

GETTING THE GAVARNIE BLUES

David Newland

Gavarnie is a very special place. It has two butterflies named after it. So far as I know, it's the only place that does. The *Gavarnie Blue* (*Agriades pyrenaicus*) – one of the rarest butterflies in the world – and the *Gavarnie Ringlet* (*Erebia gorgone*) are both named after this small skiing resort high up in the French Pyrenees. At 1,370 m, it is higher than the summit of Ben Nevis (the highest mountain in Britain, which is 1,344 m). And surrounding it are huge natural amphitheatres of rock. The rocky Cirque de Gavarnie, Cirque d'Estaubé and Cirque de Troumouse, all tower over Gavarnie. They lie within the National Park of the Pyrenees and shelter high meadows which form an eldorado for butterflies.



Habitat below the Cirque de Troumouse, just east of Gavarnie

Gavarnie village is crowded with tourists, but the valley leading to Gavarnie is huge and there are connecting valleys, Ossoue, Haas and Bué, all with their own fragrant meadows and small farms that provide peaceful oases. These high meadows hold a profusion of butterfly species throughout the year. Even the high road to the Spanish border point, at 2270 m, called Port de Boucharo, has Mountain Clouded Yellows and several different species of Mountain Ringlet on the wing on fine summer days.



Gavarnie Blue basking



Gavarnie Blue mud puddling

The Gavarnie Ringlet you may never positively identify, because it is very similar to the other Brassy Ringlets on the wing, except for its slightly duller underside. But, if you go at the right time and look along the muddy edges of mountain streams in the Ossoue Valley or in the valley above the Lac des Gloriettes, you should find some Gavarnie Blues. Although called a “Blue”, a clearer description would be the Gavarnie Silver. They are tiny silver butterflies which congregate on the edge of mountain streams and probe the mud with their tongues. The theory is that they absorb nutrients from the mud, although I am not sure how much is known about this behaviour. Do we know what nutrients are taken up, or why some butterfly species like to congregate on the edge of watercourses or around large puddles and “mud puddle”, while other species apparently have no interest in doing this? I would be very interested in comments and suggestions on this topic.

There is an enormous number of other butterflies to discover too. When I was there this summer (early July 2007), I met a Naturetrek tour, led by Mark Galliot. He deftly wields a butterfly net to identify specimens and this year had netted 65 different species in a week. In 2006, he had found no less than 87 different species, but 2007’s poor summer weather had stretched right down to the Mediterranean and had apparently deterred migrants from further south. Neither of us saw a single Painted Lady, usually one of the commonest species, or any Long-tailed Blues, which you would normally expect to find at least occasionally.

One of the first butterflies that I did see in the Ossoue valley was a beautifully fresh Large Blue. This was quickly followed by a Swallowtail, and there were many different Mountain Ringlet species, including our own Small Mountain Ringlet (*Erebia epiphron*), numerous different fritillary species, frequent Clouded Yellows, and, of course, also Apollos and Clouded Apollos. These magnificent large white butterflies swoop down the hillsides, moving so fast and so far that photographing them becomes an athletic challenge.



Large Blue in the Ossoue valley



Apollos fly regularly across the hillsides around Gavarnie

The over-riding impression is of the sheer density of butterflies in the mountain valleys around Gavarnie. There are just so many butterflies, of so many different species. We have nothing like it in Britain. High meadows that have remained the same for generations, sometimes grazed by sheep or cows, or cut annually for hay, are the places to go if you enjoy seeing butterflies. The number of butterflies per square metre, the range of different species, and the ease of seeing them provides a wonderful experience. What a pity we don't have the equivalent conditions here.

Gavarnie is a small skiing centre in the far south of France close to the Spanish border. It is about 40 km south of *Lourdes*, which is 150 km south-west of *Toulouse*.

How to get there: You can fly to Toulouse or Lourdes or reach Lourdes by train, but thereafter you will need a car. Cycling is possible, but the gradients are steep and long, and this is only possible for the super-fit.

Where to stay: There are hotels in Gavarnie and in the village of Gèdres, which is about 10 km south of Gavarnie. Gavarnie itself is a car-free resort, but you will probably not want to spend much time in the resort itself unless you are staying in a central hotel.

When to go: Any time is good, but Gavarnie Blues fly from June to early August.

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