

Re: William

by William, 25-Feb-17 06:53 PM GMT

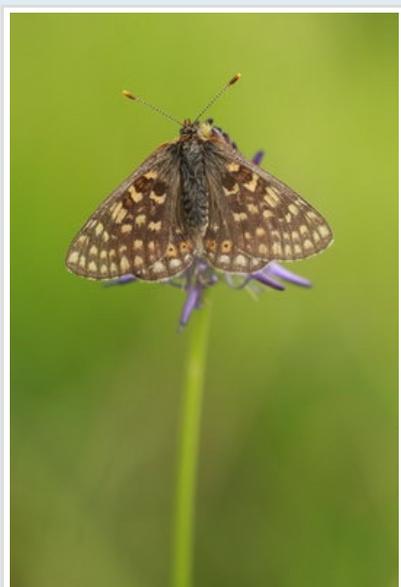
Alpine Amble – Fritillaries

I've been meaning to post some more photos from Switzerland for a while, but one thing and another has worked to stop me getting round to it. Unlike the lycaenids, the fritillaries didn't yield any new species for me, but it was nice to re-acquaint myself with old friends in a different context.

My favourite Fritillaries have always been Marshies, and so after the initial heart in mouth moment when I thought I'd found Cynthia's, I was delighted to catch up with the diminutive locals, termed *glaciegenta* in this groovy new paper: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/syen.12167/abstract>, basically suggesting that in different regions of Europe Marsh Fritillaries partition into a low and high altitude form, and splitting a few of these into new species. For example, in Spain, *Euphydryas aurinia beckeri* (or *Euphydryas beckeri* if you prefer) flies at low altitudes, while *E. aurinia pyrenes-debilis* takes the high ground. *Pyrenes-debilis* is illustrated as the same thing as *glaciegenta* in Tolman and Lewington, but apparently they're quite different on the gene and genital front, having just arrived at the same dwarfism and dark colours by convergent evolution (since they face similar altitude-related problems in the Alps and Pyrenees). Anyway, the gritty little *glaciegentas* were toughing it out by one of our campsites at 2000m towards the end of the walk, apparently they feed on gentians and fly much later in the year than ours, between June and August depending, like many things in the Alps, on the altitude.



Glaciegenta Marsh Fritillary



Glaciegenta Marsh Fritillary

A variety of other high Alpine species were flying alongside these at our campsite, including Shepherd's Fritillaries and Mountain Fritillaries, leading to a not unwelcome ID headache, since the two are ones I've wanted to get a better look at for quite some time. This ambition extended particularly to female Mountain Fritillaries, which have a unique ice-queen blue suffusion, fortunately one obliged.



Shepherd's Frit



Shepherd's Frit



Mountain Fritillary



Mountain Fritillary

These flew alongside their close, and equally similar-looking relatives, Small Pearl-Bordered and Pearl-Bordered Fritillaries, providing a strange lepidopteran anachronism as I found many mud-puddling companionably alongside Silver-Spotted Skippers and Chalkhill Blues – the ultimate species of heady late summer days on the chalk back here, with the orange emperors of the spring woodlands and meadows – weird!



SPBF

Other classic summer species flying alongside these early emergers were the Argynnis species, High Brown, Silver-Washed, Niobe and Dark Green Fritillaries. Dark Green was the commonest by some distance, blazing around the flowery meadows, and remaining as ever, largely unattainable. High Brown was encountered only rarely in some of the small woodland clearings, while Niobe was slightly commoner in some of the rockier grasslands towards the end of the trip.



HBF



HBF

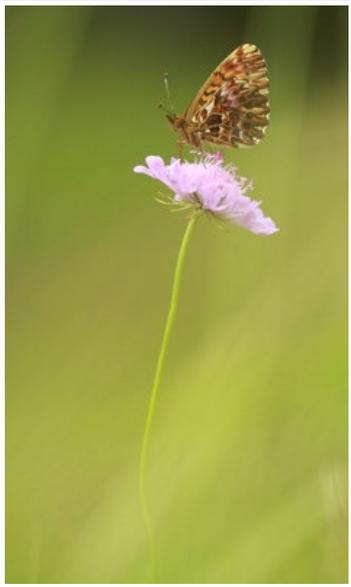


Niobe Fritillary

I actually only managed one Silver-Washed Fritillary, nectaring companionably alongside a High Brown in a small meadow on the last day of the walk. Generally speaking, woodland butterflies were the poorest represented of the butterflies on the walk, with no Hairstreaks, White Admiral or Purple Emperor either, probably because we spent most of our time at high altitudes where all the deciduous trees had given way to conifers. The commonest fritillary from the trip was undoubtedly *Titania*'s, tending to pop up hand in hand with the Purple-Edged Coppers in the bistort-rich meadows. In previous trips to the Alps, it's always been joined by the Lesser Marbled Fritillaries (yet another Bistort feeder), yet these were strangely absent this time, and the second most abundant species was the False Heath Fritillary. Other *Melitaeas* clocked up were Spotted, Grisons, Meadow, Heath and Knapweed Fritillaries.



SWF



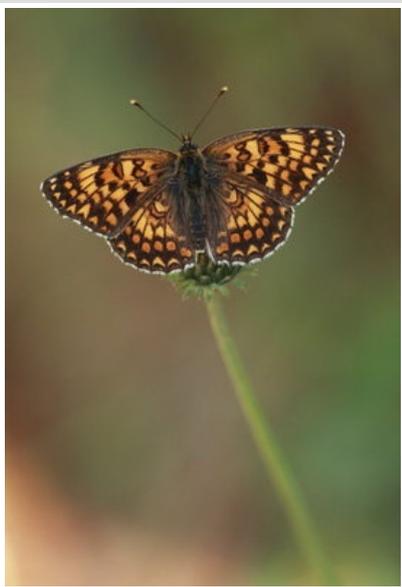
Titania's Fritillary



Titania's Fritillary



False Heath Frit



Knapweed Frit

Generally, I managed to pick my way through this group and the majority of the ID disasters were saved for *Pyrgus* (with a handful helpfully set aside for *Erebia* too, in the interests of fairness), such disasters (I've convinced myself), are a natural part of getting to grips with the awe-inspiring variety of butterflies in the Alps, and well worth the effort.



Titania's Fritillary

Re: William

by Wurzel, 25-Feb-17 10:00 PM GMT

Stunning images William 😊👍 I'd love to have some of those ID headaches 😊👍

Have a goodun

Wurzel

Re: William

by Padfield, 25-Feb-17 10:22 PM GMT

I agree – brilliant pictures.

Male shepherd's frit/mountain frit can indeed be a headache (in the Alps, where ssp. *palustris* of shepherd's frit flies). I only feel really happy identifying them when they are clamped to females. For what it's worth, I'd call mountain for the upperside you've labelled shepherd's, William, but seriously, I wouldn't change the label on that account! Your guess is as good as mine. 😊 I love the female mountain – what a beautiful hue. I've seen them from bright, vulgar blue to plain orange, but that one has really lovely gradations of colour.

Guy

Re: William

by David M, 25-Feb-17 10:46 PM GMT

Padfield wrote:

I love the female mountain – what a beautiful hue.

Agreed. Absolutely a joy when you see one.

Re: William

by Matsukaze, 26-Feb-17 04:01 PM GMT

~~quote~~These flew alongside their close, and equally similar-looking relatives, Small Pearl-Bordered and Pearl-Bordered Fritillaries, providing a strange lepidopteran anachronism as I found many mud-puddling companionably alongside Silver-Spotted Skippers and Chalkhill Blues – the ultimate species of heady late summer days on the chalk back here, with the orange emperors of the spring woodlands and meadows – weird!

Now wondering if there is somewhere in the Alps where all the UK species can be seen in a single day...

Re: William

by David M, 26-Feb-17 05:07 PM GMT

Matsukaze wrote:

Now wondering if there is somewhere in the Alps where all the UK species can be seen in a single day...

That's not quite achievable, but if you went at the optimum time of year and spent a day within a 40km radius of your starting point I reckon you could get close.

Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary would be a notable absentee, whilst I've never seen a Peacock in four years of trying!!

Re: William

by William, 18-Mar-17 03:25 PM GMT

Thanks Chaps!

Guy – I was fairly hesitant with the upperside, he's an underside of the same butterfly – what do you think?



'Whites'

Since spring is getting going now in Somerset, it's time to roll out the last of the Swiss pics – some 'whites' or at least white things!

Black-Veined Whites were probably the most abundant of this group, and it was nice to get some good photo opportunities during the frequent cloudy spells as they roosted on flowerheads in damp meadows and clearings.



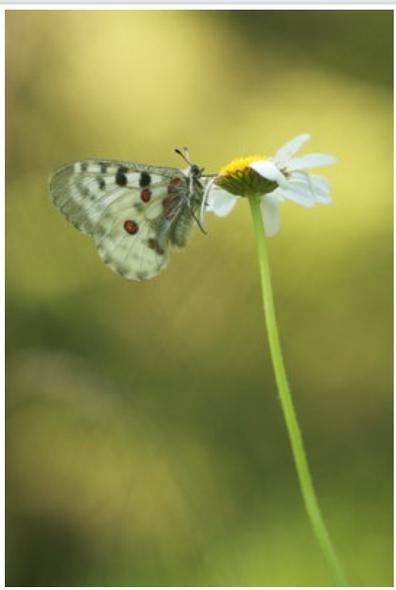


Mountain Green-Veined Whites were also fairly common at higher altitudes, unlike other trips (thanks to the cloudy spells once more), I managed to get a few photos of them too.



The white highlight though, could only be one – I finally managed a prolonged audience with the Apollo towards the end of the trip, after an early start, getting good views of some roosting in a small woodland clearing. Like the Black-Veined Whites, they seemed to seek out white flowers for this, and so proved quite nice and obvious. A fitting end, to a truly unforgettable experience (though Small Apollos proved to be a near miss, lots of scrambling about on scree slopes in promising habitat yielded nothing more than distant white blurs!).





Re: William

by David M, 18-Mar-17 03:33 PM GMT

Some superb compositions there, William. Do you have a foreign jaunt planned for this year?

Re: William

by Wurzel, 18-Mar-17 10:59 PM GMT

I agree with David William – stunning imagery those last set of Apollo shots are just gorgeous 🤩👍👍

Have a goodun

Wurzel

Re: William

by William, 19-Mar-17 12:12 AM GMT

Thanks Guys – I find it's hard to take a photo I don't like of Apollos, they are such impressive butterflies from every angle!

David – I've got some vague plans to head to Eastern Europe in the hope of some Lycaenids – watch this space 😊

BWs,

William

Re: William

by Paul Harfield, 19-Mar-17 12:12 PM GMT

Hi William

As others have said, the female Mountain Fritillary is as beautiful an insect as your capture of it and those Apollos are quite awe inspiring. Every one of the images you post is a masterpiece in itself 😊 . The last couple of entries are truly brilliant 😊 .

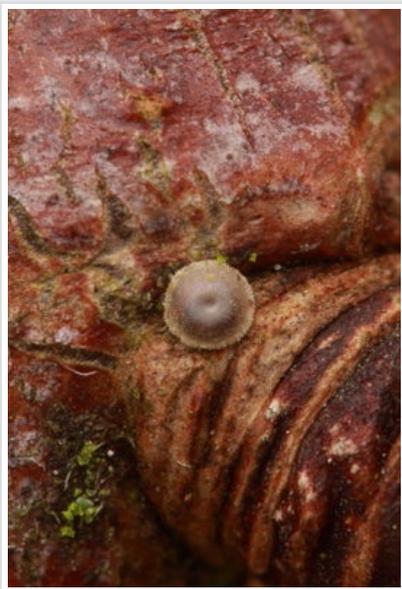
Re: William

by William, 19-Mar-17 06:09 PM GMT

Thanks Paul – much appreciated!

Catching Up

Since spring has finally sprung in Somerset, I've managed to photograph a few butterflies recently – first though, a White-Letter Hairstreak egg from this winter, in a park in the middle of Taunton – a spot where I first found them while idly looking up into an Elm during a traffic jam, fortuitous indeed!



WLH egg



White-Letter egg hatching.

Commas, as others have remarked, seem to be doing well this spring, with them quite often equalling Peacocks on local walks at the moment.



Comma



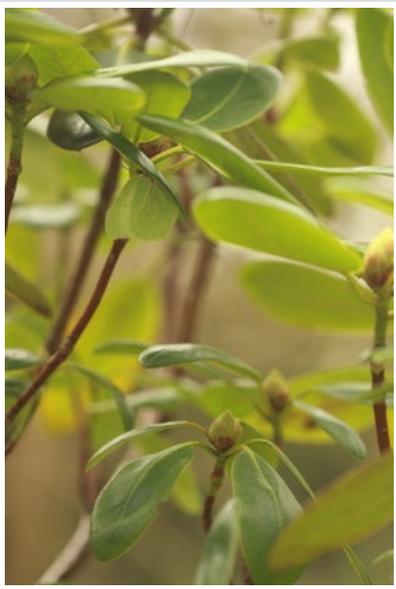
Comma

Brimstones are normally fairly scarce in my part of the world, and so it has proved this spring, with one solitary (but well-behaved) female in the

garden.



Brimstone



Spot the butterfly!



Brimstone

Re: William

by William, 22-Mar-17 10:46 PM GMT

[Larval Doings](#)

Inspired by the exploits of Pete et al., and living close to a couple of good Fritillary colonies, I thought it was high time I got out and about this spring and looked for some larvae rather than just staring at photos of them. So it was that Tuesday morning found me at Haddon Hill as the rain came tumbling down, and I wondered quite what it was I was doing. Fortunately, the sky cleared, and the sun appeared, and after about 20 minutes, I found my target – a Heath Fritillary larva. The foodplant, Cow Wheat is clearly only just germinating on site at this relatively high altitude site, with no plants any more developed than the pair of seed leaves, poking up amongst the bilberries. I quickly went on to find 4 more larvae, though probably more by luck than judgement (I found no more with another hour of searching after these). All the larvae were basking on leaf litter lying over a mossy substrate, the first about a foot from the nearest foodplant, and the other 4 in amongst the bilberry and the cow wheat (on the edge of a pony track, presumably providing a sheltered little 'valley')



Heath Fritillary Larva



Heath Fritillary Larva



Heath Fritillary Larvae



Heath Fritillary Larvae

Buoyed by this success, I decided to ride my luck and head to Clatworthy Reservoir. This is one of the stronger Small Pearl-Bordered Fritillary sites on Exmoor, and unlike many of the others, is fairly easily accessible, with the fritillaries' Violet foodplant growing quite obviously among the bracken (which is cut rotationally). I began by looking amongst the dead bracken fronds, but found surprisingly few violets, and those that I did find didn't seem to fit Jeremy Thomas' description of ones in humid patches where the vegetation is beginning to close over. With this in mind, I turned my attention to the main path through the site, this has a small bank on one side, over which grasses hang, creating a warm, damp microclimate. Here were far better developed Violets, poking up amongst the tussocks, and crucially, they seemed to be littered with feeding damage, with the lobes of many of the heart-shaped violet leaves removed with almost surgical precision. On the scent, I moved down the bank, checking the violets as I went along. It's likely I missed quite a few larvae, hidden amongst the dense mat of fescues, but I did eventually manage one, sheltering on a leaf under the Violets – seemingly a 4th instar, without the 5th's magnificent horns!



Small Pearl – Bordered Fritillary Larva – 4th Instar



Small Pearl – Bordered Fritillary Larva – 4th Instar



Violets occupied by Small Pearl – Bordered Fritillary



Violets occupied by Small Pearl – Bordered Fritillary Larva

Today my luck ran out, after packing my passport and heading over to Ashclyst Forest in Devon in search of Pearl-Bordered Fritillary larvae. It seemed by gamble had not paid off, when on arrival, I was greeted by a hailstorm – surely enough to dampen the enthusiasm of even the most famished larva. The sun did eventually materialise, and despite evidence of rampant violet-nibbling once more, 3 hours of searching turned up nothing. I intend to return some other day – the habitat looks superb, with great drifts of violets poking up through the bracken that is so carefully managed by the National Trust here. I'd be grateful for any tricks or tips that people have for finding these – I'll be back!



Pearl – Bordered Fritillary larval feeding damage?



Pearl – Bordered Fritillary larval feeding damage?

Re: William

by bugboy, 22-Mar-17 11:32 PM GMT

2 out of 3 is a pretty good return and some interesting insights into the hunt for them. Good luck with the Pearl cats, looks like you're close 😊

Re: William

by Wurzel, 23-Mar-17 11:31 PM GMT

Interesting shots of the Heath Frit larvae William 😊 Also are second brood Small Pearls a possibility in August down that way? 😊 I might be down there for a week around that time...

Have a goodun

Wurzel

Re: William

by Matsukaze, 23-Mar-17 11:55 PM GMT

It surprises me Brimstones are seen as often as they are in Somerset, particularly west Somerset – distribution of the foodplants is extremely patchy. They must travel long distances.

If memory serves, Ashclyst Forest has some relatively recent Purple Emperor records – one to look out for if you are back there soon.

Re: William

by William, 24-Mar-17 02:12 PM GMT

Thanks Bugboy – hope springs eternal!

Wurzel – interesting question, I'm not entirely sure of the answer. Clatworthy has one of the strongest populations in Somerset, but given that it's relatively high up on Exmoor (on the famously misty Brendons), I'm not sure that they'd produce a second brood (the same can be said for most of the Exmoor sites). Clatworthy does have quite a strong DGF population, and Grayling also fly on Exmoor and the nearby Quantocks (lots of Purple Hairstreaks that show quite nicely here), so the area still has plenty to offer later in the year.

Looking at the Somerset Transects, none of the Mendip sites produced second broods of SPBF last year, but they might be worth a go (Crook Peak/Priddy Pools). If you're planning on looking, feel free to drop me a line for a bit more information!

Chris – ditto – I've never actually seen Buckthorn round me (despite searching), except when planted by benevolent lepidopterists. I'd noted the old PE records, though I don't really know the place well enough to start searching – a project for July perhaps!

BWs,

William

Re: William

by Wurzel, 25-Mar-17 12:39 AM GMT

Cheers for the info William, I'll have to see what I can see when I get down there 😊 My parents have yet to book the cottage for us all to stay in so when they do I'll PM you of that's ok.

Have a goodun

Wurzel

Re: William

by William, 24-Aug-17 10:47 PM GMT

Frit Larvae

Life has become rather busy this year, and so I've been rather quiet on UKB – safe to say I've been enjoying everyone's superb sightings and photos (and the constantly evolving website) nonetheless. I'm now at home after a trip to the Alps and Hungary, as the lucky recipient of BC EIG's annual research grant – the opportunity of a lifetime (of which more later), and so have a bit of time to catch up (in between looking for butterflies)!

Spring was rather quiet from a butterflying point of view, since I had very little time on my hands, but before I returned to University, I finally managed a trip to sacred lands in Sussex. The main purpose was to find Large Tortoiseshell (congrats Bugboy!), though I (like many others) failed on that front. Still, with the incomparable Neil as my guide, I still had two days that will live long in the memory at Rewell Wood and Chantry Hill, giants of the butterflying world – even though it was early in the season, the scale and quality of these places, and what Neil and friends are achieving in Sussex is both magnificent and heartening. I was sadly too early to see them springing into life with the first Hairstreaks and Skippers, but I went home happy with my first ever Pearl cat, and a vow to return!



Buoyed by this success, I returned to Haddon Hill on the 11th of April to look for Heath Fritillary larvae, and was rather bowled over to find 32 in half an hour – again, I think more by luck than judgement, all of these were in one small part of the site (about 4x3m) – these spectacular densities were not repeated elsewhere! Basically all of them were basking either on leaves, or mats of moss, through which some rather straggly bilberry was growing, and the Cow Wheat was getting going. What seemed to set this area apart from the rest of the site was the open structure of the vegetation – the bilberry wasn't dense and bushy, but rather stunted (I guess grazed recently by some of the roaming Exmoor Ponies), giving the Cow Wheat a foothold, and the larvae somewhere to bask.

Here's a picture which hopefully shows what I mean – all of the larvae (I presume 5th instar?) were in the area circled in red, note the much bushier Bilberry behind (already in leaf), compared to the scrawny twigs poking up in the circled area (with its thick mats of warm moss).



Heath Fritillary Larval Country

Here's a larva too, to give a bit of context.



Heath Fritillary Larva

And some more!



Heath Fritillary Larva



Heath Fritillary Larva



Heath Fritillary Larva



Heath Fritillary Larva



Heath Fritillary Larvae



Re: William

by David M, 24-Aug-17 10:56 PM GMT

William wrote:

....as the lucky recipient of BC EIG's annual research grant – the opportunity of a lifetime (of which more later)

This will be extremely interesting, William. I shall greatly look forward to further details.

Re: William

by Katrina, 03-Sep-17 12:49 PM GMT

I too am interested to hear what your project will be. Are you just keeping us in suspense or is it a secret project? 🤔

Re: William

by William, 26-Sep-17 08:45 PM GMT

Thanks chaps – here it is!

Hungary

As I mentioned on my previous post, I was one of this year's lucky recipients of the Annual Research Bursary provided by Butterfly Conservation's European Interests Group (see: http://www.bc-eig.org.uk/downloads/EIG_Annual_Research_Bursary.pdf). Put simply, this is the opportunity of a lifetime – up to £500 for a cash-strapped student to head out to Europe and its wealth of huge, intact ecosystems (and all the butterflies they entail), asking only an A4 proposal and a write up at the end. The generosity of EIG is extraordinary, and was much appreciated by me this summer.

I used my grant to go east, specifically to the Fertő-Hanság National Park (<https://www.ferto-hansag.hu/en>), which surrounds the Hungarian part of the Neusiedlersee – the huge alkaline lake that straddles the Hungary/Austria border. The lake and surrounding wetlands are of enormous importance for birds, and for the duration of my 6 week trip, I was lucky enough to be living right next to it. This meant I could enjoy White – Tailed and Eastern Imperial Eagles, Black – Winged Stilts, Moustached Warblers, Night Herons, Spoonbills and many more right outside my front door, this extraordinary variety of species proved to be normal service in the Fertő-Hanság, and is emblematic of the quality of the place – at every turn I was confronted, and delighted by its seething, throbbing biodiversity – unforgettable stuff. Away from the lake, the park also takes in large areas of steppe (with birds like Great Bustard and Saker), wet woodland (poplar plantations with a liberal sprinkling of Lesser Purple Emperors), and a great many beautiful wet meadows.

This latter habitat was strangely reminiscent of my native Somerset – appropriately so, for, like Somerset, it provides a crucial refuge for Maculinea, not arion, but alcon, teleius and nausithous – Alcon Blue, Scarce Large Blue and Dusky Large Blue. My project (for which I had the grant), was to spend 6 weeks assisting the staff at the Fertő-Hanság with mark–release–recapture work on these butterflies, which they've been doing for an astonishing 17 years (starting 2 years after I was born – humbling!). The work provides really useful information about phenology (when are the butterflies emerging? Is this changing in response to climate?), population size (how is this affected by management? Is there any pattern to changes?), and dispersal (how good are the Maculinea at dealing with obstructions and colonising new sites?), and has helped to inform the management of the sites at which they fly, resulting in some seriously impressive populations.

To put this into context, many UKBers have gone in pursuit of Large Blues in the last few years, and have seen how lean things can be at Collard Hill – I was volunteering there in 2014, when they were particularly thin on the ground 7 or 8 sightings meant a good day, certainly, numbers never seem to be particularly high. Obviously, 2014 was a year when the blues were hit by a nasty combination of a furnace-like 2013 summer and a wet winter, and numbers are now much higher, but it's fair to say that I'm not used to seeing Maculinea in large quantities. Thus, a communal roost of 40 or 50 butterflies in the Hungarian meadows, a whirling, swirling cloud of blue and brown wings as the sun set, is a sight that will be hard to ever beat – the populations of these fast-declining butterflies in the Fertő-Hanság are some of the strongest in Hungary, and perhaps even Europe as a whole. Indeed, 2017 seems to have been a record year for them there (as it has been for Large Blues here), and the totals we marked at our 4 sites are all the highest ever, often 200 in a day at one, with my personal tally coming to a respectable 2400 – heartening stuff.

Anyway, some photos, I didn't take as many as perhaps I might have done, being busy trying to get butterflies in a net and within reach of a marker pen rather than a camera, and so many of the memories will not have been consigned to pixels, but here's a selection.



Alcon Blue



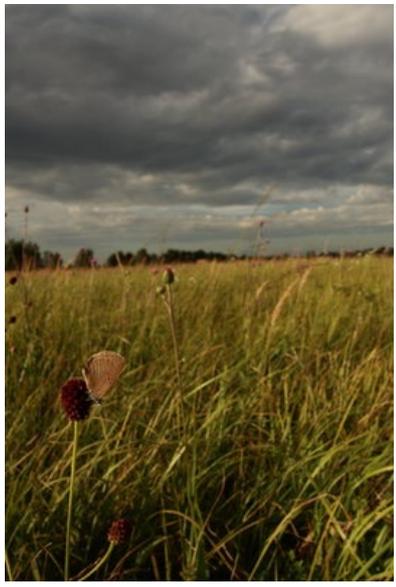
Dusky Large Blue



Scarce Large Blue



Marking a Dusky Large Blue



Dusky Large Blue



Scarce Large Blue



Scarce Large Blue



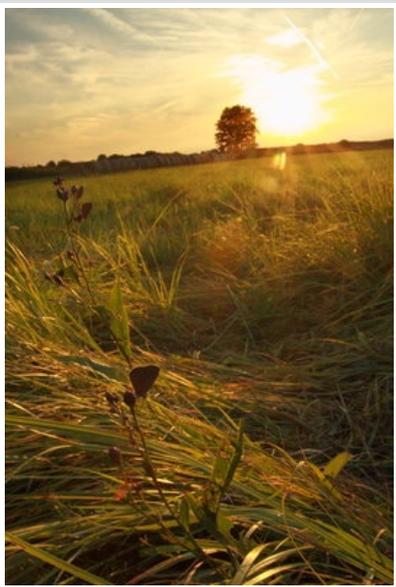
Alcon Blue ova



Dusky Large Blues



Scarce Large Blues



Dusky Large Blue



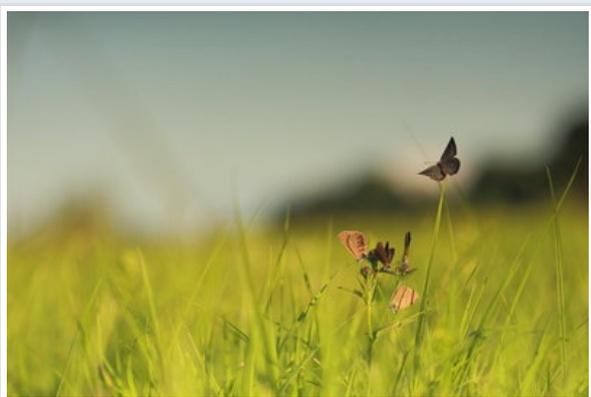
Dusky Large Blues



Scarce and Dusky Large Blues



Dusky Large Blues



Maculinea

I've got a slightly fuller account, with a bit more about the Maculinea on my fledgling blog if anyone's interested, though you'll have to excuse my attempted heights of literary fervour - <https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=6004324128376657891#allposts>.

Re: William

by Wurzel, 27-Sep-17 01:58 PM GMT

Fantastic stuff William 😊👍👍 I've got some similar shots of Dusky Large Blues from a week in Czech, always on that red-purple grass 😊 Do the EIG offer bursaries to cash strapped mature ex-students? 😊

Have a goodun

Wurzel

Re: William

by Goldie M, 27-Sep-17 04:59 PM GMT

Hi! William, I just love your shots, they're so different from the norm, much more natural looking, fantastic, Goldie 😊

Re: William

by bugboy, 27-Sep-17 08:03 PM GMT

What a fabulous place to call work for a few weeks 😊 with some very evocative pictures to illustrate it 😊

Re: William

by William, 27-Sep-17 09:45 PM GMT

Thanks chaps – it really was the trip of a lifetime! Wurzel – the grass is the *Sanguisorba officinalis*/Great Burnet, the larval foodplant, to which Dusky Large Blues are very attached (they rest on it, roost on it, nectar on it, and lay eggs on it), the only other plant I ever saw them perch on was Saw-wort.

Cheers,

Will

Re: William

by David M, 27-Sep-17 10:34 PM GMT

You dedicated your precious time wisely, William, by the looks of things.

Wonderful sequence of rare butterflies, with behaviour rarely seen by we relatively bereft UK-dwellers.

Re: William

by essexbuzzard, 27-Sep-17 11:52 PM GMT

Some very evocative pictures there, William, and it seems you put your grant to good use. Anything that can be done to help the Large Blues, an amazingly complex group, can only be good.