



THE PICOS DE EUROPA - SUMMER 2019

Trip Report

**Pete and Vicki Smith
Bob and Veronica Lambert**



A Trip to the Picos de Europa mountains of Northern Spain

30th June to 7th July 2019

This trip was born way, way back at the end of March, 2018. I was on holiday in southern Spain with Bob Lambert on a major butterflying trip, tracking down some rare species that can only be found in the far south of the Iberian Peninsula, and part way through the week, our evening discussions had turned to the subject of where we were going to head for our next butterfly adventure. Several options were put up for consideration, but after much deliberation the ultimate conclusion was that a trip to the Picos de Europa would provide us both with the best chance to add several species to our respective life-lists. Also, Bob was very keen to return to the mountains, and the area would be a great base for a couples holiday, so we could take our wives along! At the end of June 2018, I reserved us a holiday rental in a small village. Flights were booked as soon as EasyJet released their schedule, and we then had a long wait until this trip came around, but anticipation had been building for quite a while, and reached fever-pitch in the weeks before our departure.

I guess it all became real when Vicki and I met up with Bob and Veronica at the Premier Inn, Stansted, on the evening of 28th June, the day before we flew out to Bilbao.

Saturday

We landed in Bilbao around three pm local time and set off on the long drive to our hotel in Tama, just outside Potes. Most of our journey was on motorway, but unfortunately, on the final part of our drive through the narrow and dramatic Hermida gorge, we hit a delay, as a motorcyclist had been involved in an accident on this notoriously dangerous route. We were stopped for almost an hour whilst the emergency services did their thing, but eventually by evening we had reached the delightful posada where we were to spend our first night. A good night's sleep was had by all, and we awoke on Sunday morning to partake of a superb breakfast, which, along with the usual meats, cheese and bread, included the largest, stickiest and most tasty croissants I have ever encountered!

Sunday

We couldn't get into the apartment where we were to spend the rest of the week until later on Sunday afternoon, so we took a stroll through the delightful town of Potes. A walk along the river produced a few interesting sights, including a small but somewhat venomous-

looking snake, and some big birds of prey up in the skies, one of which proved to be a Booted Eagle. Bob and I were itching to get a look at what butterflies were on the wing, and a small patch of rough grassland near a car park produced our first species. Here we found **Short-tailed Blues**, **Long-tailed Blues**, **Mallow Skipper** and **Southern Brown Argus**, amongst other species.



Long-tailed Blue



Mallow Skipper

By mid-afternoon we were settled into the apartment, and were checking out the butterflies immediately surrounding our home base. It was pure luck that we had selected a villa that had a strong local population of **Spanish Purple Hairstreak** right on the doorstep! I had missed out on this species in Provence back in early June, due to the season out there running late, so it was a great pleasure to see these beauties up close. I had only ever seen one other Spanish Purple Hairstreak before, many years ago.



Spanish Purple Hairstreak

The meadow next to the villa also had good numbers of **False Ilex Hairstreaks**, and plenty of Blues, plus occasional Clouded and Berger's Clouded Yellows, Wood Whites, and just one Spotted Fritillary was seen.



False Ilex Hairstreak

We had arrived! The apartment was great. It had a well-equipped kitchen which opened onto a lovely large balcony with stunning views out along the Liebana valley.



View from the balcony

We would be spending quite a few hours sat here over the course of the week, and this evening we had a quick and easy dinner of shop-bought pizzas, accompanied by some remarkably fine red wine. The Rioja was very smooth and tasty, considering the ridiculously cheap price tag of between 2 and 4 Euros per bottle, and it went down far too well! The balcony overlooked the shared swimming pool, which would be a life-saver later in the week when the temperatures rose.

Unfortunately, the pool's water pump seemed to be set to run all night long, and was quite noisy. I didn't hear it at all overnight, but Bob and Veronica's room was right above it, and it kept them awake at times. We had a different sort of noise in our room; it appeared that some form of animal was tap-dancing on the roof most of the night. We never did find out what it was, but it was certainly doing some intricate foot-work...

Monday

Intricate foot-work was to be a bit of a theme today, although it would be Bob who was undertaking it this time, not some unidentified creature of the night.

Monday morning dawned dull and cloudy. I had it on good authority from Spanish butterfly expert Paul Browning that the weather on the Potes side of the Picos is often like this, but that the "other side", South West of the Puerto de San Glorio, is often sunny. We decided to put this to the test, and drove up to the Puerto along an increasingly winding road. The cloud was getting thicker, visibility was down to just 20 metres, and the temperature had plummeted to a cool 12 degrees. Was this really good butterfly country? The Puerto de San Glorio was in cloud, and what should have been a spectacular viewpoint was instead very much a damp squib. We stopped anyway, and Bob managed to spot a solitary bedraggled Apollo butterfly roosting on a flower head, one hell of a good spotting effort, as the butterfly was about 25 metres away up a steep hillside. We climbed up to see it, through saturated tall grasses, getting thoroughly drenched in the process. The butterfly was torpid, covered in water droplets, and had it been a warm-blooded creature would no doubt have been suffering from hypothermia. We had a good look at it anyway, then descended back down the wet, slippery hillside towards the road.

It was here that Bob got into his dance groove. It started as a bit of a slip, slide, and loss of control, but rapidly accelerated into a full-blown downhill sprint, as he skidded down the rocky hillside edge and approached the road at great speed! Airborne for a mere fraction of a second, he then appeared to regain control as he made foot contact with the edge of the tarmac and almost righted himself, but control was rapidly lost again as he went into a bizarre yet spectacular almost horizontal somersault. Time slowed down, and I watched in horror as he finally contacted with the road surface. It was one of those situations where you can hardly avoid laughing, even though the situation really isn't that funny. There was pain. There was damage. There was the possibility that this could actually completely wreck the holiday on our first proper day. He hobbled, he moaned, he cursed. He did, to be fair, by that evening, have a massively swollen and very red toe on one foot, and a bruised, swollen mess on the side of his other foot. The rest of the day was spent with him limping badly, but we managed to press on.

We carried on driving past the Puerto, and as we began to lose a bit of altitude, the skies suddenly just cleared, the temperature soared, and we found ourselves in full sunshine. Quite a remarkable, rapid, and very welcome transition! Paul had been correct.

A suitable track and layby presented themselves, and as soon as we had pulled up and parked, two enormous, dark *Erebia* butterflies took to the wing. We grabbed our cameras and dashed out to find **Chapman's Ringlet**, largest of the European *Erebias* and a life-tick for us all - Eureka!



Chapman's Ringlet

With the sun still shining, we moved on further and turned off a side road to head a little further north, stopping at a layby where two stray dogs were hanging around. They seemed friendly, if a little emaciated and neglected, and they kept us company as we explored a fabulous alpine meadow area, where a multitude of Blues, Coppers and Fritillaries were on the wing. Every now and then I found myself with a warm, damp nose poking into one or other of my shorts pockets.



Butterflying in the alpine meadows

Our number one target for this area was the Dusky Large Blue, but we were right at the beginning of its flight period, and we didn't find any in a promising damp hollow, stuffed full of *Sanguisorba* plants. We decided to walk higher up the slopes, finding numerous fritillaries, **Meadow, Knapweed, Small Pearl-bordered, Pearl-bordered, Marsh, Heath, Provencal** and **Dark Green Fritillaries**, plus good numbers of **Purple-edged Coppers**. Blues included **Common, Chapman's, Idas, Mazarine** and **Turquoise Blue**.

We had wandered for about half an hour, and were contemplating stopping for a picnic

lunch, when all of a sudden a butterfly took to the wing right in front of me. It had the most incredible dark inky-blue colour as it flew up and around. It had to be...yep, another Eureka moment, my first ever **Dusky Large Blue**! What a beauty. In my excitement, not only did I let out a yell of "DUSKY LARGE BLUE!", but apparently I also did some sort of weird flappy hand signal thing. Vicki tells me I do this a lot if I see a new or particularly exciting butterfly...



Dusky Large Blue

It was hard to leave the Dusky Large Blue site behind. We saw one further male, had lunch, and meandered for another hour or so, enjoying other species such as **Turquoise Blue** and **Purple-edged Copper**, the latter being very different to the ones that I am used to seeing in the French Alps. The males all had lovely purple edges to them and were quite beautiful.



Purple-edged Copper

Mindful of the fact that we had a long and winding journey back to home base, we eventually tore ourselves away and returned to the hire car. But on the way back up to the Puerto de San Glorio, a nice looking meadow/woodland area with a convenient lay-by forced another stop. There were "Marbled Whites" flying here, and given that we had two species of these on our hit list, stopping off for a look was a no-brainer. These Marbled Whites were very large, very white, and clearly not in the mood to sit still! After a lot of perseverance, we got close enough to confirm them as **Esper's Marbled White**, a life-tick for Bob and only the second time that I had seen one.



Esper's Marbled White

There were plenty of them at this lovely site, but I was also hoping to find **Iberian Marbled White**. It took a while, but finally I found a few amongst the Esper's, and one eventually sat down and posed nicely. Another life-tick!



Iberian Marbled White

There was also a very attractive heath flying around in reasonable numbers. It's hard to know whether to call this a **Chestnut Heath**, a **Spanish Heath**, or a **Spanish Chestnut Heath**. Some authors give it specific status, whilst others have it as a sub-species, *iphioides*.



"Spanish Heath"

After filling our boots with photographs, we wound our way up and over the Puerto, back into thick cloud, then down and around the mountainsides, back to base, where we celebrated with a fine dinner of delicious local chorizo, made into an

onion/mushroom/pasta dish. This was accompanied by several more bottles from our supply of delicious red wine.

Whilst engaged in the serious business of writing up the day's butterfly records and reviewing our photographs, Bob produced a picture on his camera of a very surprising looking copper.



Pete and Bob identifying and recording in the evening

I was already well into my fourth glass of red by this point, so as he showed me his photo, I imagined that I had somehow teleported across Europe to Greece, for there before me was a shot of what looked very much like a Grecian Copper! How could this be? Clearly I was missing something (mainly sobriety), and after a quick check of the books, it became clear that Bob had photographed the local form of the Scarce Copper known as *subspecies miegii*. I had completely missed it in the field, and had to wait for a return visit the following afternoon to see and photograph it for myself. It is quite a stunner!



Scarce Copper subspecies miegii

It had been one hell of a day! Three life-ticks for me, plus a couple of new local forms. What we now needed was a day of clear weather on the Potes side of the Picos mountains so that we could head off to the high altitude limestone scree sites in pursuit of our remaining targets. We also needed Bob's foot not to be broken...

Tuesday

We woke up to a cloudy start again on Tuesday, with no prospect of sunshine in the local forecast. But on the plus side, Bob could walk! So once again we drove south west, taking the steep, winding road up and over the Puerto de San Glorio, with its precipitous drops, hairpin bends, sheer rock faces and oncoming drivers in the middle of the road. Once again, my passengers did a tremendous job of tolerating the journey – there was only the occasional scream or muffled shriek at the scariest of moments, and nobody lost their breakfast on the upholstery, thereby avoiding the need for that expensive “end of holiday” car valet! Full marks to them all. I could NOT be a passenger on those roads! I would need heavy sedation; I am not sure that Valium would cut it. I think I would need Ketamine as an absolute minimum.

We headed in a more northerly direction to the tiny settlement of Cain, at the start of the Cares gorge. Here, we turned into non-butterflying tourists and trekked along the stunning, and at times slightly scary, gorge walk. The scenery was highly dramatic and although it was busy with plenty of tourists, we really enjoyed our time walking along what is probably the most famous and most-visited walk in the area.



Part of the Cares gorge



Walking the Cares gorge path

On the way home we stopped once again at the meadow site where Bob had found the *miegii* Scarce Copper, and once more we found plenty of butterflies, including good numbers of **Lesser Marbled Fritillary**.



Lesser Marbled Fritillary

Bob and I did a quick trip to the supermarket to stock up on a few supplies, and I fell foul of the local bread police. There were a whole range of baguettes, round breads, long breads, all shapes and sizes, and all held in pull-out sliding drawers, but as I opened one to take out a loaf, a scary Spanish shop woman shouted “No!”, and physically stopped me from reaching for my bread. She gestured towards a glove dispenser. Apparently you have to wear gloves to pick up the bread (this doesn’t seem to apply to any of the fruit, vegetables or other products). So I donned the required glove, and was then given a strict lesson by Señora Scary on how to put the loaf into a paper and plastic bag, and weigh it on the scales, which would then produce a sticky label that was affixed to the bag. Duly chastised, we continued with the shopping.

The long drive, gorge walk, and plentiful wine saw me heading for an early night. The other three stayed up to watch the England Ladies football semi-final, and did some sterling work trying to finish off the rest of the wine stocks.

Wednesday

There were some hangovers this morning, but on a more positive note, the sun was shining and there was scarcely a cloud in the sky! At last it was time to take the road up to Fuente De, ascend in the cable car, and search for Gavarnie Blues and Lefebvre's Ringlets. We arrived at Fuente De behind two coaches that had just disgorged their contents of two large groups of school children on a trip. The queue for the cable car was long, and the cars only hold 20 people, so we had a bit of a wait for the ascent. I hadn’t realised that Veronica was terrified of going on the cable car – she spent the entire four minute ascent clinging on to Bob with her eyes firmly shut, and I imagine there was some intense internal dialogue running through her mind involving some deity or other, but it was surely worth it to drink in the views from the top, and to experience the high altitude atmosphere. The girl did well. Bob and I immediately took to mooching about on the limestone and grassy patches, seeking out our quarry. I had soon seen a single male **Gavarnie Blue**, but it had landed only briefly and then disappeared at pace over a rocky drop. Twenty minutes later and Bob was getting tense - he still hadn't seen one. We decided to rejoin the women-folk and walk a little further up the track to see if we had better luck further on. Bob and I had just walked

past a small puddle, when Vicki, who was behind us, called out "what is this blue here then?" We turned around, and sure enough, there on the floor was a gorgeous male **Gavarnie Blue** drinking up salts.



Gavarnie Blue male

Further up near a large pond, we found more Gavarnie Blues, including some small groups of mud-puddlers.



Gavarnie Blues and Small Blues mud-puddling

Higher still up the mountainside as scree began to dominate, we started to see some very dark ringlets on the wing. They were relentless in flight, patrolling up and down, and hardly ever stopping, but it was possible to get close enough to one or two to obtain a good impression of a dark *Erebia* with no orange markings and two small white ocelli. It had to be **Lefebvre's Ringlet!**

I consider myself extremely lucky to have managed to get close enough to one to get a shot.



Lefebvre's Ringlet

Once again, this is a local form, *f.astur*, associated only with the Picos de Europa mountain range.



Habitat above Fuente De



Vicki above Fuente De

The high altitude above Fuente De had done us proud, and we celebrated in the usual style that evening. Dinner tonight was a self-service salad affair; I had squid and Moroccan pulses with mine, and as we sat down to eat and drink, a thunderstorm began to approach and rumble around the valley, the sound bouncing off the hillsides, and finally bringing a torrential deluge our way, which cooled the air down very nicely.

We had now hit all of our target species. I had four lifers and shots of three species that I had only ever seen singletons of before; Bob had ten life ticks, and we had both seen some fascinating local forms. All pressure was off!

Thursday

Today was spent relaxing around the apartment, and wandering in the local meadows and lanes. The temperature was rising, and we made good use of the pool, and later on, the superb indoor barbeque facilities. There was a purpose built, rustic brick and wood building, with internal barbeque and chimneys, a large table, kitchen area and inside loo, just perfect for having a barbeque in an area where the occasional thunderstorm could potentially dampen your sausage...



The BBQ lounge and BBQ



It was fantastic, apart from the fact that the draw on the chimney wasn't sufficient to keep the smoke out of the building for the first half an hour while the charcoal got up to full

temperature, so as chief barbeque man, I spent half an hour choking down fumes and being smoke-cured inside and out, and the other three cleared off and left me to it. It's OK, I'm not bitter, I am fine in my own company...

The sausages, burgers and beef steaks were rather tasty, and by the time they were ready, the air had cleared nicely. Discussion on Thursday evening later turned to what we were going to do Friday, and whether we wanted to revisit any species or sites. Both Bob and I felt that although we had found two male Dusky Large Blues earlier in the week, we didn't feel as though we had experienced them in all their glory and ecological splendour. We decided that on Friday we would leave the ladies at the villa by the pool, and we would make one final excursion up and over the mountains, this time to visit an alternative potential site for the Duskies.

Friday

So we set off early on Friday and reached the site in good time. It was looking good for fritillaries and some species of blue, but the only vaguely suitable Dusky Large Blue habitat appeared to be a very small area of damp grassland close to a large lake. The quantity of *Sanguisorba* was meagre, and it really didn't feel like a great site to find Dusky Large Blues. However, we did photograph the only **Amanda's Blue** of the holiday here.



Amanda's Blue

After an hour or so, Bob suggested we return to the site where we had seen the two male Duskies earlier in the week, and this turned out to be a great decision. We were a few days further into the season and this site was performing very well. We had about 20 **Dusky Large Blues** in a smallish damp area not far from the road, and were able to watch females egg-laying and males patrolling over the habitat as they investigated every Burnet flowerhead in the vicinity, looking for a mate. We decided to move further up the hillside, but there was an issue. Bob was cursing a short distance away from me. Closer (but not too close) investigation identified the cause of the cursing; he had split his shorts – comprehensively! It remains unclear whether this was due to an excessive blast of flatulence, over-enthusiastic prancing about in pursuit of butterflies, or whether it was a

simple wardrobe malfunction, but whatever the cause, this was not a sight for the faint of heart. Pretty much everything was hanging out!

Further up the hillside where we had seen the two males previously, there were upwards of 50 Dusky Large Blues on the wing. It was possible to have four or five flying simultaneously in a single vista of a few square meters - fabulous sightings of a very rare butterfly, made all the more special as we were not on a nature reserve and could roam freely, but carefully, amongst them. We had the full Dusky Large Blue experience that day!

Clear skies on the way back as we reached the high point near the Puerto enabled us to get the great views that we had missed when crossing in the clouds earlier in the week.



The Picos de Europa – view from the Collado de Lesba

Saturday

Saturday was spent once again relaxing locally, before our long journey home to Blighty on Sunday. What a fabulous week. Absolutely great butterfly action, great company, food, wine, scenery and plenty of good laughs along the way. It truly was the Picos of perfection!