

Butterflies of Morocco's High Atlas Mountains

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 - 11 June 2006

Report compiled by Alan Miller



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour leaders: Alan Miller (leader)
 Tom Wigglesworth (co-leader)
 Mohammed Zaki (local guide)

Tour participants: Ruth Swithenbank
 Peter Vanstone
 Ranjit Gill
 Terry Loades
 Marian Loades
 June Feaster
 Derek Brown
 Cathy Brown

Day 1

Sunday 4th June

Marrakech Airport to La Bergerie, Merigha near Ouirgane, Morocco

Clear blue sky and no wind as the first group arrived at the airport. The sun was beginning to set. The temperature at the hotel at 10pm was 22 deg C. The second group arrived at the hotel at 2am to a clear, starry sky and temperature still 16 deg C

At 7.30pm Alan and Mohammed met the first six tour members at Marrakech Airport after their arrival on a British Airways flight from London Heathrow. After introductions the group went outside to their transport, two Toyota Landcruisers. From the car park Pallid Swifts circled in the evening sky and Spotless Starlings headed for the lamp posts for their roost spot.

Night fell quickly and most of the hour-long journey was in darkness. The group arrived at La Bergerie at 9pm for their week-long stay. Upon arrival they were greeted by Abdul, the hotel manager and shown to their rooms which were all located together off a central courtyard.

After a quick freshener the group convened on the restaurant terrace where they met the owner, Françoise, then enjoyed a late dinner of traditional Moroccan fayre including Lamb Tagine. After the meal Alan talked over plans for the week, once being interrupted by a Moorish Gecko which appeared on the wall behind him.

The early group retired to bed whilst Alan waited for the later arrivals, Derek and Cathy, who were travelling on a Royal Air Maroc flight with Tom from London Gatwick. Their flight landed at 11.30pm and after a taxi transfer, arrived at La Bergerie at 2am. Food was declined and after a drink everyone retired to bed.

Day 2

Monday 5th June

Morning La Bergerie to Oued (river) Nfis. Afternoon Azzaden valley east of Tassa Ouirgane

Clear blue cloudless sky with little wind. 38 deg C at noon; still 34 deg C at 5pm

The group met for breakfast at 8am. Formal introductions were made and Alan updated Derek and Cathy on plans for the week. La Bergerie is set in 6 hectares of grounds, mainly cultivated, and plants in flower were alive with butterflies, the commonest being Bath White, Small White and Painted Lady.

At 8.45am the group set off for a walk from the grounds through Marigha village towards Oued Nfis and the local Salt works. Along the roadside vegetation were good numbers of Atlas Blue, African Babul Blue and Small Copper together with the larger, impressive Scarce Swallowtail and Cleopatra. At the first riverbed crossing was a large area of water containing Marsh Frogs and countless tadpoles with Red Darters hawking over the water surface. Continuing on the group had excellent views of some birds including Woodchat Shrike, Spotted Flycatcher and Common Bulbul.

After passing the Salt works the group walked a little way uphill to a verge where the roadside flowers were covered in Spotted Fritillary and Bath White butterflies. Also found were the caterpillars of Striped, Small Elephant and Bedstraw Hawkmoths.

By this time it was noon, the temperature 38 deg C and the group wilting so the transport was summoned to take everyone back to La Bergerie for a sandwich lunch and a rest.

At 2.30pm half the party decided to stay round the pool at La Bergerie whilst the others travelled to Tessa Ouirgane and headed on foot along the track to the Azzaden Valley. Part-way along the track a past rock fall across the path caused two members to return to the vehicles whilst the remainder continued to the riverbed where they added Red Admiral and Large White. Also False Ilex Hairstreak was identified after being netted by Tom.

On the return walk the group stopped at the viewing platform overlooking the Mouflon Reserve but unfortunately no Barbary Sheep were seen, although a female Atlas Agama lizard was spied on a close rock and a Blue Rock Thrush viewed through Alan's telescope.

At 5.15pm it was still 34 deg C as the group returned to the transport and then back to La Bergerie.

The whole group met at 7pm for a log call and to talk over the day's events. An enormous Rhinoceros Beetle joined us on the adjacent wall. We then moved to our table on the terrace and enjoyed an evening meal of Vegetable Soup, Lamb Tagine and Fresh Fruit Salad. Whilst eating we were entertained by more Moorish Geckos in the restaurant coach lamps, and Mauritanian Toads at the bottom of the wall next to us.

By 9.30pm everyone had retired to their rooms.

Day 3

Tuesday 6th June

Return walk from Imlil to Aroumd. Return via Asni

Clear, bright start but windier. As the day wore on the gusts became stronger making the atmosphere hazy. The 2pm temperature was 26 deg C.

Today the group breakfasted earlier, at 7.30am then met at the transport at 8.15am where we met Mustapha who was to be our driver with a Ford Minibus for the rest of the tour.

We took a gentle drive to Imlil some 29kms away at a valley road head then walked through the village and via the mule trail up through the walnut groves to the village of Aroumd. Unfortunately there was a strong, gusty wind which meant that the butterflies weren't settling, however we still added Brown Argus, Spanish Marbled White and Cardinal to our list together with Hummingbird and Silver-striped Hawkmoths. As we passed through the village of Aroumd before dropping down to the river we stopped at a local Berber house for Moroccan Mint Tea and pancakes. Walking through Aroumd we were treated to the spectacle of hundreds of Alpine Chough 'dancing' in the sky.

On the track outside some small shops we found a large butterfly that was later identified as our first Dark Giant Grayling. We then found a shady spot under Walnut trees near the river and enjoyed a picnic lunch.

After lunch we were treated to a pair of Lammergeiers circling overhead for some time before we returned by another path to Imlil, getting back to the transport at 4pm.

After butterfly stops on the way back, we made a small detour to Asni to see the trees in the main street dripping with Cattle Egrets, and the trees behind the police station with White Stork nests on top.

We arrived back at La Bergierie at 5pm in enough time for most to take a dip in the hotel pool before log call at 7pm then dinner of Onion Tart, Meatballs, and for dessert Crème Caramel.

A search for moths after dinner turned up good numbers including Vestal and Spectacle moths.

Day 4

Wednesday 7th June

Oukaïmeden

7.30am Clear, blue, cloudless sky with no wind. At the higher altitude there was a little high cloud after lunch but still 26 deg. C at 2pm. As we came down the mountain the heat increased to 30 deg C at 5pm

We departed at 8.15am for the long drive to Oukaïmeden at 2668 metres. A very productive stop enroute turned up Moroccan Marbled White and Moroccan Copper, together with the local bird speciality the Moussier's Redstart.

As we climbed the last ascent to the basin we stopped to view large stands of Marsh Orchid and Star of Bethlehem in the stream channel.

At 11.30am we reached Oukaïmeden basin and our first stop was to see the prehistoric rock carvings dating back over 3,000 years. Mohammed entertained everyone by finding a scorpion which he caught and held in his hand.

The group took a gentle walk around the lake and through the meadow basin before taking a picnic lunch. Quail could be heard calling and new butterflies included Amanda's Blue and Glanville Fritillary.

We were joined at lunch by Seebohm's Wheatear, then we walked the path above the viewpoint towards Gliz. Here we picked up two local butterfly specialities; Giant Grayling was netted for everyone to see, and we also saw Vaucher's Heath in flight. Near the path there was also a male Horned Lark. Dropping back towards the transport we also saw Mazarine Blue.

A welcome coffee break was taken before we started the descent return. The journey took us through an area where much of the local pottery is made so we stopped at the pottery at Asgan. Here the temperature at 5pm was still 30 deg. C.

It was 6.30pm before we arrived back at La Bergerie. After a wash and freshener the log call was at 7.30pm. Whilst talking through the day's sightings a Nightjar flew over the group in fading light. We then ate dinner of Salad, Beef Stew and Spaghetti, and for dessert Fresh Fruit.

Day 5

Thursday 8th June

Return walk from Imlil east past Tamatert to the pass at 2279 metres

Fine, clear blue sky. 33 deg C in the shade at Breakfast. Lunch at 2000 metres 28 deg C and a little cloud.

After breakfast we drove to Imlil and then set off walking east along a good track towards Tamatert. A new species was added to the list when a small skipper butterfly was netted and identified as Red-underwing Skipper.

We stopped at 2000 metres under some Poplar trees for a picnic lunch. Whilst still 28 deg C it was breezier with cloud over the high peaks. Following lunch the group split and Mohammed stayed with the ladies who made a gentle descent back to Imlil. Meanwhile Tom, Alan and the men continued upwards to the pass at 2279 metres. On the way up they added Moroccan Orange-tip, and on the way down Southern Grayling. Whilst descending from the top there were a few spots of rain but the temperature was still 26 deg C and within seconds the drops had dried on clothing.

Both groups met at 4pm at a café for drinks and local doughnuts before the return drive to La Bergerie, getting back at 5.30pm

Log call was at 7.15pm followed by a dinner of Spinach and egg quiche, turkey kebabs sausages and frites and for dessert melon balls.

Day 6

Friday 9th June

Tizi-n-Test

High cloud at breakfast with a cooler, fresher feel. 24 deg C. As the day developed the sky cleared to hazy sun.

Today the group drove to another area of the High Atlas, the high pass of Tizi-n-Test at 2092 metres.

We stopped enroute to look at an Atlas Agama lizard in an area of low wild Thyme bushes. Closer inspection revealed that the bushes were covered in dozens of False Ilex Hairstreak butterflies. We spent some time here and found Cleopatra, Queen of Spain Fritillary and a Moroccan Meadow Brown which appeared for the group out of Mohammed's pocket. He had netted it higher up the scree and put it in his pocket for safety on the descent.

Our picnic lunch was taken at the Auberge de Belle Vue with stunning views. There we also netted a large Antlion which was seen by everyone.

After lunch we returned the same route and a stop turned up Dark Giant Grayling, more Queen of Spain Fritillary and Small Skipper.

A cultural stop was at the 12th century Mosque de Timnel, the oldest in Morocco. The mosque had been renovated over the last 8 years and we were allowed to enter. Mohammed explained it's history. Inside we found a pair of Tawny Owls roosting in the rafters with two chicks hidden behind some wooden panels.

It was after 5pm when we arrived back at La Bergerie. Log call was at 7pm and for dinner this night we had Salad, Beef and vegetable Tagine, and for dessert Apple Tart.

Day 7

Saturday 10 June

Asni; Marigha – Amez Miz

Bright, clear, sunny and still. 33 deg C at Breakfast. 35 deg. C at 5pm

After breakfast we drove to Asni to visit the weekly market. We spent an hour engrossed in it's sights, smells and sounds.

From Asni we drove towards Amez Miz to explore the valley along the Oued (river) Nfis. Here at a stop where we could walk next to the river we found fields in flower covered in butterflies including Clouded Yellow, Common Blue, False Ilex Hairstreak, Moroccan Orange-tip and African Babel Blue. Tom also netted a butterfly that had eluded us in other places and we were able to positively identify it as Berger's Clouded Yellow. Other interesting sightings were a family of Barbary Ground Squirrels and family of Black Wheatears.

We stopped at lunchtime at the village of Ait Zitoun where we had our picnic (and Moroccan mint tea) in a Berber farmhouse before exploring the land around. A young tortoise was an interesting find.

After a couple of stops on the return journey Derek, Tom and Alan walked the last section back to La Bergerie (whilst the rest headed for the pool). It was worthwhile because in addition to Atlas Blue and Scarce Swallowtail, they found the last new butterfly of the trip, Common Tiger Blue.

The last log call was at 7pm followed by Kir appetitif on the house before dinner of Salad, Couscous with Tafia followed by an Orange salad. The last meal was finished off with a round of 'Best butterfly of the trip' which was won by Terry who made a poem about the Long-tailed Blue matching the colour of the Moroccan sky.

Day 8

Sunday 11 June

La Bergerie to Marrakech via Barrage Lalla Takerkoust

Bright, clear, cloudless and sunny. 34 deg at breakfast

A leisurely breakfast was followed by packing etc before loading bags onto the top of our minibus for the return journey to Marrakech.

We departed at 10.30 after goodbye's to La Bergerie. Just after leaving we had a pair of Barbary Falcons fly in front of the vehicle, one with a recent kill of a blackbird in it's talons.

We visited the barrage at Lalla Takerkoust which provides water for Marrakech. The lake was extremely busy with visitors, mainly locals, so we went to Le Relais du Lac for a last drink and the group took the opportunity to say thank-you to Mohammed and Mustapha.

At the airport at 1.30pm the group said its last goodbye's as Derek, Cathy, Tom and Alan left to catch their plane back to Gatwick. Meanwhile Mohammed and Mustapha took the remaining six into Marrakech and left them at an hotel for an extra few days stay.

Species lists

Butterflies

	Common Name	Scientific name	June 2006							
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon mauretanica</i>			x	x			x	x
2	Scarce Swallowtail	<i>Iphiclides podalirius feisthamelii</i>		x				x	x	
3	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	
4	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae mauretanica</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
5	Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
6	Moroccan Orange-tip	<i>Anthocharis belia</i>					x		x	
7	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
8	Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias australis</i>							x	
9	Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	
10	False Ilex Hairstreak	<i>Nordmannia esculi mauretanica</i>		x	x			x	x	
11	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
12	Moroccan Copper (M end)	<i>Thersamonia phoebus</i>				x				
13	Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>		x	x		x			
14	Common Tiger Blue	<i>Tarucus theophrastus</i>							x	
15	African Babul Blue	<i>Azanus jesus</i>		x					x	
16	Martin's Blue (M ssp)	<i>Plobejus martini ungemachi</i>					x	x		
17	Brown Argus	<i>Aricia aegestis cramera</i>			x	x	x		x	x
18	Mazarine Blue (M ssp)	<i>Cyaniris semiargus maroccana</i>				x				
19	Amanda's Blue (NA ssp)	<i>Agrodiaetus amanda abdelaziz</i>				x				
20	Atlas Blue (HA ssp)	<i>Plebicula atlantica atlantica</i>		x	x			x	x	
21	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>				x	x	x	x	x
22	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		x	x	x				
23	Painted Lady	<i>Cynthia cardui</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
24	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album imperfecta</i>			x	x	x			
25	Cardinal (NA ssp)	<i>Pandoriana pandora seitze</i>			x	x	x	x	x	
26	Moroccan High Brown Fritillary (HA ssp)	<i>Fabriciana auresiana astrifera</i>						x		
27	Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>		x	x	x	x	x		
28	Glanville Fritillary	<i>Melitaea cinxia atlantis</i>				x		x		
29	Spotted Fritillary	<i>Melitaea didyma</i>		x	x	x		x	x	
30	Moroccan Marbled White (M ssp)	<i>Melanargia galathea lucasi</i>				x	x			
31	Spanish Marbled White	<i>Melanargia ines</i>			x	x	x	x		
32	Southern Grayling (NA ssp)	<i>Hipparchia aristaeus algerica</i>					x			
33	Giant Grayling (NA end)	<i>Berberia abdelkader abdelkader</i>				x	x			
34	Dark Giant Grayling (NA end)	<i>Berberia lambessanus</i>			x	x	x	x		
35	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>				x	x			
36	Moroccan Meadow Brown (M end)	<i>Hyponephele maroccana</i>						x		
37	Southern Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia cecilia</i>		x				x		x
38	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus lyllus</i>				x			x	

	Common Name	Scientific name	June 2006							
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
39	Vaucher's Heath (M end)	<i>Coenonympha vaucheri vaucheri</i>				x				
40	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria aegeria</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
41	Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera megera</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	
42	Rosy Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus onopordi</i>				x				
43	Red-underwing Skipper	<i>Spialia sertorius ali</i>					x	x		
44	False Marbled Skipper	<i>Carcharodus stauderi</i>					x	x		
45	Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris iberica</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	

Birds

	Common Name	Scientific Name	June 2006							
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	100		200	200	3		200	200
2	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			12				2	
3	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			6	2				10
4	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		1					1	
5	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>			2					
6	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>			1	1		2		1
7	Barbary Falcon	<i>Falco pelegrinoides</i>								2
8	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				2		1	1	
9	Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>			1			1	1	
10	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>				H				
11	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>							1	
12	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>							1	
13	Feral Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		8	12	6	6	12	12	8
14	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		4	2	1		1	1	
15	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		2	1			2	2	4
16	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		2					4	1
17	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>						H	H	
18	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>						4		
19	Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>				1				
20	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>				4				
21	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	6							50
22	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>							4	
23	European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>						1		
24	Levaillant's Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus vaillantii</i>			1		H			
25	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>				4			1	4
26	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		2	2				1	2
27	Shore Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>				1				
28	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>						1		
29	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>				20				
30	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>		12	12	6	6	18	18	8
31	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		8	6	4	4	4	12	8
32	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>								1
33	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			2				3	
34	Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>		6	6	4	4	4	8	
35	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		H		H	1	H		
36	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				1				
37	Moussier's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus moussieri</i>				2	1	2		
38	Seebohm's Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe seebohmi</i>				3				
39	Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>		3						

	Common Name	Scientific Name	June 2006							
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
40	Black Wheatear	Oenanthe leucura							4	
41	Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius		1			1	2		
42	Blackbird	Turdus merula		2	3		6	3	2	1
43	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus				1				
44	Sardinian Warbler	Sylvia melanocephala		H	H				1	1
45	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata		4	2		1			2
46	Coal Tit	Parus ater					4	1	1	
47	Great Tit	Parus major		2				1	1	
48	Blue Tit	Parus caeruleus ultramarinus		1						
49	Woodchat Shrike	Lanius senator		1					1	
50	Chough	Pyrrhocorax Pyrrhocorax				5	100			
51	Alpine Chough	Pyrrhocorax graculus			400		40			
52	Raven	Corvus corax			1	3				
53	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor	8							8
54	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		6	24	12	12	24	24	36
55	Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs africana		2	6	1	20	8	6	4
56	Serin	Serinus serinus		6	12	6	40	10	6	4
57	Linnet	Acanthis cannabina				3		3		
58	Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		4				2	6	
59	Greenfinch	Carduelis chloris		1						
60	Corn Bunting	Miliaria calandra				1			H	
61	House Bunting	Emberiza striolata sahari		3	2	3	6	6	2	2
62	Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia			1		1			
63	Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus				2	1			

Mammals

			June 2006							
	Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	Barbary Sheep	Ammotragus lervia						x		
	Barbary Ground Squirrel	Atlantoxerus getulus							x	

Reptiles

			June 2006							
	Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	Moorish Gecko	Tarentola mauritanica	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Atlas Agama	Agama impalearis		x			x	x	x	x
	Wall Lizard	Podarcis hispanica		x	x	x		x		
	Spur-thighed Tortoise	Testudo graeca							x	

Amphibians

			June 2006							
	Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	Marsh Frog	Rana ridibunda		x					x	
	Mauretanian Toad	Bufo mauritanicus	x	x		x	x	x	x	
	Stripeless Tree Frog	Hyla meridionalis				x				

Other species

			June 2006							
	Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	Hummingbird Hawkmoth	Macroglossum stellatarum		x	x	x	x			
	Red Darter	Crocothemis erythraea		x					x	
	Striped Hawkmoth cat'pillar	Hyles lineata livornica		x						
	Small Elephant Hawkmoth cat'pillar	Deilephila porcellus		x						
	Bedstraw Hawkmoth cat'pillar	Hyles gallii		x						
	Dragonfly	Cordulia linaenea		x						
	Whirligig Beetle	Gyrinus natator		x						
	Water Boatman	Corixa punctata		x						
	Egyptian Grasshopper	Anacridium aegyptium		x	x					
	Blue Flash Grasshopper	Oedipoda coerulescens		x				x	x	
	Pale green Flash Grasshopper	Oedeus decorus		x				x	x	
	Rhinoceros Beetle	Oryctes nasicornis		x						
	Longhorn Beetle	Leptura 6-guttata		x						
	Chafer	Oxythyrea funesta		x	x		x	x		
	Silver-striped Hawkmoth	Hippotion celerio			x	x			x	
	7-spot Ladybird	Coccinella 7-punctata			x	x				
	Ground Bug	Lygaeus saxitalis		x	x					
	Cicada	Cicadatra orni			x					
	Vestal moth	Rhodometra sacraria			x					
	Spectacle moth	Abrostola tripartita			x					
	Scorpion	Buthus occitanus				x				
	Common Blue Damselfly	Enallagma cyathigerum				x				
	Red Darter	Sympetrum striolatum				x				
	Cream-spot Tiger moth	Arctia villica						x		
	Ant-lion	Palpares libelluloides						x		
	Sun Spider sp.	solifugidae (family)						x		
	Noctuid (Yellow underwing)	Ephesia fulminea						x		