

Butterflies of Estonia

Holiday Report
8 - 15 July 2015



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Introduction

Many people head south on holiday to see butterflies around the Med or in the Alps, assuming that the Baltic states are too far north to be interesting. Yet Estonia is a relatively untamed country, a land of forests, lakes and islands. It is on the great migratory routes for birds and moths. It has a very high proportion of its land designated as National Parks or nature reserves, but not the over-regulated sorts. About the size of the Netherlands, Estonia has less than a tenth of the Dutch population. They have wonderful botanical diversity, particularly orchids, and are proud of their wooded meadows, ancient deciduous forests and bogs – an unfamiliar habitat to most entomologists, so that Bog Fritillary, Cranberry Fritillary & Cranberry Blue are likely to be species we have never seen. The forests are home to majestic giants like Poplar Admiral, Camberwell Beauty, Purple Emperor and Lesser Purple Emperor. Large Coppers and Large Blues are both to be found in their respective habitats. A mix of typical European species with unfamiliar northern species such as Baltic Grayling and Lapland Ringlet. These were the thoughts that drew us to try Estonia.

Rob Parker & John Maddocks travelled from the UK for this holiday. The tour was organised by our hosts in Estonia, courtesy of Marika Mann. It was led by local guides Rein and Peeter, with added input from Erki Õunap.



Day 1: Wednesday 8th July

We turned our backs on the airport and drove south-east along good quality roads (EU funded). The country is flat and sparsely populated and the drive gave an opportunity to absorb the open environment as agriculture and villages gave way to forests and rivers. Our driver answered our questions as we ate up the kilometres en route to Tartu, and the south-eastern corner of the country. Our destination was Mooste, a former manor, where we were welcomed to a converted

and beautifully modernised vodka factory. The setting was exquisite, tranquil and overlooking a large lake. We stayed there for the first 3 nights, and enjoyed a high standard of catering throughout.

Day 2: Thursday 9th July

We were driven to the Jarvselja Forest, where we had an appointment with Erki Ounap, one of Estonia's foremost entomologists, and author of the latest (2014) guide to Estonian butterflies. A Purple Emperor dropped down to welcome us as we stood outside the forest study centre of the



Tartu University. He briefed us on the season, which was proving to be poor for butterflies, and on the places to look for our target species. He then led us through the forest to the margin of the adjacent Uulike Bog. The ground under our feet was soft with deep moss and bilberry and cranberry. It was wet in places, but not muddy. Before long, John was chasing his first Moorland Clouded Yellow and we were inspecting the Silver-studded Blues at our feet. Eventually one of the Blues was found to be a Cranberry Blue – another rare butterfly. After lunch

we drove on towards Piusa railway embankment, and started to notch up some more familiar species, noting that we had Pearly Heath and Chestnut Heath as well as Small Heath. A sudden downpour overtook us and we moved further along the railway line to the final destination, a sandy track catching the afternoon sun along a steep embankment. Here we were pleased to find the Purple-shot Copper as well as some of the 23 fritillaries on the Estonian list. At one point we were just 400 metres from the Russian border.



Day 3: Friday 10th July

Under a grey sky, we drove north to a part of the Karkna Forest known as a haunt of the Poplar Admiral. The wide ride through mature osiers looked promising, but it was a while before the sun came out and at first only the Ringlets were flying. As the weather improved we were delighted to encounter the Large Chequered Skipper, Geranium Argus and Amanda's Blue. The Lesser Marbled Fritillaries outnumbered the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, and then we found the distinctive Scarce Fritillary. The Wall Browns were very large, and at first we thought they could have been

Northern Wall Brown, which would have been a new species for John. Alas they weren't! They turned out to be Large Wall Brown instead. We were alert for Poplar Admirals, but the closest we came was a White Admiral. Sadly the sky was grey again so we ate our packed lunch and headed back for a proper look at the Jarvelja Forest. Again we chose a likely looking ride for *populi*, but that was not to be; we had to make do with another Purple Emperor. Actually, it was a very agreeable spot, particularly for the Large Chequered Skippers, although most of the species were repeats of the morning's tally.



Day 4: Saturday 11th July

Already it was time for our transit from the South-east corner to the western extremity of Estonia. Naturally our guide stopped at suitable spots en route. The first was in the landscape preservation area at Ainge, and a recent clearfell area was productive. We added Large Grizzled Skipper, Black-veined White, Northern Brown Argus, Mazarine Blue, Heath Fritillary, and John got the photograph he wanted of a Purple-shot Copper. After that, it was the Tihemetsa Forest, and we chose a sunny ride with a wide ditch surrounded by flowery grassy margins. Here we found Large Coppers chasing the abundant Lesser Marbled Fritillaries up and down the ditch, both glinting glorious gold in the sun. And there was an unexpected Black Hairstreak resting on a thistle. All too soon, we were back on the road, and headed for Parnu, Estonia's largest coastal resort, facing south in the Gulf of Riga.

We took lunch in the pretty town centre and then moved on to Nedrema wooded meadow – an interesting habitat of well spaced mature deciduous trees letting sunlight into a mass of flowers at ankle level. Most of the blue/yellow flowers were cow wheat (not the one we have in Britain, but of 5 other varieties). The first butterfly we spotted was the Woodland Brown – a species now extinct in much of Europe – and there were a dozen of them at our feet! Also present were plenty of Lesser Marbled Fritillaries and the delightful Large Chequered



Skippers. By the time we reached Tuhu bog it was late in the afternoon, and we walked the boardwalk with a brisk wind blowing across the open habitat, seeing only a handful of familiar species, but in the company of a Small Tortoiseshell that kept moving ahead of us across the

boards. We got to Matsalu National Park in time for a rendezvous with an evening boat ride in search of beavers . . .

Our second boat of the day was much larger – the 22:15 sailing for the ferry to the island of Saaremaa, which is about 7 times the size of the Isle of Wight. The crossing arrives at Muhu island which is linked to Saaremaa by a causeway, and at that hour we had plenty of light still, but with a pleasing pink tinge. By midnight we reached the Loona Guest house, our home for the next 3 nights. It had been a long day and we were ready for bed.

Day 5: Sunday 12th July

Our first day on Saaremaa island was spent in the vicinity of our guesthouse at Viidumae nature reserve, beginning with light woodland which was home to a strong colony of the Woodland Brown. We found them in the grass, up trees, chasing and pairing, generally at home in an area they seemed to have all to themselves. It was nice to have photographic opportunities with such a scarce



Woodland Brown mating pair

species. We looked in vain for the Dusky Meadow Brown and enjoyed the company of so many fritillaries, all of which had to be inspected, and eventually one of them turned out to be Nickerl's Fritillary.

After lunch, we went on to see an alvar habitat at Kogula. This is an unusual dry area of limestone pavement, covered with a very thin soil layer, which is home to unusual plant species. It was surprising to find shrubs and small trees growing there, but the pavement was broken and the cracks allow the roots to get established. Relatively few butterflies flew here; but the species were interesting. Chestnut Heath and Heath Fritillary were very much at home, and both Northern Brown Argus, Small Blue, Geranium Argus, Large Wall Brown and even Woodland Brown were found too. So was Wood White – but was it *L. sinapis*, or *L. juvernica* – the Cryptic Wood White? Fortunately enough

homework had been done for us to know that both species were present in Estonia, and DNA testing on a large sample had established that they flew together with the Cryptic Wood White in preponderance. We were not equipped for microscopic genitalia inspection in the field, so we had to leave it at that. Apart from a second specimen across the road, this was the only Wood White encounter of the week. Later in the afternoon we moved further up the peninsula of Tagamoisa to a larger patch of alvar where the invasion of scrub and trees had spoiled the original wooded meadow habitat. The result was the addition of Silver-washed Fritillary to our list; as is often the way, they were flying in company with White Admiral. In this case, Woodland Brown was present too. We returned to our guest house at Loona, a former manor house, now nicely converted for visitors to the Vilsandi National Park.

Day 6: Monday 13th July

We rose early for the drive down to Saare, on the southern tip of the Sorve peninsula, a former Soviet border site. We had an appointment with the enthusiast who empties the moth traps close to the lighthouse which attracts migratory birds as well as moths. The 4 moth traps are part of a chain using similar traps for the national monitoring scheme. Unusually, one of the traps is different to the others. It features 2 UV lights, one suspended about 5 metres above the other, with a line of sight to the lighthouse, and the other situated at ground level underneath shallows treated with wine & treacle lures. The high lamp, the blossom or the sugar attract moths to the vicinity and the moths finish up in the bottom trap. The result is a very different catch to the other traps. The site itself is an outdoor military museum, with Marti Martenson's private natural history museum in one of the remaining buildings. The museum housed a collection of Estonian butterflies as well as a series of interesting moths caught at the site. We were able to look at specimens of some of the butterflies we had not so far found, such as a comparative set of Large Tortoiseshells and Scarce (Yellow-legged) Tortoiseshells. We lingered until the day had warmed enough for butterflies to be on the wing, and then set off for the ditches alongside the coast road, where we hoped to find coppers. The common species were already on the wing, and it was half an hour before we had a new species – very fresh Graylings, the ordinary *Hipparchia semele*, sadly not the rare Baltic Grayling. At that point, the Scarce Coppers appeared, making a good start to the morning. Only a short drive from there, we started along a forest track to the Kommando Punkt, a derelict Soviet coastal gun position conveniently located in a forest of mature osiers.



A whoop of delight came from John as he found a Poplar Admiral conveniently grounded in the middle of the road. In the absence of traffic, he was able to spend 10 minutes hunched beside what had been our most desired target butterfly. It flew for us several times, returning to us at the roadside and posing on Rob's sweaty wrist for a memorable photographic session.

If the morning session had been a triumph, our luck changed as we reached our next site, where we had hoped to find Large Blue. Just as we reached the car park, the heavens opened and we opened our picnic basket inside the car. There was no point in staying, so we drove on, waiting for the storm to pass. The rain had stopped as we reached Loode oak forest, but nothing much was flying. We stopped to look at an enormous clump of lady slipper orchids, sadly well past flowering, and nearby, John found a mating pair of Woodland Browns. We made a detour to see the famous meteorite crater at Kaali before returning to the Large Blue site. Sadly, the grass and clover sward was wetter than walking through standing water, and nothing was flying. Our local guide Peeter devised a plan for the following day. By starting early, and re-booking on a later ferry back to the mainland, we would be able to grab 45 minutes for a final Large Blue hunt.

Day 7: Tuesday 14th July

It worked! By 08:15 the next morning, we had reached the site, the Tehumardi monument, a memorial to lives lost in a Soviet-German battle there in 1944. It seemed to be too early to find our quarry, but the sun was on the sand dunes and John soon spotted a Large Blue. Shortly after, we



were photographing a mating pair. By 09:00, we were back on the road and headed for the ferry. It is a 24 minute crossing on a large ferry (almost the size of a cross-channel ferry). As soon as we reached the mainland we were en route to Laelatu, another large well-known wooded meadow. Sadly we arrived to the sound of a lawnmower, and we found that most of the meadows had been cut in the past 24 hours. We found nothing new until we spotted a Brimstone crossing the road on our way to a delightful farmhouse lunch

stop. Remarkably, we had seen very little of our familiar British butterflies. We chased a few Whites at the farm, but they were Green-veined Whites, not Large or Small. We went the whole week without seeing either. Our final site was Mukre bog, and it was 5pm before we reached it. It was a lovely calm evening and an abundance of Silver-studded Blues were flying lethargically or roosting as we followed a boardwalk through forest, past attractive lakes and round in a loop to find a host of roosting butterflies on the rushes along one side of the lake. These could only be inspected by moving carefully over the squelchy moss. A nice mix of fritillaries and blues yielded the Bog Fritillary and Idas Blue. Sadly, it was time to leave for Tallinn. We wished we could have stayed longer there. We were delivered to the capital city and spent a comfortable night in the Bern Hotel, conveniently close to the city wall around the medieval town.

Day 8: Wednesday 15th July

A morning in Tallin is a hectic experience, and the tour included an expert guide to show us all the sights of this lovely historic capital. Heli tailored the walk to our interests, so we saw the natural history museum instead of doing too many churches. Perhaps we were losing half a day's

butterflying, but it was definitely well worthwhile. After lunch, it was nice to be able to get from the hotel to the airport in just 14 minutes!

All in all it had been a fascinating and enjoyable exploration of Estonia and despite the season and weather hampering our efforts during the week we had the pleasure of seeing some fantastic butterflies and habitats.

Species Recorded. The attached Species Checklist shows the 46 species recorded during 6 days in the field – about 41% of Estonia's butterflies. This is a good proportion for one week disturbed by unseasonal rain. Had the 2015 season not been so abnormal (cool dry spring reducing normal abundance and disrupting emergence dates), a week in Estonia could be expected to yield even more interesting species. One measure of the season was the Tartu University's judgment that the season to 9th July represented the 2nd worst of their 12 year series. Another was the poor showing of common British species. Quite remarkably, we did not find the following species that ought to have been common in both Britain and Estonia at the time: Large White, Small White, Small Copper, Holly Blue, Peacock, Comma, or Speckled Wood. We walked through many suitable pieces of woodland muttering to ourselves, how could we not find Speckled Woods here?

Local Guides. We would like to express our appreciation of our 2 local guides, Rein and Peeter, whose excellent English and knowledge of the natural world greatly enhanced our visit. We had casual encounters with wild boar and deer, and almost saw a beaver, but Estonia's brown bears, wolves, wildcats and flying squirrels are secretive creatures; present, but elusive.

Report written by Rob Parker

Photography by John Maddocks



Poplar Admiral

Photo Gallery

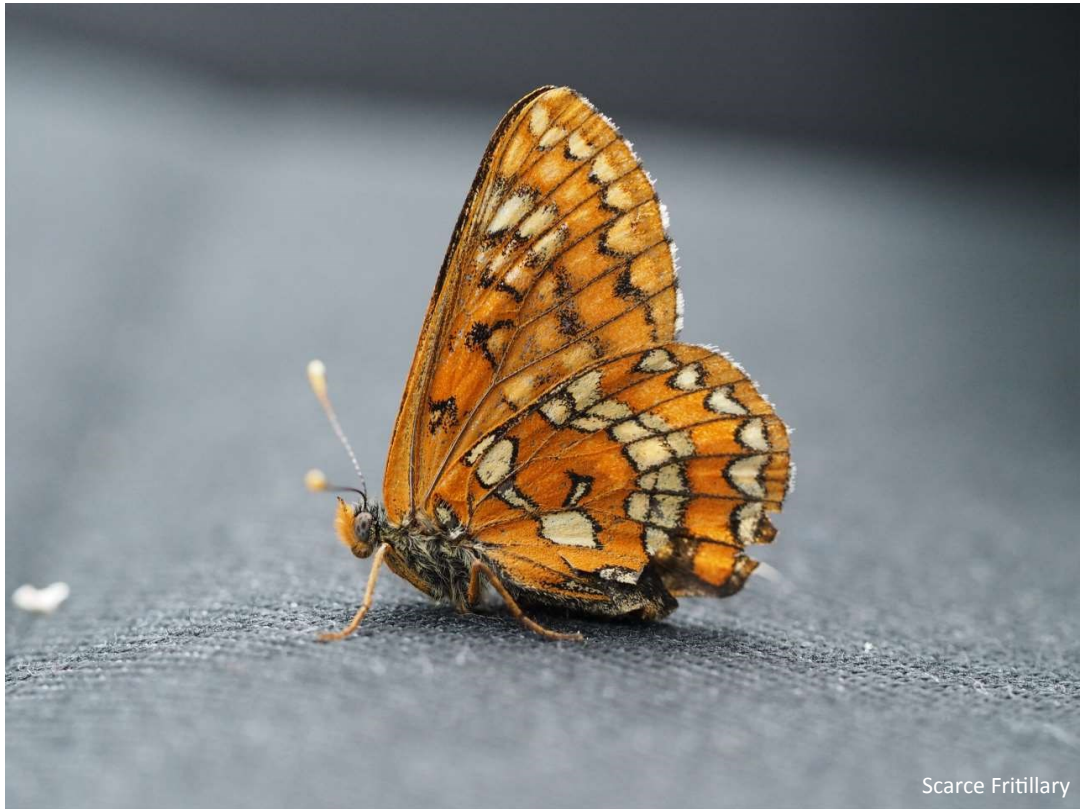


Cranberry Blue



Cranberry Blue







Mazarine Blue



Geranium Argus



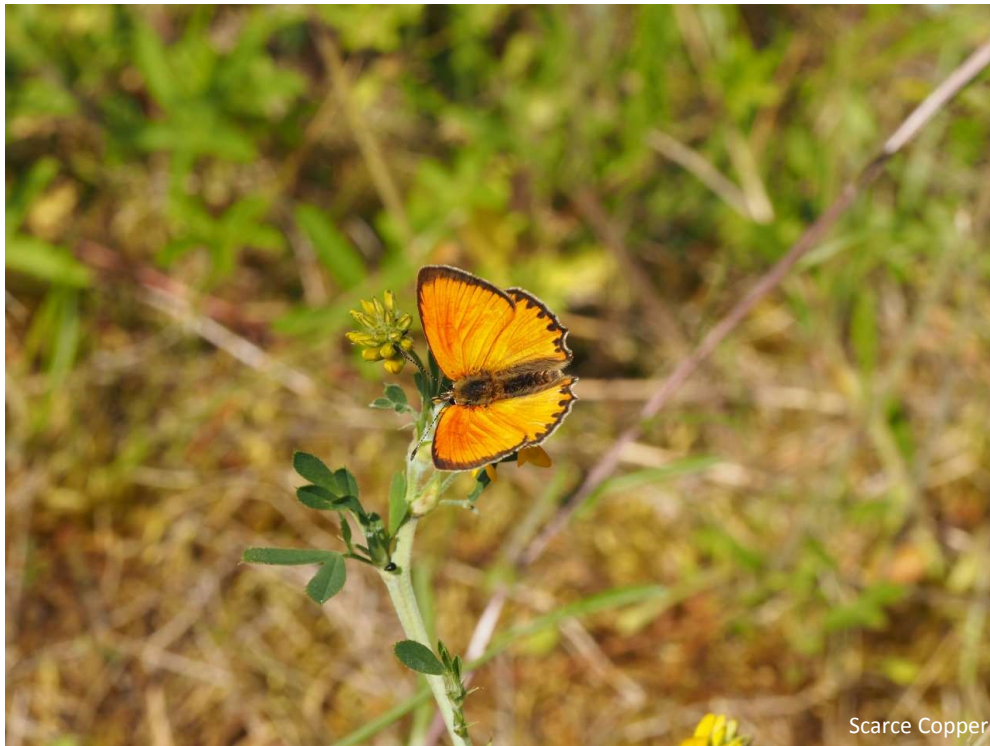
Northern Brown Argus



Woodland Brown



Large Copper



Scarce Copper

46	Green-underside Blue	<i>Glaucopsyche alexis</i>								
47	Large Blue	<i>Maculinea arion</i>	X							X
48	Scarce large Blue	<i>Maculinea teleius</i>								
49	Silver-studded Blue	<i>Plebejus argus</i>	X		X		X			X
50	Idas Blue	<i>Plebejus idas</i>	X							X
51	Reverdin's Blue	<i>Plebejus argyrognomon</i>								
52	Cranberry Blue	<i>Plebejus optilete</i>	X		X					
53	Geranium Argus	<i>Aricia eumedon</i>	X			X		X		
54	Northern Brown Argus	<i>Aricia artaxerxes</i>	X				X	X		
55	Mazarine Blue	<i>Polyommatus semiargus</i>	X			X	X			
56	Turquoise Blue	<i>Polyommatus dorylas</i>								
57	Amanda's Blue	<i>Polyommatus amandus</i>	X			X	X		X	X
58	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>	X				X	X	X	X
59	Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>	X					X		
60	Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Argynnis aglaja</i>	X		X		X			
61	High Brown Fritillary	<i>Argynnis adippe</i>								
62	Niobe Fritillary	<i>Argynnis niobe</i>								
63	Pallas Fritillary	<i>Argynnis laodice</i>								
64	Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>								
65	Lesser Marbled Fritillary	<i>Brenthis ino</i>	X			X	X	X	X	X
66	Bog Fritillary	<i>Boloria eunomia</i>								
67	Pearl-bordered Fritillary	<i>Boloria euphrosyne</i>								
68	Titania's Fritillary	<i>Boloria titania</i>								
69	Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary	<i>Boloria selene</i>	X			X	X			X
70	Freyja's Fritillary	<i>Boloria freija</i>								
71	Weaver's Fritillary	<i>Boloria dia</i>								
72	Frigga's Fritillary	<i>Boloria frigga</i>								
73	Cranberry Fritillary	<i>Boloria aquilonaris</i>	X							X
74	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	X						X	
75	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	X						X	
76	Peacock Butterfly	<i>Inachis io</i>								
77	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>	X		X		X			X
78	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>								
79	Map Butterfly	<i>Araschnia levana</i>								
80	Large Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>								
81	Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis xanthomelas</i>								
82	Camberwell Beauty	<i>Nymphalis antiopa</i>								
83	False Comma	<i>Nymphalis vau-album</i>								
84	Scarce Fritillary	<i>Euphydryas maturna</i>	X			X				
85	Marsh Fritillary	<i>Euphydryas aurinia</i>								
86	Glanville Fritillary	<i>Melitaea cinxia</i>								
87	Knapweed Fritillary	<i>Melitaea phoebe</i>								
88	False Heath Fritillary	<i>Melitaea diamina</i>								
89	Nickerl's Fritillary	<i>Melitaea aurelia</i>	X					X	X	
90	Heath Fritillary	<i>Melitaea athalia</i>	X		X		X	X		X
91	Poplar Admiral	<i>Limenitis populi</i>	X						X	
92	White Admiral	<i>Limenitis camilla</i>	X			X		X		X
93	Lesser Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura ilia</i>								

94	Purple Emperor	<i>Apatura iris</i>	X		X	X	X			
95	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>								
96	Large Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata maera</i>	X			X	X	X		
97	Large Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata maera</i>								
98	Woodland Brown	<i>Lopinga achine</i>	X				X	X	X	
99	Large Heath	<i>Coenonympha tullia</i>								
100	Pearly Heath	<i>Coenonympha arcania</i>	X		X	X	X			
101	Chestnut Heath	<i>Coenonympha glycerion</i>	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
102	Scarce Heath	<i>Coenonympha hero</i>								
103	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>	X		X					X
104	Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
105	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
106	Dusky Meadow Brown	<i>Hyponphele lycaon</i>								
107	Arran Brown	<i>Erbia ligea</i>								
108	Lapland Ringlet	<i>Erebia embla</i>								
109	Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>								
110	Grayling	<i>Hipparchia semele</i>	X						X	
111	Baltic Grayling	<i>Oenesis jutta</i>								
			46	Total						