

Report of a Trip to Casa Ana, Sierra Nevada, Spain by the Kent Branch of the (UK) Butterfly Conservation Society, May 2008

Having heard very favourable reports about Casa Ana and, keen to try new butterfly territory, we made our reservation with Anne Hunt for a short break in late May 2008. As with any new venture, there was a mixture of excitement and mild anxiety as we climbed into our hire car at Malaga airport and set off into the hills clutching the directions sent by Anne. The journey was very straightforward, with only one small mistake on my part, and we were soon dropping down into the little village of Ferreiros where we were greeted with a scene straight out of a spaghetti western. The beautifully maintained white painted buildings were a charm and we stood for some while as we took in the ambience before tracking down our lodgings. Casa Ana is set on the edge of a deep valley and enjoys uninterrupted views of the nearby hills and we could not wait to meet our host. Anne enthusiastically showed us around the apartment and, in no time at all, we were settled in and totally relaxed.

After the lengthy journey, we were ready for our evening meal, and what a meal! A banquet would more ably describe what confronted us and we left the table well fed and relaxed. A short walk around the village sorted our scrambled bearings and we retired for the night.

Being unfamiliar with the local geography, after a hearty breakfast (feast), we set off to locate some suitable butterfly country. The temperature was unseasonably cold at a lowly 8 degrees and I held little hope of any butterflies as we climbed higher up the valley towards Trevelez. The terrain promised alpine species but, with a stiff breeze now blowing, we knew that any sightings were unlikely so headed west once more in search of lower altitude.

Between Pitres and Pampaneira, we came across a small lay-by by the side of the road and pulled in for a break. The now very strong breeze was blowing over the lay-by and creating a sheltered area noticeably warmer than elsewhere. After just a few minutes, we were engaged in filming Small White, Swallowtail, Moroccan Orange Tip, Speckled Wood, Pearly Heath, Mallow Skipper, Meadow Brown, Small Copper, Painted Lady, Small Skipper, Mazarine Blue, Common Blue, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Knapweed Fritillary, Red-underwing Skipper, Clouded Yellow, Brown Argus and a pair of mystery fritillaries. Seventeen species in a lay-by in unfavourable conditions was far more than we had expected and two hours disappeared as we filmed and photographed the ever-changing sight before us. It was now time to return to Casa Ana for a shower and another fabulous meal.

The weather conspired to slow down the proceedings the following morning and we decided to check out habitat in the hills above Capileira. The habitat was very interesting indeed and would, in any other conditions, support many altitude species but today the sky was on the ground and it was impossible to see more than a few metres and we descended to find some warmer weather. The lay-by offered some shelter once again and we stopped off along the way and picked up Spanish Gatekeeper and Wall Brown as we took some refreshments.

Dropping down into the village of Carataunas, we found some good weather and were soon recording Bath White, Clouded Yellow, Small White and Spanish Marbled White and a Cardinal alongside the road. Several small butterflies were flying around the many broom bushes and closer inspection revealed Long-tailed Blues. Females were laying eggs on nearly every flower and I lost count after I reached treble figures. There must have been literally thousands of eggs and

I could well imagine the consternation of the local bean growers as the resulting larvae would make short work of any prospective crop should they turn their attention to it. Moving further into the hills, we were rewarded with swallowtails laying eggs on the roadside umbellifers and what a sight they were. All legs and flapping wings, and all but impossible to photograph but most exciting on video.

With the sun now dropping low in the sky, we returned to Casa Ana but called in at the lay-by once again for a quick look around. I had intended to follow the dry streambed up into the hills on the next visit but, with nothing spoiling, we set off anyway and eventually broke out onto a plateau where Queen of Spain Fritillaries dashed around in profusion. This sheltered microclimate was ideal for butterflies and I wished we had discovered it earlier in the day as more species put in an appearance. Having lost yet another two hours, we headed home to shower and relax before tackling another fantastic meal.

With brighter skies at last, the following morning saw us heading off towards Trevezes and beyond to Mecina-Bombaron where we stopped at several interesting roadsides. A small path beside a bridge over a gorge took us into a little vale where wild flowers danced in the light breeze in stark contrast to the surrounding, rugged hills. Moroccan Orange Tips posed for both film and photographs along with Speckled Wood and numerous Clouded Yellows and we quite forgot about time yet again. The remainder of the day was spent at various roadsides and likely looking fields with good results.

Towards the end of our stay, we explored the local habitat below Casa Ana and were surprised to find Long-tailed Blues on the doorstep and eggs on every legume. Add to this, the wonderful sound of Nightingales, and we were in a small paradise, alive with butterflies and birds. A short walk up the lane revealed yet more hidden meadows full of flowers and butterflies. Our final meal was taken with a degree of regret, we would miss this special treat for sure.

Casa Ana had provided us with a very relaxing holiday in excellent butterfly terrain and I can recommend the venue without hesitation. Anne was the perfect host and the meals supplied by Helen and her husband were simply fantastic and a credit to their talents. As with most holidays in mountainous countryside, timing is important and, had we been able to stay longer, our species count would have doubled without doubt. 2008 will be remembered for the dire weather patterns and Spain was no exception and it is testament to the venue that it was able to provide good sightings in difficult conditions. The peace and tranquillity is difficult to convey but suffice it to say that it is addictive and it was with much regret that we packed our bags and bade farewell and headed back towards Malaga. If there was to be a saving grace it was the ease of finding the route home with no queues or lost directions, which is more than could be said for our visit to Granada but that, as they say, is another story!

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For more information about butterflies in Las Alpujarras, Andalucia, see Casa Ana's "butterfly page" at www.casa-ana.com/butterflies-sierra-nevada-spain.htm and for enquiries about staying at Casa Ana, see their website www.casa-ana.com or contact Anne Hunt, email info@casa-ana.com, tel 0034 958 76 62 70.