

# France - Butterflies of La Brenne

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 7 July 2009

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Marsh Gentian with Alcon Blue eggs & caterpillar



Hummingbird Hawk Moth



Large Chequered Skipper



Woodland Brown

Report and images compiled by Tony Williams

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## Summary

Following on from last year's successful butterfly trip to La Brenne, Naturetrek's second attempt was probably even better, thanks mainly to much better weather in 2009. We had blue skies and sun for the first three days; fine weather with a few showers during the last three that didn't interfere with finding butterflies but meant for less muggy, more comfortable conditions.

We saw nearly the same number of species of Butterfly, 50, as in 2008 but most in much larger numbers. Highlights included an obliging Purple Emperor settling for long periods on two client's shoes and very good views of good numbers of other target species: Alcon and Large Blues, Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail, and Great Banded and Woodland Graylings. We also saw many species absent from or very rare in Britain including: Marbled and Weaver's (or Violet) Fritillaries, Short-tailed and Provencal Short-tailed Blues, Ilex Hairstreak, Mallow and Large Chequered Skipper.

Butterflies weren't the only points of interest. A moth trapping session allowed us all to see a variety of species up close. Bird highlights included good views of a Sociable Plover, a small Bee-eater colony, a few sightings of a fly-bye Little Bittern and both Whiskered Terns and Black-necked Grebes with young.

## Day 1

### Thursday 2nd July

The general opinion was that the train journey from London to Poitiers was comfortable, and the TGV connection from Lille arrived on time at Poitiers at 16h10. The group was met on the platform by Naturetrek's local guide, after a few short introductions we were quite quickly into the two minibuses with luggage and on our way. During the hour and a half journey to our hotel in La Brenne we passed through some pleasant countryside and the picturesque village of Angle-sur-Anglin. We stopped once to admire Painted Ladies on lavender in front of a small village's "mairie" and noted 2 harriers as we drove along, one a definite Montagu's.

As we arrived in La Brenne we had quick views of some Whiskered Terns and flying Purple Herons (species we would see a lot of latter) over some of the area's many lakes. We arrived at our small family run "Logis de France" hotel in Mézières-en-Brenne just after 6 o'clock, found our rooms and had a drink before a very pleasant evening meal whilst talking about plans for the rest of the holiday. Night at the Bouef Couronné in Mézières-en-Brenne (as were all five nights).

## Day 2

Friday 3rd July

It was decided to go to Lancosme forest today with the hope of finding a few late Woodland Browns (a rare European habitat directive species) along with many other interesting species. We travelled via some minor roads searching for a Sociable Plover that had recently been in the company of Lapwings in newly harvested hay meadows not far from the hotel. No luck with the plover so we drove on into the western edge of the Lancosme forest; here we found large numbers of many different species of butterfly feeding on the bramble flowers in the sun– there were so many it was difficult to know what to concentrate on first. After nearly an hour we'd all seen, and had good views of : Marbled and Silver-washed Fritillaries, Marbled Whites, Painted-ladies, Great-banded Graylings, Pearly Heaths and White Admirals among some commoner species ; a Map and a Dingy Skipper proved more elusive and weren't seen by all. A pair of Honey Buzzards circling quite low overhead seemed almost to make decisions on which way to look even harder to make.

We moved on a few kilometres to look in the Saint Sulpice area of the forest. We quickly found a very obliging Woodland Brown, one of the Brenne's specialities, that stayed settled on a bramble for all to admire. Other species of note along the first forest track we explored included many Heath Fritillaries, more Pearly Heaths, quantities of Ringlets and the lively Great Chequered Skipper – a species we encountered frequently during our stay in Brenne.

We had a picnic and rest at the Chapel Saint Sulpice clearing, in the centre of Lancosme forest. Shortly after leaving out picnic site we made a stop on one of the many forest tracks in the area for a butterfly in front of the vehicles, identified by a guide as a Southern White Admiral it unfortunately flew off before most participants had had a look. The stop did provide the chance to catch and have a good look at Large Chequered Skipper. Whilst having a close look at the skipper a large butterfly was seen to settle on the track we'd just driven down only 50 yards away. We all slowly walked towards what proved to be an area of damp mud and on it a splendid male Purple Emperor. We all had very close views as it settled on two participant's shoes for long spells. Fantastic!

After a little longer looking along the forest tracks without anything new we decided to head off back in the direction of the hotel. We made a stop to have a short walk on a private estate (Naturetrek is the only tour company to have permitted access to this estate) seeing many butterflies we'd already seen during the day. This allowed us to remind ourselves of the relevant features when identifying some of the more difficult species (Heath and Marbled Fritillaries, Small and Essex Skippers...) and to add Speckled Wood (continental variant) and Clouded Yellow to our list for the day. It was now time to return to the hotel, we did so using the back roads and were rewarded with splendid views of the Sociable Plover. It was in company of many Lapwings, its main distinguishing features, whilst on the ground and in flight, were seen by all. From the plover it was then a five minute drive to the hotel, once there, there was plenty of time available for a wash and drink and relax before doing the day's log and having an enjoyable evening meal.

## Day 3

Saturday 4th July

Today we went to the western side of the Brenne, the main aim to visit chalk meadows in the hope of finding butterfly species typical of this type of habitat and that we hadn't seen yesterday. We left the hotel at 9 o'clock as usual with a first stop at the "La Touche" reserve near Lingé, it belongs to the LPO (France's Birdlife International representative) and managed for a remarkable range of rare species that occur and breed there. We made a short visit to a private hide to have a quick look at the Whiskered Tern colony just in front of it, many of their small floating nests with small chicks. The only other bird species of note was Purple Heron; the reserve has one of Brenne's largest colonies.

We didn't dawdle as the sky was clear and it was already getting warm; butterflies were starting to move. Our first butterfly site, the chalk hillside at La Boudinière, wasn't more than twenty minutes drive away; conditions were looking good. The hillside provided us with most of the species we were looking for; Great Banded and Woodland Graylings (Still not quite sure if we looking at Woodland Grayling or Rock Grayling [only separated by close examination of the Julien organs] – size would appear to indicate Woodland) and Adonis Blues were numerous, we were able to compare the first two similar species at our ease. Most of the Adonis Blues were worn individuals not readily distinguishable from the widespread Common Blue. A very smart Swallowtail on the way back to the minibuses was caught, examined and quickly released, a nice addition to the list.

Time was getting on and we still had much to do. We stopped at a very well kept garden on the way to the picnic site where the abundant valerians had attracted many butterflies; of particular interest to us were Scarce Swallowtail (it's name apparently originating from it's colour being "scarcer" than that of the Swallowtail), Dark Green Fritillary and Dingy Skipper.

We then moved on for our lunch stop, on the banks of the Creuse at Lurais. There were a few butterflies about but nearly everybody gave them a miss and opted to take time over the picnic and have a rest. It was again hot and sunny. The plan was to spend the afternoon at a nearby farm. On the way we made a quick deviation through Tournon St. Martin to look at a small Bee-eater colony in someone's front garden (albeit a large garden) readily visible from the pavement; we had good views of several birds both perched and flying. Ten minutes latter we were at the farm where the owners gain a living by producing a local speciality, the pyramid-shaped Pouligny St.-Pierre goat's cheese, and as a side line own a small gite; Denis the farmer is very interested in butterflies and moths and as a consequence much of his land is managed especially for them. We parked the minibuses in the farmyard, found Denis and within 5 minutes were admiring a flourishing Large Blue colony in a nearby meadow. This is one species we particularly hoped to see, part of the reason for selecting this time of year for the trip. We saw many other species during our afternoon's walk around the farm, some such as Lulworth Skipper, Brown Argus and Violet (or Weaver's) Fritillary being other new species for the trip. It was very hot and we took things slowly, even so it was good to get back to the hotel for a well deserved shower and rest before log and evening meal.

## Day 4

Sunday 5th July

Still looking for interesting species that were new for the trip, the day was to be spent in the central part of Brenne; a day of very little time in vehicles. There'd been a little rain but as we left the hotel at 9 o'clock the skies had cleared with the promise of a nice day, a little less muggy than the previous two days.

The first stop was at the "Maison de la Nature" just 5 minutes drive away. Here we walked the 300 yards to the Cistude hide (Naturetrek have permission to use the hide outside public opening times) lake, arriving before the public opening at 10, and were rewarded with fly- by views of Little Bittern, the species we'd been hoping to see. As the day warmed up it was time to think of butterflies and as planned we drove the few kilometres to Lingé and parked to walk to the small meadow at the "back" and private part of the "La Touche" reserve. Our target species, the Alcon Blue, is a close relative of the Large Blue with a similarly complicated life-style and a rare species with a very restricted range in western Europe. On the mile walk to the meadow we saw a few butterflies including Mallow Skipper.

Once in the meadow we soon found many Marsh Gentians, the Alcon Blue caterpillar's food plant, coming into flower with most of the opening flower-buds dotted with the minute bright white eggs of the butterfly. Success! There were a good number of adults about and indeed one participant even managed to photograph a female as she was laying...

After the walk back to the minibuses it was lunch time; we had a picnic at a well appointed picnic site in the small village of Lingé nearby. We then had a quick look at the nearby Purais Lake (another LPO reserve) and adjacent meadows. No new butterflies here, but we had a chance of seeing another Alcon Blue site and Marsh Gentians with their eggs. The same area had many Marsh Helleborines in flower and the lake several interesting birds including Black-necked Grebe; this lake is one of the most important breeding sites for the species in Brenne, which has nationally important numbers.

We then drove a few kilometres to the "Communaux de Rosnay", an area of protected semi-natural meadows managed principally for birds such as Red-backed Shrikes and for butterflies, particularly Marsh Fritillary. The site can be very good for fritillaries but there was nothing particularly special flying during our visit, we did see our first Gatekeeper of the trip and had good views of Short-tiled Blue. We went back to the hotel via the Maison de la Nature in order to set up the moth trap. We arrived back at the hotel a little before 6pm.

## Day 5

Monday 6th July

We left the hotel about 9am to drive the few kilometres to the Maison de la Nature and have a look at what we'd caught in the moth trap; the catch turned out to be rather disappointing with only 11 species, the more colourful being Privet and Elephant Hawk moths. Whilst some of us were identifying moths others had a quick walk round to the Cistude hide with the hoped for Little Bittern showing 3 or 4 times during the ½ hour of watching.

From there we went on to the Lancosme forest, hoping to find one or two species we hadn't seen previously during the trip. We did have brief views of a Purple Emperor but unfortunately couldn't find the hoped for Lesser Purple Emperor.

We had our picnic at the Maison du Parc visitor centre where there was a little time to have a look round the boutique for those who wanted. After this leisurely lunch we moved off to investigate that part of "Denis" farm we hadn't seen two days ago. We spent most of the afternoon exploring an open woodland site, looking at a massive field-full of thistles on the way. These had been specially kept with butterflies in mind, the few rides cut through them allowing easy access that allowed closer views of many species.

During our visit we added Provencal Short-tailed Blue to our trip list (that made it 50) and saw several other interesting species including Large Blue again and another Mallow Skipper.

We should have been back at the hotel just after 6 if it hadn't been for the presence of an interesting looking moth seen feeding on some roadside buddleia as we drove past. There was a little manoeuvring with the minibuses before we were able to make a close inspection of the bushes on foot. However, it was all worthwhile when a Broad-bordered Bee-hawk moth finally showed itself, albeit 9 feet up feeding on the top-most flowers of the buddleia.

Our return to the hotel was therefore a little later than had been planned but there was still plenty of time to get washed and changed before drinks and log and another pleasant evening meal.

## Day 6

Tuesday 7th July

Up early this morning for breakfast before leaving the hotel just after 7am for the hour and a half's drive to the railway station in Poitiers. The drive went without incident so that we were at the station in comfortable time to catch the train back home.

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## Species Lists

### Butterflies

	Common name	Scientific name	July				
			2	3	4	5	6
1	Mallow skipper	<i>Carcharodus alceae</i>				1	1
2	Large chequered skipper	<i>Heteropterus morpheus</i>		3			
3	Dingy skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>			3	3	
4	Lulworth skipper	<i>Thymelicus acteon</i>			1		
5	Essex skipper	<i>T. lineola</i>		3	1	2	
6	Small skipper	<i>T. flavus</i>		6	3	15	9
7	Large skipper	<i>Ochlodes venatus</i>		3	6	5	8
8	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>			2	2	
9	Scarce swallowtail	<i>Iphiclides podalirius</i>		4	1	3	
10	Large white	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		4	3	3	16
11	Small white	<i>P. rapae</i>		5	10	2	2
12	Green-veined white	<i>P. napi</i>		5	2		
13	Clouded yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>		1	7	14	17
14	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>		5	6	3	6
15	Wood white	<i>Leptidea sinapsis</i>		20+	30	6	10
16	Purple emperor	<i>Apatura iris</i>		3			
17	Southern white admiral	<i>Ladoga reducta</i>		1			
18	White admiral	<i>L. camilla</i>		15	10	2	4
19	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>		3	6	2	
20	Map butterfly	<i>Araschnia levana</i>		2	4	2	1
21	Painted lady	<i>Cynthia cardui</i>	✓	c.90	100+	c.40	c.30
22	Red admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		4	3		
23	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>		6	9	1	6
24	Silver-washed fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>		30	15		10
25	Dark-green fritillary	<i>Mesoacidalia aglaja</i>			2	3	2
26	Marbled fritillary	<i>Brenthis daphne</i>		4	15		8
27	Violet fritillary	<i>Clossiana dia</i>			3		
28	Heath fritillary	<i>Mellicta athalia</i>		20	15		5
29	Marbled white	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>		c.50	c.100	c.70	c.80
30	Woodland/Rock grayling	<i>Hipparchia fagi/alcyone</i>			7		
31	Great banded grayling	<i>Brintesia circe</i>		4	8		
32	Meadow brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		40	60	c.40	c.50
33	Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia cecilia</i>				3	
34	Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>		c.50	c.10	4+	c.25
35	Small heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		10	3	6	2
36	Pearly heath	<i>C. arcania</i>		3			
37	Speckled wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		4	1	2	2
38	Wall brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>			2		
39	Woodland brown	<i>Lopinga achine</i>		2			
40	Ilex hairstreak	<i>Nordmannia ilicis</i>		1	1		
41	Small copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>			2	2	1
42	Short-tailed blue	<i>Everes argiades</i>			1	2	
43	Provençal short-tailed blue	<i>E. alcetas</i>					5
44	Holly blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>			4		
45	Small blue	<i>Cupido minimus</i>			3	1	
46	Large blue	<i>Maculinea arion</i>			20		6
47	Alcon blue	<i>M. alcon</i>				20+	

	Common name	Scientific name	July				
			2	3	4	5	6
48	Brown argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>			2		2
49	Adonis blue	<i>Lysandra bellargus</i>			10+		
50	Common blue	<i>Polyommatus menelaos</i>		6	2	10	4

## Moths

1	Burnet sp.	<i>Zygaena sp.</i>		6	4	15	c.15
2	Cinnabar	<i>Tyria trifolii</i>			2	10	
3	Broad-bordered bee hawkmoth	<i>Hemaris fuciformis</i>					1
4	Hummingbird hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>		1	3	10+	c.19
5	Forester moth	<i>Adscita statures</i>		2			
6	Silver Y	<i>Autographa gamma</i>			4		
7	Jersey tiger	<i>Euplagia quadripunctaria</i>				1	
8	Clouded border	<i>Lomaspilis marginata</i>					2
9	Lunar yellow-underwing	<i>Noctua orbona</i>					1
10	Elephant hawkmoth	<i>Deilephila elpenor</i>					5
11	Privet hawkmoth	<i>Sphinx ligustri</i>					1
12	Lacky	<i>Malcosoma neustria</i>					2
13	Brown-tail	<i>Europroctis chrysorrhoea</i>					3
14	Yellow-tail	<i>Europroctis similis</i>					1
15	Balsam carpet	<i>Xanthorhoe biriviata</i>					1
16	White-line dart	<i>Euxoa tritici</i>					1
17	Cosmopolitan	<i>Mythimna loreyi</i>					1
18	Marbled coronet	<i>Hadena confusa</i>					1

## Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	July						
			2	3	4	5	6	7	
1	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		6	12	10	6		
2	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		3		6			
3	Black-necked grebe	<i>P. nigricollis</i>				6			
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		4		9	15		
5	Little bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>				1	1		
6	Black-crowned night heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>				1	1		
7	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		5		6	43		
8	Little egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>				4	5		
9	Great white egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		1			1		
10	Grey heron	<i>A. cinerea</i>	3	7	3	15	10+	✓	
11	Purple Heron	<i>A. purpurea</i>	2	2	6	9	4	✓	
12	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		3	3	c.120	5		
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2	3	4	30	6		
14	Gadwall	<i>A. strepera</i>			9	20			
15	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				c.480	20+		
16	Tufted Duck	<i>A. fuligula</i>				40	20		
17	Black kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		3	2	14	7		
18	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	1		2				
19	Marsh harrier	<i>C. aeruginosus</i>			1	3	1		
20	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1		1			
21	Honey buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		1	1	1	2		
22	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	4	4	6	8		
23	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	2	1	2	3		



	Common name	Scientific name	July						
			2	3	4	5	6	7	
24	Hobby	<i>F. subbuteo</i>					1		
25	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	1						
26	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					1		
27	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			3	10	2		
28	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			10+	c.70	20		
29	Sociable plover	<i>Vanellus gregarius</i>		1					
30	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		40+					
31	Black-headed gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
32	Whiskered tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	3	11	32	60	18	✓	
33	Wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	10	40+	70+	30+	30+		
34	Stock dove	<i>C. oenas</i>	2		3				
35	Feral pigeon	<i>C. livia</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		
36	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	c.15	20	20	40+	10+		
37	Turtle dove	<i>S. turtur</i>		7	7	10	9		
38	Common swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	33	60	80	100+	80+		
39	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1				
40	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>			7				
41	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		1		1			
42	Green woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	1		2				
43	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>		1					
44	Middle spotted woodpecker	<i>D. medius</i>		2					
45	Lesser spotted woodpecker	<i>D. minor</i>		1	1				
46	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		2		9	3		
47	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	c.50	c.70	100+	90+	60+	✓	
48	House martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	c.20	c.40	60+	40+	20+	✓	
49	Tree pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		1	5	2	2		
50	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1	1	2	2	1		
51	Grey wagtail	<i>M. cinerea</i>			2				
52	Yellow (Blue-headed) Wagtail	<i>M. flava (flava)</i>				1			
53	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		4	6	4	1		
54	Dunnock	<i>Prunela modularis</i>		2	1	5			
55	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		4	6	3	2		
56	Black redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1	1	3	1	1	1	
57	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		7	4	6	8		
58	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		5	9	12	4		
59	Song thrush	<i>T. philomelos</i>		1	4		2		
60	Mistle thrush	<i>T. viscivorus</i>					2		
61	Savi's warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>				1			
62	Grasshopper warbler	<i>L. naevia</i>				1			
63	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>				2			
64	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		1	1	3	5		
65	Reed warbler	<i>A. scirpaceus</i>			2	4	2		
66	Melodious warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>		2	2				
67	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>				4			
68	Blackcap	<i>S. atricapilla</i>		10+	15+	20+	20+		
69	Bonelli's warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>		5					
70	Chiffchaff	<i>P. collybita</i>		15	10	18	5		
71	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		2	4	7	2		
72	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>		3	1	4	4		
73	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			2	3			
74	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		1			2		

	Common name	Scientific name	July					
			2	3	4	5	6	7
75	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			1			
76	Short-toed treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		2	2			
77	Red-backed shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	1	3		4	4	
78	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	5	20		33	15+	
79	Golden oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>		2	2	1	1	
80	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		2	6	10	5	
81	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	1	4	2	4	2	
82	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		30		8	9	
83	Carrion crow	<i>C. corone</i>		10	20	15	6	
84	Rook	<i>C. frugilegus</i>			5			
85	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	8	14	33	40+	60+	
86	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>					1	
87	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	4	30+	40+	20+	20+	
88	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	4	5	6	1	2	1
89	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>			2	3	4	
90	Goldfinch	<i>C. carduelis</i>		2	4	9		
91	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		1	1	3	2	
92	Corn bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	1	1		4	1	
93	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		1	2	5	2	
94	Cirl bunting	<i>E. ciricu</i>		1	2		1	
95	Reed bunting	<i>E. schoeniclus</i>		1				