

## Ariege, Pyreeneans, France: 21<sup>st</sup> August to 1<sup>st</sup> September 2017

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### Overview

A family holiday focussed on walking and targeting butterfly sites (and a little cycling), although we were interested in all wildlife and noted interesting birds and mammals etc. The Ariege proved to be stunning, wonderful scenery of very varied habitat, very friendly people and very quiet roads, thoroughly recommended for a walking or cycling holiday. We were a little late in the butterfly season, but still managed 62 species including some targets.

### Logistics

Easyjet flights Bristol-Toulouse, Europcar hire car for the 12 days, stayed in the Esmerelda Gite in Biert, just west of Massat. Lovely comfy accommodation with very friendly and helpful ex-pat English owners. Biert is small (not even an Augerge!) but a good local base, near to Massat where there are good shops (Tabac, wine and cheese shop etc), a small supermarket (large ones near Saint Girons and Foix) and a few cafes, bars and one larger restaurant. Also a very interesting church. We were 40 minutes slow drive to Foix and a little less to Saint Girons. Roads are good, e.g. the D618 to Tarascon is easy driving, the D17 to Foix smaller but fine apart from the very narrow steep Mur de Peguerre stretch down to the D618 just east of Massat (no fun at all on a bike!). Also 45 minutes to Col d'Agnes. You'll know the area from this years stage 13 of the Tour de France if you are in to cycling, and I hired a bike from the excellent Les Deux Velos which was just down the road, to cycle this stage when the weather cooled down. The weather was hot, low to high 30s every day for the first 9 days, then a cooler id 20s sunny day before a rapid cooling over our only wet day and then slight warming and sunnier weather on the day we left.

### Maps and books

For butterfly identification, the Collins Guide is great but beware that flight times are questionable and some images a little off (e.g. male Eros Blue and Knapweed Fritillary upper sides). Its worth checking out the excellent websites on European butterflies and general internet searches for identification updates: <http://www.guypadfield.com/index.html>; <http://www.butterfly-guide.co.uk/regions/pyrenees/ariege.htm>;



Descent from Etangs de la Gardelle, not an easy walk! Fabulous for butterflies.

Maps: Michelin Ariege Haute-Garonne sheet 343 for larger scale driving, for walking IGN Carte Radonnee (blue maps) sheets 2148OT Vicdessos and 2047ET La Bastide-de-Serou. Massat. Walking guides:- Les 30 plus beaux sentiers de Montagne Ariege (Balades a Pied) –good general guide in French; we did walks 10, 14, 22. Sunflower Pyrenees car tours and walks – their idea of “moderate” is a lot harder than I expected and the

times are too short, we were in the car tour 5 area; walk 13 at Gorges de la Frau is uphill if you

start at the northern end, but then downhill on the way back, easy but watch your footing on the loose stones in places; walk 14 Among the Lakes (Etangs de la Gardelle) is a fabulous walk, moderate and meant to take 6h for the complete long walk, we took 8 h plus stops (in total 10 am through to 8pm) to do the shorter loop and it was tough, certainly the top end of moderate if you ask me and I did cycle a full stage of Le Tour de France in the same week, so I'm not that unfit!

### Itinerary (best sites in bold)

21<sup>st</sup> – flew to Toulouse, picked up hire car, drove to Biert via Saint Girons, stopping at a small Intermarche at Mane where I explored a flowery field next to the car park which proved to be very good indeed. Hot and sunny.

22<sup>nd</sup> – drove up to **Col d'Agnes**, stopping at the restored Neolithic village site at Courtal de Peyere Ausellere. Hot and sunny.

23<sup>rd</sup> – drove to Cole de la Core, near Mont Valier, stopping at Col de Sanclere just south of Biert on the way. Dull weather to start and we drove through rain, but above the clouds, very hot and sunny. Got caught in a warm thunderstorm in the beech woods at Col de la Core.

24<sup>th</sup> – **Etang de Gardelle**, high mountain walk past Etang de Soulcon in the south. A very tiring walk up steep climbs which I was very proud indeed of my 7 and 10 year old managing to finish. Eight hours of walking topping out at 2476m. Hot and sunny.

25<sup>th</sup> – rest day in Biert and Foix. Hot and sunny.

26<sup>th</sup> **Col d'Agnes** and Etang de Labant, returning via Courtal de Peyere Ausellere. Hot and sunny.

27<sup>th</sup> – Ker de Massat walk between Biert and Massat. Hot and sunny.

28<sup>th</sup> – Drove over to the **Gorges de la Frau** in the east of the region, stopping at the Pog de **Montsegur**. Hot and sunny.

29<sup>th</sup> – rest day in Biert in the morning, bike hire and cycle to Col de Port in the afternoon. Hot and sunny.

30<sup>th</sup> – cycled stage 13 of le our, tough! Slightly cooler (mid 20s) but sunny

31<sup>st</sup> – lousy wet drizzly day, went to the excellent Foix castle.

1<sup>st</sup> Sept – dull start but soon sunny again, but much cooler, high teens. Drove back to Toulouse stopping at the Intermarche at Mane again.

### Sites

How hard or easy you want to make the walks is up to you and how far you go, there are easy and more difficult walks at most upper altitude locations. At the Etangs de Gardelle site you can



Provencal Fritillary, quite common and widespread in flowery meadows

simply walk south along the wide track, but would miss the excellent habitat on the higher circular walk, but the latter was tough and at the time I considered myself quite fit, although our two young children made it and have almost forgiven us! Col de peguerre, de la Port didn't look great habitat to me and had been heavily grazed so I gave them a miss. Col de la Core wasn't as good as hoped for, Col de Pause may be better but is apparently a nasty road to drive.

*Mane* (near Saint Girons) Intermarche field – any flowery meadow like area is worth checking! This rough grassy field had Provencal, Knapweed, Glanville and Spotted Fritillary, as well as the ubiquitous Swallowtail, Clouded yellow etc.



Spotted Fritillary, in the rough flowery field at the Intermarche at Mane

*Courtal de Peyere Ausellere* (on road up to Col d'Agnes) – very interesting restored village

habitation with woodland, grassy areas and a stream thats ideal for kids to play in.

*Col d'Agnes* – Car park area is at 1570m, lower slopes very good for butterflies, upper slopes less so but good for *Erebia* species. Beautiful scenery. Busy Etang de Lers and a slightly expensive restaurant at the road junction (about 1300m) by the lake and prior to the col itself. Got very lucky and saw a Pyrennean Desman by a stream in the early morning driving up one day.

*Col de Sanclerre* – site just to the south of Biert, only 950m, but some nice meadows and views.

*Col de la Core* – on the edge of the Mont Valier reserve, fabulous scenery and walks, but a little disappointing for butterflies. Lots of Griffon Vultures.

*Etang de Soulcon and Etangs de la Gardelle* walk – 80 minutes drive to the south of Massat. Starting at about 1600m (car aprk at the sourthern end of Etand de Soulcon) and walking up to 2476m, a tough walk but superb for butterflies with Garvanie Ringlet and Pyrenees Brassy Ringlet (split from Spanish Brassy Ringlet), as well as Apollo and a whole range of fritillaries. Also Alpine Accentor and Citril Finch.

*Etang de Labant* (between Col d'Agnes and Aulus le Bains) – nice easy walk and lovely scenery, good for usual butterflies and *Erebia* ringlets.

*Pog de Montsegur and Gorges de Frau* (just over an hours drive east of Massat) – excellent meadows for butterflies at Montsegur; Gorges de Frau is a lovely walk (we parked at the northern end and walked up and back), very good for butterflies and we had stunning views of Southern White Admiral here.



Scarce (Spanish) Swallowtail *feisthamelii*

*Ker de Massat* (local walk between Biert and Massat) – good mixed woodland and flowery meadows, quite an easy walk.



Pyrenees Brassy Ringlet (was Spanish Brassy ringlet subspecies *rondoui*), Etangs de la Gardelle, 2200m altitude

Butterfly list (my new species in bold; highlights in italics)

1. **Carline Skipper** – only one seen, of the race *cirsii*, at 1650m altitude at Col d'Agnes
2. Dingy Skipper – one old individual seen
3. Silver-spotted Skipper – small numbers seen at most sites
4. Small Skipper – one seen at Gorges de Frau
5. Mallow Skipper – 2 or 3 seen at the meadow ib Mane and the fields at Montsegur
6. Swallowtail – several seen, one or two at most sites including the gite garden in Biert
7. *Scarce Swallowtail* – only 3 seen, Courtal de Peyere Ausellere, Col d'Agnes Montsegur; these are of the *feisthamelii* subspecies that I have seen listed as a full species by some (Spanish Swallowtail)
8. *Apollo* – only one seen, at 1800 m one hour in to the walk at Etang de Gardelle
9. **Mountain Dappled White** – two at about 2000m aon the Etang de Gardelle walk
10. Small White – common, but I didn't check the for similar species very often
11. Southern Small White – one seen for sure at Col d'Agnes, but to be honest I couldn't be bothered to check these species having seen them often before, Mountain Sall White are also likely to be present
12. Green-veined White – surprisingly only one seen
13. Large White – common
14. Wood White – common, presumed to be *sinapsis*, but *reali* is also locally present.
15. Brimstone – only 2 or 3 seen
16. Clouded Yellow – common, seen at all sites including in the garden in Biert
17. *Bergers Clouded Yellow* – identified from photographs, seen at Col de la Core, Ker de Massat, Col d'Agnes, Etang de Gardelle, Gorges de Frau
18. Purple Hairstreak – one seen down low at the Courtal de Peyere de Ausellere
19. Small Copper – several seen, widespread
20. Sooty Copper – a few seen at Montsegur, Ker de Massat
21. Geranium Bronze – one or two at lowland sites, e.g. in gardens such as in Biert
22. Long-tailed Blue – only a few seen, including in the car park at Etang de Soulcon, Ker de Massat
23. Short-tailed Blue – common at Montsegur
24. **Provençal Short-tailed Blue** – took a lot of finding! Finally seen at Montsegur flying with the previous species
25. Small Blue – only one seen, on Buddleia in the garden in Biert

26. Holly Blue – pleasingly very often seen, with over 15 in the Gorges de Frau
27. Common Blue – common, checked out very often hunting for more interesting species
28. Brown Argus – quite common
29. Mountain Argus – frequent at higher altitude, *montensis* race seen
30. Adonis Blue – only seen at Gorges de Frau
31. Chalkhill Blue – very common and widespread, also checked out often for more interesting species which enabled me to find the next species
32. **Eros Blue** – incorrectly shown in the Collins guide (can have black uph marginal spots on the male). Seen puddling with the previous species at Etang de Lers and then a few at high altitude on the Etang de Gardelle walk
33. *Southern White Admiral* – one at Ker de Massat, one at Montsegur and 3 at Gorges de Frau, a real stunner!
34. Red Admiral – several seen
35. Peacock – several seen
36. Comma – quite common
37. *Map* – several in the garden at Biert and not infrequent in light woodland with abundant flowering plants
38. *Camberwell Beauty* – only one seen, at the upper woodland edge on the way up to Col d’Agnes, nectaring on thistles.
39. Painted Lady – only one seen, Col de la Core
40. Queen of Spain Fritillary – one on the Etangs de la Gardelle walk
41. Silver-washed Fritillary – commonest fritillary
42. Dark green Fritillary – low numbers on upland open grassland, e.g. Col d’Agnes, Etang de la Gardelle, Col de la Core
43. High Brown Fritillary – only two seen, Courtal de peyere Ausellere
44. *Knapweed fritillary* – once you get your eye in on the fritillaries, this proves to be a fairly common species, seen at Mane, Ker de Massat, Montsegur, Col d’Agnes, Gorges de la Frau
45. **Provencal Fritillary** – also quite common, seen in the garden in Biert and at all meadow sites often with the previous species
46. Glanville Fritillary – seen at Montsegur, Ker de Massat and in Mane
47. **Spotted Fritillary** – I searched a lot for this species and finally found it on the final day in the grassy field at the Intermarche at Mane! Three *meridonalis* race seen
48. *Weavers Fritillary* – a few seen at Ker de Massat, Col d’Agnes and especially on the Etangs de la Gardelle walk (where likely Shepherds Fritillary seen, but didn’t stop for close views)
49. Great Banded Grayling – several seen, including in the garden in Biert
50. **Gavarnie Ringlet** – one of my targets, four identified for certain on the Etangs de la Gardelle walk at high altitude (over 2000m). Identified using close focus binoculars, but never allowing a photograph as they were highly active on the steeper upper slopes.
51. **Autumn Ringlet** – fairly common at mid to high altitude, e.g. Col d’Agnes and Etang de Labant
52. Water Ringlet – the commonest Erebia seen, Col d’Agnes, Etang de Labant, Col de la Core, Etang de Gardelle



Southern White Admiral Gorges de la Frau

53. Large Ringlet – only one seen at Col de la Core
54. Yellow-spotted Ringlet – only one seen at Col d'Agnes
55. *Common Brassy ringlet* – the *arvernensis* race seen on the walk up Etang de la Gardelle, about 10 seen. Did not seem to mix with the next species
56. **Pyrenees Brassy Ringlet** – my other target, originally the *rondoui* endemic race of Spanish Brassy Ringlet, but now raised to specific status, only seen very high up (2300m) at the Etang de Gardelle. We found a lovely wet gully where there was a small colony of this species with 8 or so seen. Then one more seen and photographed well on the walk back down, but still at high altitude.
57. Meadow Brown – common
58. Gatekeeper – I only saw one all holiday, at Montsegur
59. Speckled Wood – the lovely *aegeria* race was common, very much so in the Gorges de la Frau
60. Small Heath – common
61. Wall Brown – only seen at the top of the Gorges de la Frau where it flew with the next species
62. Large Wall Brown – two or three at the top of Gorges de la Frau

Dragonflies - Very few seen: Golden-ringed, Southern Skimer and Southern Hawker at Etang de Labant; Western Spectre in the garden in Biert in the evenings; Southern Migrant Hawker at Courtal de Peyere Ausellere; Southern Emerald on the stagnant pool at the Intermarche at Mane.

Mammals – a few Red Squirrels seen. Very lucky to find a Pyrenean Desman scuttling quickly in to cover next to the small stream on the drive up to Col d'Agnes, not far from Le port where the road crosses the stream. Early morning sighting of this rarely seen nocturnal species. A stoat on rocky scree at 2000m up Etangs de Gardelle walk was a surprise.

Reptiles and amphibians – Asp Viper on the Etangs de la Gardelle walk, lots of Wall Lizards, Midwife toad and Marsh frogs seen (the latter large frogs were in the pool at the Intermarche at Mane – its worth stopping here to stock up!).

Bird list – I've only listed the species of note

1. Griffon Vulture – flock of over 30 at Col de la Core, 2 at Etang de Labant
2. Golden Eagle – three over Courtal de Peyere Ausellere
3. Bonelli's Eagle – one at Col de la Core and one at the Etangs de Soulcon
4. Honey Buzzard – one roadside sighting on the way to Col de la Core, no obvious passage
5. Black-bellied Dipper – often seen on L'Arac in Biert
6. Crag Martin – common, nesting in Seix and on Foix castle, seen with a migrating flock of over 1000 House Martin in Massat on the wet Thursday
7. Water Pipit – common at altitude
8. Black redstart – common in villages and upland sites
9. Alpine Accentor – confiding individual in the car park at Etang de Soulcon was a surprise



Crag Martin nesting in Seix

10. Bee-eater – flock of about 20 at Montsegur
11. Bonelli's Warbler – one with common warblers in the garden in Biert
12. Pied Flycatcher – two seen, one in the garden in Biert, one just down the road on the way to Col de Sanclere
13. Citril Finch – lovely close views at the very top (2476m) on the Etangs de la Gardelle walk



A bright Swallowtail of the continental race *gorganus* in the rough field at the Intermarche at Mane on the last day.