel Regional de la Brenne Visitor Centre for our picnic, which today included a local speciality, carp goujons. We took a little time off to have a look round the centre and do a little shopping before driving the short distance to La Boudinière – a dry grassy limestone valley. Here, as the sun started to show, we found a variety of butterfly species, some new for the trip. Most interesting were Woodland Grayling (difficult to separate from Great Banded Grayling – also present) and Berger's Clouded Yellow and although not a butterfly a very beautiful insect, the Common Ascalapha *Libelloides longicordis*, was seen and admired on several occasions by all. We then moved to an area of very dry pasture nearby without much to see until on the way back to the minibus we found, caught for a good look, and released an Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper.

A quick drive down the road in the late afternoon didn't allow us to see the expected Bee-eaters, so we then turned back for the hotel, a 20-min drive away, getting back at 6.15pm.

Day 4

Sunday 6th July

Still the weather was against us with overcast skies and wind, with an occasional sunny break in the clouds. We left the hotel at 9am and headed for a complex of public footpaths near the Etang Vieux, near St-Gemme to the northwest of the Forêt de Lancosme, some 15 minutes away. We were particularly hoping to find an early Dryad – another species that doesn't occur in Britain, it's usually difficult to find on the continent but can be relatively common in this part of Brenne, but the weather was against us. We did have a glimpse of a large brown butterfly disappearing over the hedge that may well have been a female of this species though. The walk produced many of the commoner species: Wood White, Marbled White, Ringlet, Meadow Brown, Speckled Wood, a Short-tailed Blue in very good condition and our first and only Holly Blue of the trip. Birds of interest included Honey Buzzard.

We again picnicked at St-Sulpice in the Forêt de Lancosme and spent the greater part of the afternoon on a private estate near Vendoeuvres, concentrating on the Etang Lion. We had some very good views of Black-necked Grebes with young, more Honey Buzzards and our only European Pond Tortoises of the trip (the Brenne is the most important site in France for this declining species).

Butterflies weren't abundant but we found an oak with Purple Hairstreaks showing well and various commoner species. A low-circling Osprey over our heads provided some interest; that there wasn't more is witness to this species' spectacular increase in recent years.

We arrived back at the hotel about 6pm, and had some time to ourselves before evening meal at 7.30pm. After the meal a few of us drove the short distance to the Visitor Centre at Chérine National Nature Reserve to set up the moth trap – the weather forecast being for overcast skies without rain.

Day 5

Monday 7th July

We left at 9am and had a look at the night's catch. We had quite a few species of moth (list included) the largest of which were Elephant Hawk-moth (several) and a Goat Moth. It was windy and overcast with sunny intervals so it was decided to visit woodland clearings where we and the butterflies would have protection from the wind.

We drove back to Fonterland to spend the rest of the morning looking at areas we hadn't investigated three days earlier. This proved very productive and, between heavy showers, we found a few more Large Blues, our only Clouded yellow of the trip, two Dark-green Fritillaries, a Mallow Skipper and an elusive Map Butterfly (all but the last species seen by everybody) – four species to add to the trip's list, which was now approaching 50 species.

We picnicked in a cosy purpose-built shelter in Lingé before a quick visit to the nearby La Touche reserve for another quick look at the Whiskered Terns. With more and more sun, but an ever-present strongish wind, we decided that once again the Forêt de Lancosme would be our best bet for something new and interesting. After much searching we eventually had very good long views of what for many in the group was the highlight of the trip, a splendid purple Emperor; we eventually saw three at the same spot. This was closely followed by a Southern White Admiral, which proved to be the final addition to our butterfly list.

With a little time left we made another short stop at the Dryad site on the way back to Mézières, but without any luck in finding the species. We arrived back at the hotel a little after 6.15pm.

Day 6

Tuesday 8th July

We left the hotel just after 9am, had a short stop at a supermarket in order to buy things for lunch, and arrived early in Poitiers at around 11.20am. The TGV to Lille for the London-bound Eurostar left on time at 12.50pm.

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Species Lists

Key to the following list: √ = at least one individual (no exact count) seen during the day; √√ = more than √ seen during the day (number depending on rarity/interest of species); a few = between 1 and 10 (no exact count); many = seen on several occasions during the day; h = heard only during the day.

Butterflies

	Common name	Scientific name	July					
			3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus armoricanus</i>			1			
2	Mallow Skipper	<i>Carcharodus alceae</i>					1	
3	Large Chequered Skipper	<i>Heteropterus morpheus</i>		2	a few		2	
4	Dingy Skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>		3	2		1	
5	Lulworth Skipper	<i>Thymelicus acteon</i>		2				
6	Essex Skipper	<i>T. lineola</i>		a few	√	√	√	
7	Small Skipper	<i>T. flavus</i>		√√	√	√	√	
8	Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes venatus</i>		a few	a few	a few	a few	
9	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>		1				
10	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		2	√	√	1	
11	Small White	<i>P. rapae</i>		1	√	√	1	
12	Green-veined White	<i>P. napi</i>		2	√	a few	a few	
13	Black-veined White	<i>Aporia crataegi</i>		2		2	1	
14	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>					1	
15	Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>C. australis</i>			10			
16	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>				2	1	
17	Wood White	<i>Leptidea sinapsis</i> *		√	√	√	a few	
18	Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura iris</i>					3	
19	Lesser Purple Emperor	<i>A. ilia</i>				1 ?		
20	Southern White Admiral	<i>Ladoga reducta</i>					1	
21	White Admiral	<i>L. camilla</i>		a few	√	3	1	
22	Comma	<i>Ploygonia c-album</i>		2		1	√	
23	Map Butterfly	<i>Araschnia levana</i>					1	
24	Painted Lady	<i>Cynthia cardui</i>				1		
25	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		a few	a few	a few	a few	
26	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>		1	√	√	a few	
27	Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>		a few	√	√	a few	2
28	Dark-green Fritillary	<i>Mesoacidalia aglaja</i>					2	
29	Marbled Fritillary	<i>Brenthis daphne</i>		√√	√	a few	a few	
30	Violet Fritillary	<i>Clossiana dia</i>		a few	√		2	
31	Heath Fritillary	<i>Mellicta athalia</i>		√		1	1	
32	Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>		√√	√√	√√	√√	
33	Woodland/Rock Grayling	<i>Hipparchia fagi/alcyone</i>			15			
34	Dryad	<i>Minois dryas</i>				1 ♀ ?		
35	Great Banded Grayling	<i>Brintesia circe</i>		1	a few			
36	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		√√	√√	√√	√√	
37	Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia cecilia</i>			1		1	
38	Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>		√	1	√	a few	
39	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		2	√	√	a few	
40	Pearly Heath	<i>C. arcania</i>		a few	√	√	a few	
41	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		1		2	2	
42	Wall Brown	<i>Lasioommata megera</i>			2			
43	Woodland Brown	<i>Lopinga achine</i>		15			3	
44	Purple Hairstreak	<i>Quercusia quercus</i>			1	a few	1	

	Common name	Scientific name	July						
			3	4	5	6	7	8	
45	Ilex Hairstreak	<i>Nordmannia ilicis</i>		2	√			2	
46	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		1			4	4	
47	Short-tailed Blue	<i>Everes argiades</i>		2			1		
48	Provençal Short-tailed Blue	<i>E. alcetas</i>		1	1				
49	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>					1		
50	Large Blue	<i>Maculinea arion</i>		20				3	
51	Alcon Blue	<i>M. alcon</i>		4					
52	Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>		1	2			2	
53	Adonis Blue	<i>Lysandra bellargus</i>		1	√√			1	
54	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus menelaos</i>		1	√			2	

Birds

The main aim of our four-day stay in the Brenne was finding butterflies. Many of our bird observations were made by chance, without making a special effort to find or see them well. Thus quite a few species were heard but not seen and few counts were made.

1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	1		√	1			
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		2	√	√	√		
3	Black-necked Grebe	<i>P. nigricollis</i>	1		√	a few			
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		√	√			√	
5	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		4	1				
6	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		√	√	√	√		
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>		√	√			√	
8	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		2	√				
9	Grey Heron	<i>A. cinerea</i>		√	√	√	√	√	
10	Purple Heron	<i>A. purpurea</i>	1	2	√	√	√		
11	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	√	√	√	√	√		
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		√	√	√	√		
13	Gadwall	<i>A. strepera</i>					10		
14	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	
15	Tufted Duck	<i>A. fuligula</i>	√		√	√			
16	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	1
17	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	1						
18	Hen Harrier	<i>C. cyaneus</i>	1 ?						
19	Marsh Harrier	<i>C. aeruginosus</i>		3	√	1	1		
20	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1				
21	Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	√	6	√	a few			
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	√	√	a few	√		
23	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		1					
24	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>				1			
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	√	√	√	√	√	2
26	Hobby	<i>F. subbuteo</i>		2		1	1		
27	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		√				1	
28	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		√	√	√	√	√	
29	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	
30	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		2					
31	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	√	√		√			
32	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>							
33	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
34	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	30	many	many	many	many	many	
35	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	
36	Feral Pigeon	<i>C. livia</i>			√				

	Common name	Scientific name	July					
			3	4	5	6	7	8
37	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√
38	Turtle Dove	<i>S. turtur</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√
39	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1				
40	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√
41	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				1		
42	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1	2				
43	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		h	√	h	h	
44	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>	√	√				
45	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>D. medius</i>		h				
46	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>D. minor</i>			1		h	
47	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		√	√	√	√	
48	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		1				
49	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		√		√		
50	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√
51	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	√	√	√	√	√	
52	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>	1	1	√	1	1	
53	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	a few		√	√	√	
54	Grey Wagtail	<i>M. cinerea</i>		2	√	√	√	
55	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	h	h		√		
56	Dunnock	<i>Prunela modularis</i>				1		
57	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		√		√		
58	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>				h		
59	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	a few	a few	√	√	√	√
60	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	a few	a few	√	√	√	
61	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		√		√	√	
62	Song Thrush	<i>T. philomelos</i>	h			h		
63	Mistle Thrush	<i>T. viscivorus</i>		1		a few		
64	Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>			h			
65	Grasshopper Warbler	<i>L. naevia</i>	h			h		
66	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		a few	√	√	√	
67	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			h	h	h	
68	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>			√			
69	Reed Warbler	<i>A. scirpaceus</i>		h	√			
70	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>		a few		3		
71	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>		h				
72	Whitethroat	<i>S. communis</i>	√	√	√	√	√	
73	Blackcap	<i>S. atricapilla</i>	√	√	√	√	√	
74	Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>		h				
75	Chiffchaff	<i>P. collybita</i>	h	h	√	h	√	
76	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>				h		
77	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	1	1	√	h		
78	Marsh Tit	<i>Parus palustris</i>				4	h	
79	Blue Tit	<i>P. caeruleus</i>		1	√	√		
80	Great Tit	<i>P. major</i>			√	√	√	
81	Coal Tit	<i>P. ater</i>				1		
82	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	√	√		√	√	
83	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		1				
84	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		h	h	2	h	
85	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	√	√	√	√	√	
86	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	√	√	√	√	√	

	Common name	Scientific name	July					
			3	4	5	6	7	8
87	Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>		2	√	h		
88	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√
89	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		√		√	1	
90	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		√	√	√	√	
91	Carrion Crow	<i>C. corone</i>		√	√	√	√	
92	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√
93	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		√	√	√	√	
94	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	√	√		a few	a few	
95	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	√	√		√	√	
96	Goldfinch	<i>C. carduelis</i>	√	√		√	√	
97	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>			√	√	√	
98	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		√	√	a few		
99	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		1	√		√	
100	Cirl bunting	<i>E. cirlus</i>			√2		a few	