

Five nights of moth-trapping and just a little butterfly and bird spotting by day, in the Órség National Park, south-west Hungary mid-September 2009 - by Peter Davey

A tour to Hungary was arranged for a group of moth enthusiasts between 11th and 16th September. Like the early May bank holiday 'mothing weekend' event, the trip was hosted by Szabolcs Sáfián (Sáfi) a leading member of the Hungarian Lepidopterological Society and executive of the Hungarian Natural Heritage Trust. The members of our group included Tom Morris (Dorset Moth Group), Brian Bewsher (Devon Moth Group), Neil Sherman (Suffolk Moth Group) and me. Unfortunately, a number of people who originally expressed interest in the tour decided not to join us in the weeks leading up to our departure. This was the third eco-tour hosted by the Trust in 2009. The second tour took place at the end of July when the European Interest Group <http://www.bc-eig.org.uk> stayed in the village to see the four Large Blue species.

We chose to fly with Ryanair from Stansted to Graz in Austria; the return fare was just over £80, including an airport tax of £50, so very cheap. We hired a car from Graz for the duration to enable us to visit different habitats away from our base in the Órség and Balaton regions.

We arrived at Kercaszomor village where the Hungarian National Trust is centred, on the evening of the 11th and were immediately welcomed by Sáfi, his girl-friend Agnes and her father, Josef. They had prepared a fantastic meal for us which we gladly tucked into. Meanwhile, Sáfi set up the moth lamps, and on this warm late summer evening plenty of moths soon started to arrive.

Moth highlights included: *Depressaria douglasella*, *Dichomeris limosellus*, *Assara terebrella*, *Oncocera semirubella*, *Ecpyrrhorhoe rubiginalis*, *Diasemia litterata*, *Lemonia taraxaci*, Streaked Wave, Clay Fan-foot, Shaded Fan-foot, *Diachrysia zosimi*, Dewick's Plusia, *Amphipyra livida*, Purple Cloud, Cumberland Gem, Beautiful Arches, Double Line, Plain Clay and Four-spotted Footman. Of these, the most significant was *Lemonia taraxaci*, a south-east European 'Eggar' species with uniform orange wings and a single black dot on the forewing. The most stunning moth of the night was undoubtedly *Diachrysia zosimi*, a Plusia species that bears some resemblance to Slender Burnished Brass and is hosted by the same foodplant as that of the Scarce Large Blue and Dusky Large Blue butterflies, great burnet *Sanguisorba officinalis*.

During our stay we saw a large variety of bird-life, not least in the branches and on the trunk of a fifty foot tall dead tree near our accommodation. This seemed to be a magnet for many birds, especially woodpeckers of which we saw six species: Lesser-spotted, Middle-spotted, Greater-spotted, Green, Grey-headed and Black. Other interesting species included: Tree Sparrow, Serin, Hawfinch (including flock of ten), Honey Buzzard, Raven (including flock of fifty) and Black Redstart.

Well rested and replete following a good night's sleep and a mega breakfast, Sáfi took us on a walk around the village primarily to see the hay meadow habitats. The weather was very warm and sunny, and butterflies were very active. Of the 33 species we encountered, the most interesting were: Tufted Marbled Skipper, Silver-spotted Skipper, Swallowtail, Pale Clouded Yellow, Large Copper, Small Blue, Short-tailed Blue, Silver-studded Blue, High Brown Fritillary, Weaver's Fritillary, Map, Spotted Fritillary, Heath Fritillary, Common Glider, Chestnut Heath and Great Banded Grayling. As we approached the end of our walk, we passed through willow-rich damp hay meadow and a second brood Lesser Purple Emperor flew across our path and alighted atop a ten foot-high willow bush to bask in the hot sunshine and afforded us all a superb view.



Diachrysa zosimi, Common Glider and *Lemonia taraxaci* - photos by Neil Sherman



Sooty Copper, Beautiful Arches and Lesser Purple Emperor – photos by Tom Morris



Pine Processionary – photo by Tom Morris, Large Copper – photo by Neil Sherman, and *Idia clavaria* – photo by Tom Morris

The route we took on our walk passed through lands owned by the Trust. In early August, Cambridge Conservation Volunteers led by Dr Louise Bacon travelled to Kercaszomor to carry out scrub clearance and remove invasive giant goldenrod *Solidago gigantean* from the meadows. The group was assisted by Sáfi, Paul and Susie Butter, and me and my son Stephen. As a result of everyone's efforts, the cleared areas are now primed to embrace future expansion of the 'Large Blue' species. The Volunteers also created tree-free 'butterfly' corridors to link adjacent hay meadows separated by woodland. During our mid-September visit, two of Sáfi's Hungarian colleagues, Gábor and Bálint, plus Agnes and Josef, continued the program of scrub clearance on Trust-owned damp hay meadow that was untouched during the August initiative, creating additional 'Large Blue'-friendly habitat.



Dry hay meadow scrub/*Solidago* clearance immediately before and immediately after CCV work in August (first two photos by Vince Lea of Cambridge CV) and the same meadow a month later (photo by Neil Sherman)



Before and after ... damp hay meadow *Solidago* cutting - photos taken in August by Paul Butter (Dorset Moth Group). The sallow bush behind Annette was the one where the Lesser Purple Emperor flew to and alighted on, on Saturday.

On this evening we had an early meal before setting off to run light traps and deploy wine ropes at Szalafő about ten kilometres to the north of Kercaszomor, but still lying within the Őrség National Park. We were joined by one of Sáfi's colleagues, András Ambrus, Hungary's foremost dragonfly expert, who travelled all the way from Sopron University to be with us for the evening – he used a very powerful HgMI bulb which seemed to illuminate much of the National Park! The evening was clear and although mild, moth activity was subdued; however, a Dark Crimson Underwing did visit our wine ropes, and we also saw a Red Underwing at light. Other interesting species included *Noctua interposita*, a moth that is similar to Lesser Yellow Underwing. We also recorded Oak Lutestring and Kent Black Arches. Light traps at the accommodation produced many of the species noted there on the previous night, but also included Large Thorn and *Idia calvaria*.



Sáfi and András by the BIG moth light – photo by Tom Morris

On Sunday we spent the day in the Kétvölgy area of the Park in pleasantly warm and bright conditions. Meadows adjacent to this village used to be one of the few localities in Hungary for the Danube Clouded Yellow, but reduction in the habitat hosting stocks of clustered broom *Chamaecytisus supinus* proved disastrous for the butterfly and it has become extinct. New butterfly species for the trip included: Marsh Fritillary, Scarce Copper, Purple-edged Copper, Mazarine Blue and Dusky large Blue. We also had a very good view of a Goshawk flying out of a wood and circling above the floor of the valley, and of Crested Tits moving among the branches of scots pine at the edge of woodland. We also saw Great Grey Shrike characteristically perched on telegraph wire.

A web containing second instar larvae of Marsh Fritillary was discovered among devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*. The Purple-edged Copper was flying on a low-nutrient 'leached' grassland slope. The clay substrate creates damp microhabitats which are ideal conditions for this butterfly at the site. The Dusky Large Blue, a female, was a surprising addition and still on the wing several weeks after it is usually over, flying in characteristic fashion around the flowers of great burnet *Sanguisorba officinalis*.



Dusky Large Blue - photo by Neil Sherman

On our return back to base during the evening, I accompanied Sáfi to the damp meadow where his colleagues had been clearing scrub and goldenrod, to see what progress had been made. We found a second-brood adult Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary plus a caterpillar of Small Elephant Hawk in the meadow. After an early supper we all headed to the Slovenian border at the end of the village with wine ropes and light traps. New species for the tour included: *Monopis monachella*, *Ancylis laetana*, *Ostrinia nubilalis*, Red Underwing, Dark Spectacle and Bordered Sallow. The Red Underwing was attracted to wine ropes, but we failed to see our target species: Clifden Nonpareil. Back in the village the light traps yielded *Evergestis pallidata*, *Sitochroa verticalis*, *Antheraea yamamai*, *Eupithecia ericeata*. The latter species resembles Juniper Pug but unlike this species, also feeds on deciduous plants. *Antheraea yamamai*, a massive silk moth, was originally introduced from Japan to Austria in the middle of the 19th century and is now widespread among oak forest across central Europe. Although we did not encounter Clifden Nonpareil at the border, one was attracted to our light trap at our accommodation, much to the delight of the group.



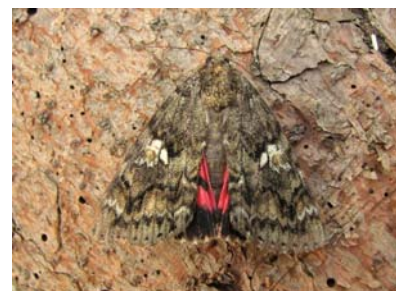
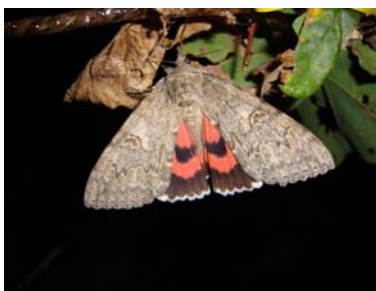
Antheraea yamamai dwarfing a Peach Blossom - photo by Brian Bewsher

On Monday morning, after a leisurely breakfast and the usual time-consuming but thoroughly enjoyable task of identifying and photographing the previous night's haul, we executed our plan to run a moth trap at a very different habitat to that found in the Órség. We drove east under leaden skies and eventually arrived at a Nature Reserve at a wetland site south of Balaton airport, upon which the sun magically appeared to give us a fine, warm, sunny afternoon. Looking around the Reserve, we couldn't help but notice hundreds of swallows, house martins and sand martins flying all around us over grassland adjacent to the water's edge. They were feeding on winged insects often just a few centimetres above the ground. From observation decks, we saw many pygmy cormorant, a south-east Europe speciality, Little Grebe and Great-crested Grebe, Caspian Gull and Reed Bunting. We also heard several warblers calling from the reeds: Sedge, Reed and Great Reed, and Penduline Tit. A Short-toed Treecreeper flying between tree trunks was a bonus as was a Yellow Wagtail flying overhead. On leaving the reserve, we stopped off at a bridge straddling a canal. Along the bank of the canal we came across birthwort *Aristolochia* sp., host plant to the Southern Festoon butterfly. Whilst there, we heard quite a commotion emanating from the nearby estuary. We looked in the general direction of the noise, and then we understood why the geese were so agitated; we caught a glimpse of a white-tailed eagle flying above their roost. We also saw Marsh Harrier quartering the reedbeds by Lake Balaton.

Driving to the north of Lake Balaton, we headed through the town of Tapolca. The bright warm sunshine of the afternoon had eventually given way to thundery showers but not before we arrived at our destination for the evening: dolomite grassland on unused military land north of Nyirad, some 130 kilometers from Kercaszomor. We were able to reconnoitre the site for half an hour before the weather closed in. The habitat was fantastic with areas of warm oak forest and leached chalky grassland that supported a wealth of diverse flora. In the short time we were there, we were able to walk-up Chalk-hill Blue, Reverdin's Blue, Berger's Clouded Yellow, Grayling and False Grayling, five new butterflies to the trip. We also walked-up some interesting moth species too: Straw Belle, Oblique-striped, *Mecyna flavalis* and *Nothris lemniscella*. However, as the heavens opened, we

retreated back to Nyirad for a restaurant ‘snack’, despite having a full picnic in the boot prepared for us that very morning by Josef. That was consumed later on that evening.

By the time we returned to the military ground, the main rain area had passed through, leaving damp but warm, mainly cloudy conditions as dusk fell. Peeling back loose bark on an old oak bough yielded *Amphipyra livida*, a moth that looks very much like our Mouse moth, but when fresh, it has a fabulous blue sheen across the otherwise grey forewing and orange/copper hindwings. We hastily deployed wine ropes and set up the 250w blended bulb suspended from an oak branch in a grassy clearing surrounded by oaks. Moth activity was high, and it was not long before some very interesting species started to appear. The first tour of the wine ropes revealed a Dark Crimson Underwing, the first of four to be attracted that evening by Sáfi’s irresistible but top secret sugar solution, although I gather Palinka was added to the mix. During the course of the night (up to 1am. when we departed) we saw the following noteworthy species: *Philedone gerningana*, *Acrobasis tumidana*, *Artiora evonymaria*, Scarce Blackneck, Scarce Bordered Straw, *Auchmis detersa*, Pale Stigma, *Xanthia sulphurago*, *Episema glaucina*, *Cleoceris scoriacea*, Ash Shoulder-knot, Neglected Rustic, *Euxoa distinguenda* and *Euxoa hastifera*. *Artiora evonymaria* is rather similar to our Lilac Beauty, but hides its hindwing completely beneath its forewing when at rest. *Auchmis detersa* is rather similar to Blair’s Shoulder-knot but slightly more broad-winged and a barberry feeder. The Pale Stigma is like a very big unicolorous Dun-bar, but with a row of distinct black chevrons parallel to the edge of the forewing. *Xanthia sulphurago* is a beautiful ‘Sallow’ moth resembling a small black-dotted Orange Sallow. *Episema glaucina* is a highly variable species with the most well marked resembling Beautiful Gothic; it feeds on grape hyacinth and St Bernard’s lily. *Cleoceris scoriacea* is another species from this autumn group, but at first glance could be mistaken for Spectacle. Ash Shoulder-knot, an oak-feeder, resembles a cross between Grey Shoulder-knot and Golden-rod Brindle. *Euxoa distinguenda* and *Euxoa hastifera* were two species closely related to White-line Dart and Square-spot Dart. Around midnight, the second Clifden Nonpareil of our trip flew hesitantly towards the light and was netted. It turned out to be a worn dark-winged female; a real bonus for the evening.



Red Underwing and Straw Belle – photos by Brian Bewsher; Dark Crimson Underwing – photo by Tom Morris



Xanthia sulphurago, Clifden Nonpareil and *Episema glaucina* - photos by Neil Sherman



Artiora evonymaria, Pale Stigma and *Auchmis deterosa* - photos by Neil Sherman



Euxoa hastifera and Ash Shoulder-knot - photos by Neil Sherman; *Cleoceris scoriacea* – photo by Tom Morris

Our final full day in Hungary was spent looking for the Fire Salamander *Salamandra salamandra*. We headed north-west crossing and exiting the Órség before re-entering it in a cold forested valley west of Szentgotthárd. Although we hunted high and low, under wet stones, beneath rotten logs and next to fishy streams, our 'precious' was nowhere to be found, though we did see toads including yellow-bellied, frogs, grass snake, sand lizard and a slow worm. Sáfi suspected that there had been insufficient rain to tempt this spectacular creature from its summer hiding place. An off-piste stroll beneath the woodland canopy revealed many fungi of different species: hedgehog fungus, *Sparassis crispa*, *Paxillus involutus*, *Russula emetica* and enough Parasol Mushrooms to complement the evening meal.

Talking of meals, the group would like to thank Agnes and her dad Josef for providing us with such excellent food during our stay. The cuisine was always varied, contained fresh meat and vegetables and was true home from home cooking. The wine and beer was rather good too. In fact we think Josef should set up a restaurant somewhere in Hungary; it would have no problem in attracting clientele and a five-star rating. Thanks also to Sáfi yet again, for arranging such a successful and enjoyable tour.





Willow-leaved Gentian (*Gentiana asclepiades*) and Yellow-bellied Toad (this one seen at Szalafő) - photos by Neil Sherman