

Tour Report

Bulgaria Macro Photography Trip

8 – 16 June 2025

Banded demoiselle



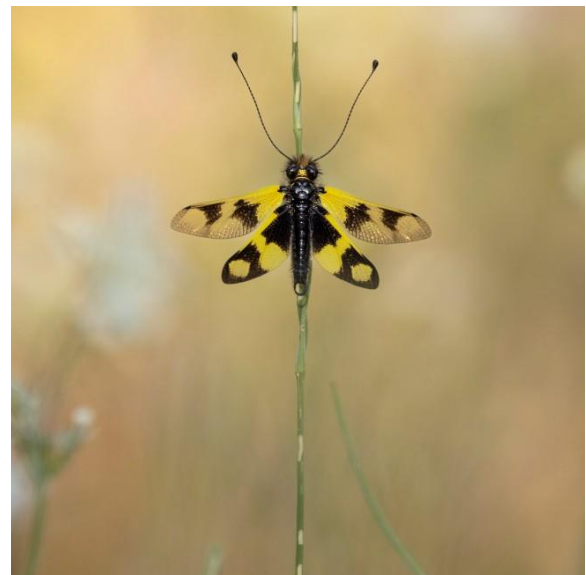
Silver studded blues



Conehead mantis



Owl fly



Compiled by Emma Healey

Sunday 8 June 2025

Day 1:

After a late cancellation due to illness, a reduced group of five clients, plus myself, were all checked in. We had a slightly later take off due to air traffic control issues and apparent 'sheer weight of traffic' but the pilot managed to make up time by going over 600mph (!!) on the way.

We arrived in Sofia, where we were met by our guide Dimiter, who took us outside, where our driver Lazar picked us up in the van and drove us 20 minutes to our first hotel. We got in at 21:30, popped up to change and came down for a lovely dinner before falling into bed by 23:30, ready to get going the next morning.

Monday 9 June 2025

Day 2:

Madzharovo

We met downstairs for breakfast and left at 08:30 to drive southeast to our first location, with a quick stop en route for a comfort break and ice creams! The drive took around 4.5 hours and we passed a number of different landscapes, including rice, sunflower and poppy fields and numerous white storks nesting on telegraph poles. Dimiter told us there is a project by the electricity companies to install platforms on many of the pylons to support the storks' nests and protect the pylons - mutually beneficial.

We arrived at our hotel at just past 13:00 and were greeted by a lunch of an omelette, salad and chips. We then checked into our rooms and had some time to explore the grounds, which seemed like an oasis in the small, quiet town, before our first outing.

In the hotel grounds and the area around it, there was a variety of lovely butterflies, including a small copper, orange tips and some blues, as well as jumping spiders living in the wall and even a couple of leafhoppers as we were boarding the bus to head out for our first photography excursion, which was a nice surprise.



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The scenery around the area was beautiful and crossing the river, we passed the large meander and stopped at our first stop to search for spoonwings. We climbed out of the vehicle and started to explore the bush to see what we could find. The first discovery was a beautiful Balkan lizard orchid just inside the first area, and then soon after that, the first spoonwings were spotted. We were off!

It was still a bit too hot so they were still flying around a lot, but we managed to get some nice portraits. We also saw some painted ladies, blue butterflies and some other critters, including a crab spider and Longhorn beetles.

As it was quite hot, we decided to explore further down towards the river for an hour or so until it started to get cooler. We found an Eastern festoon butterfly, which stopped briefly for some images before continuing on its hunt for food, and a shy Balkan green lizard rustling in the leaf litter. We stood back and watched as it edged closer to the path, eventually crossing quickly in front of us. Even though we had anticipated it and positioned ourselves, it was very quick, so hard to photograph, but lovely to watch as it continued through the grass. We also came across a number of damselflies, butterflies and dragonflies, so plenty to keep



us busy.

We went back up to our “spoonwing spot” as the sun was getting lower, however, nature had other plans and we watched as a huge bank of cloud covered the sky, making the sunset light and plans for backlit images quite difficult. We found some more spoonwings and tried to get some portrait shots, but they never seemed to pose in quite the right spot and the light was quite tricky so we called it a day and came back to the hotel for dinner and a celebratory round of drinks for Lazar’s birthday.

Tuesday 10 June 2025

Day 3:
Madzharovo

We left under the cover of darkness at 05:00 and drove down to where we’d seen the Eastern festoon butterflies yesterday. We hoped that they would be roosting in the area, as we’d seen a couple flying around and it is the right habitat for them. We walked down the road with our torches and it seemed fairly quiet, but we did spot some whites roosting, all the while listening to the sound of the Nightingales singing their morning song. Soon, Dimiter managed to locate an Eastern festoon, and lo and behold, there were four on the same thistle bush so the group

descended the slope to photograph them, which was then where we stayed for most of the morning.



One was on the branch on its own, as was another, but there were two perched on either side of one thistle so we had some attempts at focus stacking to try and get more detail in them, and then we waited for the light to change. We spent quite a lot of time with them, enjoying the different poses and there was also a resting spoonwing nearby, which provided some more entertainment and a different subject for those not focusing on the festoons.

Dimiter went to explore the area for reptiles and any other species he could find and after some time, he returned with an antlion, which was very accommodating and perched for us on a thistle while we enjoyed photographing it in a couple of different positions until we made our way back for breakfast.



We were back at the hotel for breakfast at 09:00, then headed out again at 10:15. We drove in the other direction towards the river and went along the river road looking for butterflies and insects. As we arrived, we already started seeing quite a lot of fritillaries and other butterflies flying around so we stopped and decided to have a walk.

We walked up and down the stretch of road a few times, finding lots of interesting critters, including a number of butterflies, dragonflies, damselflies, crickets and labyrinth spiders.



Arguably, one of our most exciting finds was a bronze glandular bush cricket that we heard calling in the undergrowth. It was posed on a branch so that everybody could get a shot of it.

We found some other exciting things, like a micro moth (*Euplocamus ophisa*) that feeds on fungi and then hiding in the bush there were some spurge hawk moth caterpillars and a number of jewel beetles eating the leaves. Somewhat reluctantly, at around 12:30, we made our way back to the hotel for a quick shower before lunch.



We had some time to rest after lunch, and more importantly, to download some images from the last 24 hours or so – a busy start! We left again at 17:00 for an evening session with the spoonwings and other wildlife. When we arrived, some of the group started taking photographs of the painted ladies, wood borer beetles and other flying things in the area. While some of us explored inside the bushes looking photographing the orchid and looking for spoonwings.

Dimitar spotted a couple of spoonwings flying around and one of the group was heading over to photograph them when he spotted something on a blade of grass, which turned out to be an unexpected owl fly, so we gathered the group and everyone got some lovely photographs.

We later found out that it's a rare type of owl fly that has seldom been, if ever, seen in that area, so it made it an extra special sighting and particularly exciting that she was laying eggs. Once she left, there was an opportunity to photograph the eggs on the grass, which would hopefully hatch in around two weeks.



We dispersed around the area with some of the group searching for spoon wings but we were distracted as Dimiter located a blind snake, so most of us went to see that before continuing on our search. On the way, as ever, we stopped off for other interesting things such as bee beetles, hummingbird hawk moths, butterflies and more. We had a successful spoonwing mission and managed to find some in lovely light before making our way back for dinner.



After dinner, as we were heading to our rooms, Dimiter alerted us to the sound outside of a Scops owl, so we went out to try and see it on the way to bed and managed a quick glimpse before it flew off into another tree.

Wednesday 11 June 2025

Day 4:
Madzharovo

We left again this morning at 05:00, heading out of the hotel back to the river road we'd spent some time at yesterday. We enjoyed exploring, both along the road and further down by the riverbed and found a plethora of subjects, including a roosting fritillary, sooty copper and blues, feeding banded bees, some newly hatched shield bugs, spoonwings and some wonderful dragonflies.



Dimiter found a common toad, which was enormous and to us looked to be much more than common, so we photographed it on the riverbank.



We stayed on the lower river bank photographing spoonwings, butterflies, dragonflies and more, a crab spider, a spider eating a moth, as well as enjoying some abstract flower heads.



We discovered a beautiful spurge hawk moth caterpillar about three times the size of the ones we found yesterday, a spoonwing in an interesting position and another horned treehopper on the road. As we were about to leave, we heard a bronze glandular bush cricket and discovered it was a male so we stopped to take some photos before heading back for breakfast.



We dragged ourselves away, returning for breakfast at around 09:30 and then headed straight out again at 10:30 to the river below where we'd seen the eastern festoon butterflies yesterday. As we were driving towards the bridge, we stopped to help a Herman's tortoise get safely across the road and obviously had to stop for a few shots as it made its way into the grass!



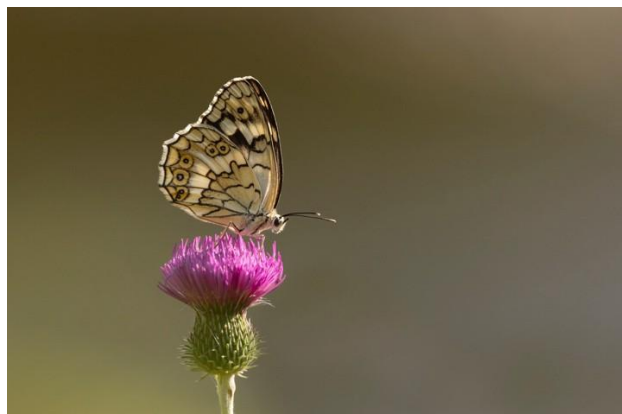
When we arrived at the river, it was hot and sunny, so not ideal conditions but there was plenty of activity. Some of the group went towards the water to photograph the marsh frogs, which we could hear calling, while others enjoyed the relative shade along the road, photographing butterflies, spoonwings and other insects feeding on the roadside flowers.



There were another couple of Herman's tortoises rustling in the undergrowth and some of the group spotted a couple of Eastern festoons, which landed briefly, as well as many other species of butterflies. At around 12:30, we came back to the hotel for lunch and agreed to go out again at 16:30.

Before we left, we went to check the lime trees close to the hotel and found a lime hawk moth caterpillar on the lower leaves, so we popped there to take some photographs.

We then returned to the riverside road where we had been earlier and started to explore further. Some of the group chose to return to the marsh frogs whereas others went along the road to see what they could find. There was a plethora of butterflies, dragonflies, damselflies, banded demoiselles and our favourite spoon wings.



We spent a very happy few hours exploring, photographing and observing the behaviour of the critters along this road. Dimiter discovered a sand boa, so some of us went to photograph it on the sand and as it moved across the rocks, stopping to rest for a while. Others enjoyed the newly emerged banded and beautiful demoiselles flying by the riverbank.



As the sun started to set, we were looking for spoonwings with backlighting, but unfortunately, none were posing as we wanted, so we decided to quickly drive back up to our previous spot and raced up to see what we could find.

Luckily, just in time, we discovered a spoonwing roosting in a good spot for back lighting so everybody had a quick go at trying to grab the shot they'd been looking for and as the light faded, we drove back to the hotel.



Thursday 26 June 2025

Day 5:

Madzharovo & Dobrostan

We had decided to leave a little later today at 05:15 as we were going back to the same spot by the river and the sun didn't hit there until later on. It had quickly become our favourite spot! It was quiet at first and the sun did not hit the road until around 07:30-ish when it started to reach the trees. This gave us plenty of time to make the most of the roosting butterflies, wasps and spoonwings. We came across a lovely ichneumon wasp roosting on the grass as well as a tiger blue, spotted fritillaries and spoonwings.



We also discovered a group of bees huddled up sleeping on the blue flower near where we left our bags and further down the road, a pentagon-abdomen crab spider was waiting for breakfast to approach.



We returned to the hotel for breakfast and to pack and then checked out at 10:45 to start our drive to Dobrostan, with the drive taking around 3.5 hours. We checked in at 15:30 and left again at

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17:00 to go and check out the meadows. We started out in the open, but it was quite windy so we moved closer to the hotel as it was more sheltered.

Dimitar discovered a smooth snake in the grass and then an Aescolapean snake in the log pile, which posed briefly before digging itself into the logs to hide itself.



We found some furrow bees sleeping in geraniums, close to a large number of mating minstrel bugs.



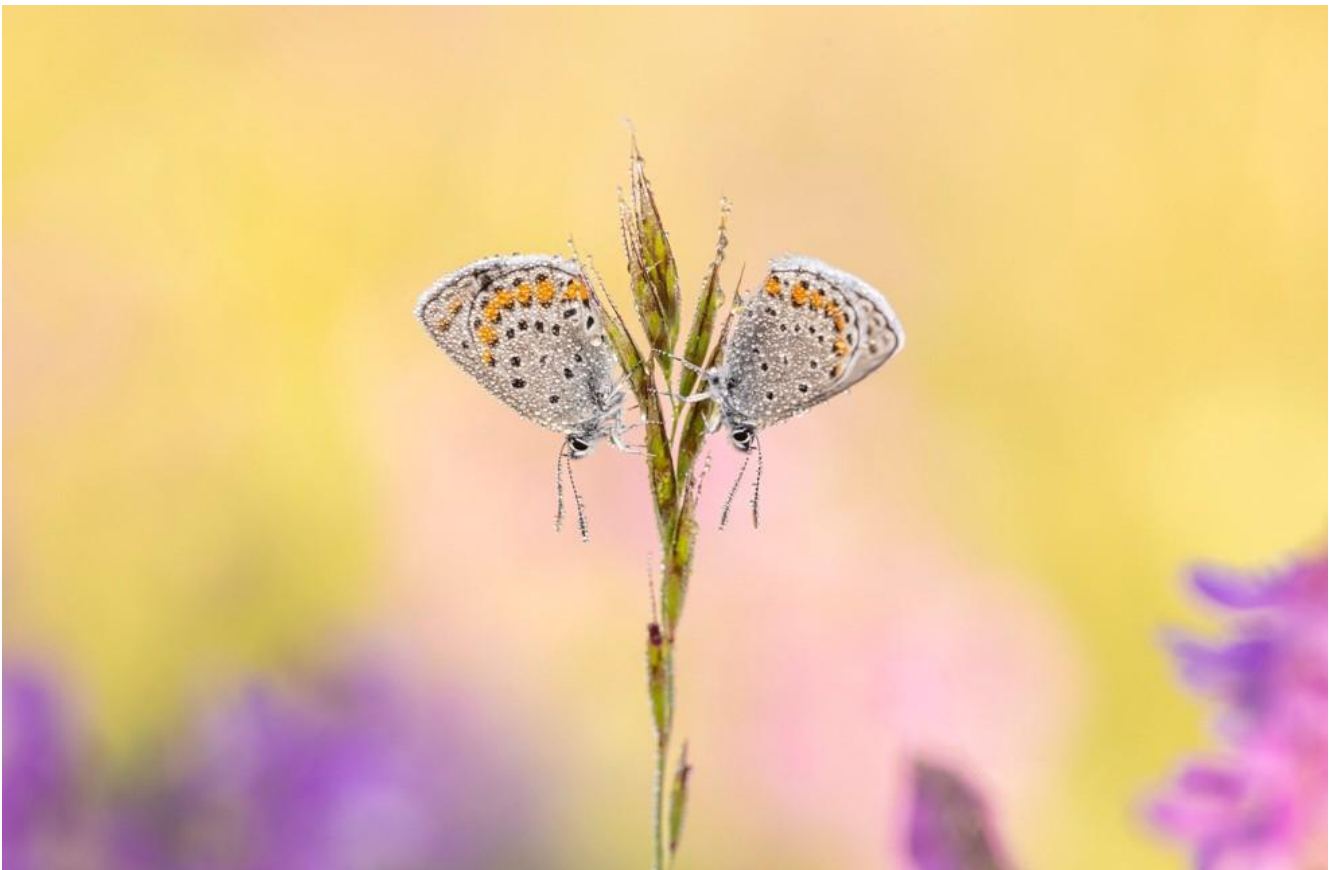
In the meadow, as the light lessened, butterflies began to roost and we came upon a number of blues, latticed heath moth and fritillaries, so we played around with some different background options for them. Finally, we found a Glanville fritillary resting on the grass before heading back to the hotel.



Friday 13 June 2025

Day 6:
Dobrostan

We left at 05:00 again this morning and drove down to the meadow where there was a beautiful mist covering the area, so we stopped on the way for some landscape and moonshots. We then started to explore, looking for various butterflies, but unfortunately, it seemed quite quiet. We found a few blues, one or two fritillaries but otherwise it was fairly challenging to find subjects. We did locate some pyramid orchids and some three-tooth orchids and a lady orchid, which was slightly over. Many of the blues were covered in dew from the mist, which was lovely and gave it a bit of depth and interest.



Some of the group enjoyed the birds flying in the fir trees, including some red-backed shrikes and corn buntings.



When we got back to the hotel, a giant peacock moth was resting on the window mesh, so we got a quick shot of that before heading in for breakfast. After breakfast at around 10:00, a few of us popped out to the hotel grounds to see what we could find there.

This afternoon, our goal was to find owl flies. We left at 15:00 as the drive to the area we were aiming for is around 2-3 hours. After a brief stop at a petrol station for a comfort break and snacks, we arrived at 5:30. The sun was still strong and it was hot - about 32 degrees - so we started to explore. We walked around the meadow and saw a lot of owl flies flying, so that was definitely a good start. Some of the group grabbed some images of them flying and briefly as they landed before they closed their wings.

There were also a number of butterflies around, including great banded greyling, swallowtails, ringlets and small heaths. On the tall grasses, there were several smaller critters too, including some meadow froghoppers and bee flies, trying to contend with the wind.



There were a large number of large robber flies hunting and mating, which were interesting to see, but tough to photograph all in the strong wind.



As the sun lowered, we managed to get some images but the wind unfortunately didn't die down and it made it difficult to get good images.



After a beautiful sunset, we left at 21:15, stopping on our way back to grab some dinner, but otherwise straight back to the hotel.



When we got back, there were some moths on the wall enjoying the night lights, including a pale tussock moth that kindly sat and posed for a close-up! Everyone decided they like to catch up on some sleep every morning, so we decided to meet for breakfast at 09:00, except those who said they would like to explore the hotel garden earlier...

Saturday 14 June 2025

Day 7:
Dobrostan

A couple of us made our way out at 06:00 to look for roosting butterflies and we managed to find a good number of blues and fritillaries so we had a great time playing with the morning light.



We then moved on to flowers and photographed some orchids, finding three different species: bee,

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pyramid and butterfly orchids.



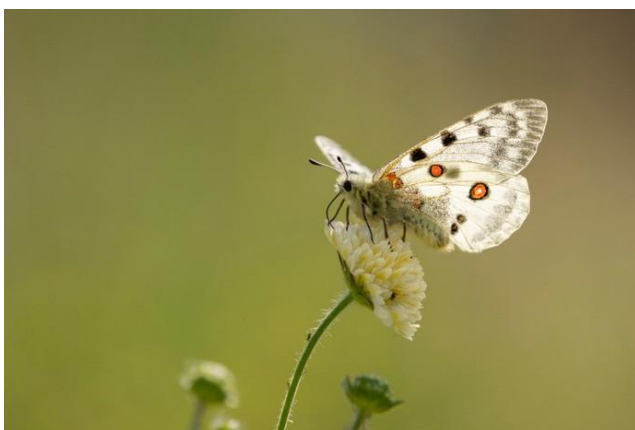
As well as butterflies gradually starting to wake up, a number of moths were also roosting, including a forester moth (below).



The large peacock moth from the night before was still there, so we were able to get some lovely close-up images of its fluffy body while it perched on a low branch.



Some of the group came out to join us before breakfast, with others choosing to catch up on some sleep. We all met up at around 09:00 for breakfast and decided to have a fairly relaxing morning around the hotel, with some of the group choosing to go to the garden to look for Apollo butterflies and scarlet swallowtails, while others spent time editing images from the week so far in the hotel.



After lunch, we had a bit more time to explore the garden and surrounding areas before heading off for the afternoon session at 16:30.

Unfortunately, the wind had picked up again, so we were concerned about how that would affect the session. We drove to the water tower first and had a bit of an explore around the area, but it was still quite windy so as well as some rose weevils, we also took some jumping spiders and found some sheltering butterflies but nothing was able to pose nicely in the grass due to the wind.

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We moved on further down the meadows, finding a slightly more sheltered area with some nice trees so we parked up and started to explore. We found a bug orchid as well as a number of butterflies starting to roost, including fritillaries, yellow banded slippers and blues so we photographed them and as the light got nice in the trees, we got some lovely backlit images.

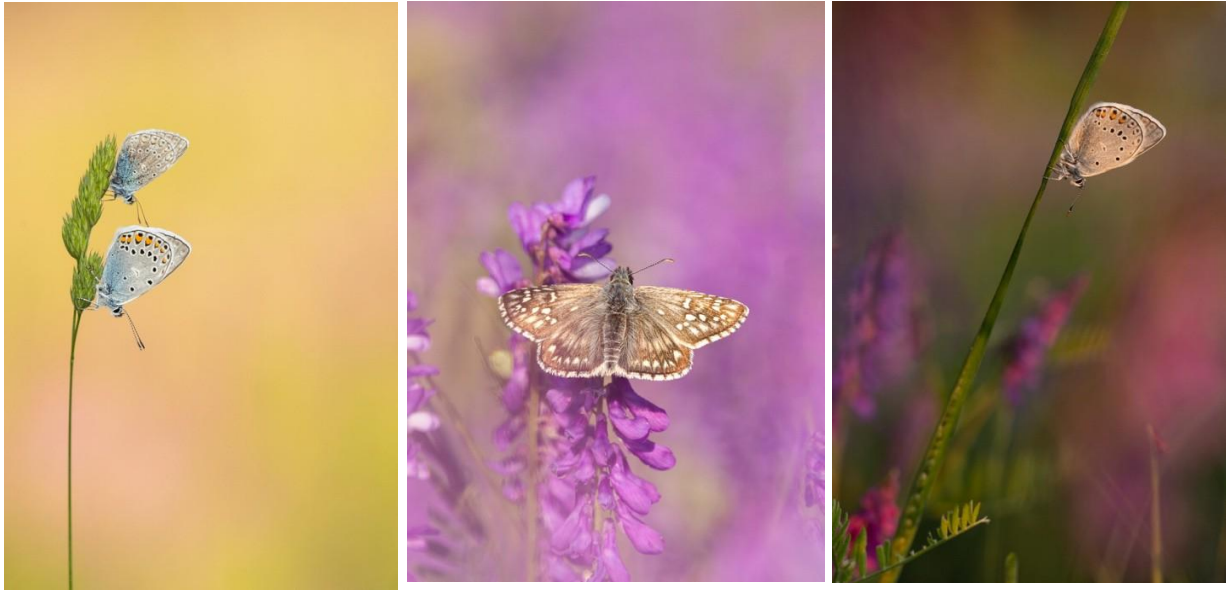


Sunday 15 June 2025

Day 8:
Dobrostan

Early this morning, we started at the crossroads close to the hotel, which had been busy on the first evening, but it was very quiet today, likely because of the wind direction last night. We got back into the minibus and travelled back to the main meadow to search for the flowers.

We spotted a few blues at first, one grass with two on, so got them in the lovely purple flowers. Light dew on some of them, so nice for portraits.



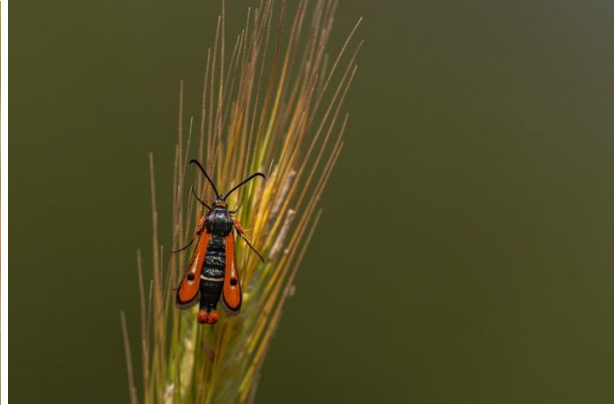
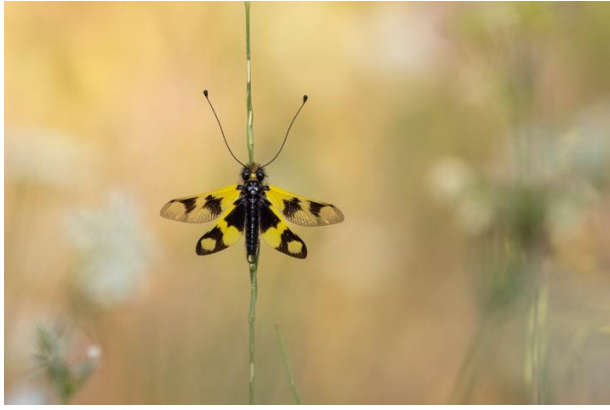
As the light improved, we saw more butterflies waking up, including a clouded yellow perching low in the grass, a number of fritillaries and another yellow-banded skipper, which gave us a good show by flying around the purples to different perches and stretching its wings out. We returned to the hotel once everything had started to fly and were back for breakfast at 08:30 and then had some free time for lunch.

A few of us explored the garden when we got back, and found a lovely Apollo butterfly and then an eastern festoon perched on the spurge. As we were photographing the festoon, we came upon a lesser spotted fritillary caterpillar – always nice to see the various levels.



We left this afternoon at 15:30 to make the most of our final session. We had discussed driving to see the owl flies again but we decided it was a bit too far, so as a compromise, we thought it would be worth checking out the meadow halfway down the mountain past Dobrostan, as we have seen owlflies there. And boy are we glad we did!

As we arrived and walked up the road towards the main meadow, we could see a number of owlflies and various species of butterflies flying above the hillside meadows on our left. We arrived at the main meadow to see more owl flies and a beautiful clearwing moth, so we were very happy. There was a lot of tall grass and as we got closer, it was buzzing with life.

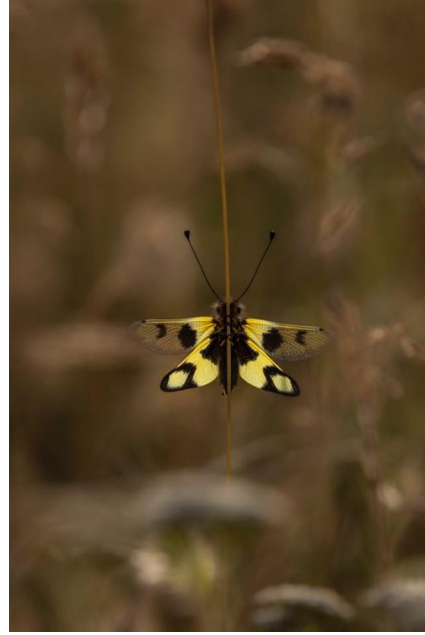


Exploring outside the meadow towards the hills, we came upon a stunning conehead mantis hiding in the spurge, so everybody managed to get some lovely shots of that in and around the flowers at first and then above when it emerged before flying off into the tree for some peace.



After we'd taken the mantis in plenty of poses, we focused on the owlflies trying to get them with their wings open before sunset. Lucky for us, they were posing perfectly and at one stage a few of the group had eight owl flies resting on grasses around them – where to start!

We had a number of different species of butterfly, including fritillaries, blues, a green hairstreak, and a marble white, which was a first for at least one of the group.



We drove back to the hotel for our final dinner as the light was fading. As we were driving up the mountain past Dobrostan, three badgers ran across the road ahead of us. What a treat!

Monday 16 June 2025

Day 9:
Dobrostan

This morning, we decided to have a slightly slower start in the hotel gardens at about 6 am. It was quieter at first with only a few yellow-banded skippers and a blue resting, so we continued to explore the area.



As we looked further down the path, we discovered a number of roosting fritillaries and just after sunrise, a roosting Eastern festoon, which everyone was able to photograph as the light improved.



Far too soon, it was time to head inside for breakfast and to pack our final bits before our drive towards Sofia.

On the way, we stopped off at a petrol station for a comfort break and refreshments. We noticed a patch of wildflowers by the side of the car park and went over to investigate. We quickly noticed a large variety of butterflies flying around, including marbled whites, scarce swallowtails and even a number of owl flies! It felt like quite an incongruous place to find such a variety of species and photographing them with the sound of the highway and the backdrop of a factory was a little strange, but you never know where wildlife will choose to find a home. It was a lovely final outing, despite the bright sunlight, and we were able to photograph some species that had eluded us until now, including a mammoth wasp.

On arrival in Sofia, we went to a Turkish restaurant for our final dinner to reminisce on the wonderful week we'd had, before saying our farewells to Dimiter and Lazar and flying home.

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	Species Seen
	BIRDS
1	Red and black storks
2	Egyptian vulture
3	Griffon vulture
4	Common kestrel
5	Red backed shrike
6	Crested lark
7	Corn bunting
	SNAKES
1	Aesculian snake
2	Sand boa
3	Blind snake
4	Smooth snake
5	Common brown Toad
6	Balkan green lizard
7	Wall lizard
	MOTHS
1	Silver Y moth
2	Plume moth
3	Hummingbird hawk moth
4	Giant peacock moth
5	Forester moth
6	Pake tussock moth
7	Pine hawk moth
	BUTTERFLIES
1	Silver washed fritillary
2	Glanville fritillary
3	Heath fritillary
4	Lesser spotted fritillary
5	Small skipper
6	Grizzled skipper
7	Chequered skipper
8	Yellow banded skipper
9	Common skipper
10	Clouded yellow
11	Brimstone
12	Scarce swallowtail
13	Apollo
14	Great banded grayling
15	Small heath
16	Chestnut heath
17	Meadow brown
18	Green hairstreak
19	Small copper

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20	Sooty copper
21	Mountain argus
22	Brown Argus
23	Common blue
24	Silver studded blue
25	Amanda's blue
26	Eastern festoon
27	Eastern bath white
28	Orange tip
29	Speckled wood
30	False ringlet
31	Painted lady
32	Comma
33	Red admiral
	CATERPILLARS
1	Spurge hawk moth caterpillar
2	Lesser spotted fritillary caterpillar
	BETLES
1	Common Garden chafer
2	Rose chafer
3	Mediterranean chafer
4	Rose weevil
5	Golden bloom grey longhorn beetle
	FLOWERS
1	Bee orchid
2	Butterfly orchid
3	Bug orchid
4	Pyramidal orchid
5	Balkan lizard orchid
6	Lady orchid
7	Three toothed orchid
8	Red helleborine
	Many types of bees!