

## UBIQUITOUS SWALLOWTAILS

Mount Ventoux, in the south of France, provides one of the hill-climbing stages of the Tour de France. Once a year it is the focus of media attention during the famous cycle race. And every day in summer, a steady stream of cyclists test their stamina by pedalling arduously to its 1,911 metre summit. Almost twice the height of Snowdon, for many months the summit is snow-capped. When the snows melt, its stony surface supports only occasional alpine plants. Why, therefore, should Mt Ventoux find favour with Swallowtail butterflies?



*Cyclists at the summit of Mount Ventoux on a warm day in June*

Pausing at the summit (in a car) while on holiday in Provence last summer, I was fascinated to see two Swallowtails (*Papilio machaon*) flying round Mt Ventoux's Observatory. They settled periodically on the ground with their wings open, rested for a few seconds, and then flew up and away into the stiff breeze that blows every day, before returning to settle again nearby. Lower down the mountain, it is sheltered and warm. But typically the summit is 10°C cooler than lower down, and the mountain's name is well chosen (*vent*, French for wind).

In Britain, we are used to finding Swallowtails only on the Norfolk Broads. I have been several times to see them there. On a fine day, they are visible from a long distance, cruising over the flat reed-beds. The sight of a fast-moving Swallowtail rushing towards you, landing on yellow flag iris in the reed-bed, taking nectar as its wings continue to

flutter, before racing on to a new nectaring station, is one of the most exciting butterfly sights I know.



*Continental Swallowtail on the summit of Mount Ventoux in June 2006*

But what a difference on Mt Ventoux, where they settle and remain still on stony ground with their wings open. Curiously, this behaviour copies the Wall Brown butterfly, and I was interested to see a Wall and two Painted Lady butterflies behaving in a similar fashion on the top of the mountain. I did not see any attempt by any of them to take nectar, of which there was very little available anyway.

It is one of the acknowledged curiosities of entomology that the British race of Swallowtails (*P. m. britannicus*) behaves differently from the Continental race (*P. m. gorganus*). The most important difference is their preference for different foodplants, but the hill-topping interest of Continental Swallowtails is also well-known. Can anyone explain why Swallowtails (and, for that matter, any butterfly) should seek the highest point of a windswept, inhospitable mountain to bask on cold ground before battling again against a strong wind with apparently the only objective of seeking a similar resting place. Living creatures generally do things for a purpose, but what is the objective here?



*British Swallowtail at Wheatfen Nature Reserve, Norfolk, June 2005*

It is known that there are slight genetic differences between the different races of Swallowtails. In North America, there are at least five more races of *P. Machaon* and research has shown that their different egg-laying preferences can be correlated with slight chromosome differences between the races. If we knew how and why these genetic differences had occurred, we might be able to understand why British Swallowtails are so unadventurous when compared with their Continental cousins. And then we might also learn why British Swallowtails have retreated to a much more restricted habitat than was apparently the case in England in previous centuries, when they are reported to have ranged more widely across the country. In his 1906 book, *Butterflies of the British Isles*, South says that Swallowtails had been seen on the wing in southern England and the Midlands in the preceding 40 years and that they were abundant in Kent and near London in the early 1800s.

#### ***Where is it?***

Mt Ventoux is in northern Provence, in the south of France, at 44°10'N 5°17'E. The nearest town, about 30 km south-west, is Carpentras, while the major centre of Avignon is about 65 km away, also to the south-west. Mt Ventoux is a prominent, high mountain overlooking the Rhône valley and visible from many miles away. Provence has a wealth of places to stay, suitable for all tastes and budgets. I found helpful *The Rough Guide to French Hotels and Restaurants* ([www.roughguides.com](http://www.roughguides.com)) and *Alastair Sawday's Special Places to Stay: French Hotels* ([www.specialplacestostay.com](http://www.specialplacestostay.com)) and of course the

appropriate Michelin Guides give a huge amount of background information ([www.michelintravel.com](http://www.michelintravel.com) and [www.ViaMichelin.com](http://www.ViaMichelin.com)).

### ***How do you get there?***

There are airports at Avignon (65 km), Nimes (120 km), Marseille (140 km) and Montpellier (190 km), with frequent flights from the UK. Regular trains run to Avignon. Whether you go by plane or train, you will need local transport and the easy way is to hire a car. You can join the regular stream of cyclists, but to describe cycling up Mt Ventoux as strenuous is quite definitely an under-statement. Don't, unless you are very fit. Going anywhere generates a carbon debt, but the most practical way is to drive. However it is a long drive from the UK.

### ***What else is there to see?***

There are many parking places to stop along the roads to the summit and a lot of species to see on and near Mt Ventoux. For me the most interesting species is the Black-veined White (*Aporia crataegi*). It was included in South's 1906 book, although by then it was very rarely seen in Britain. Winston Churchill tried to support its re-establishment by breeding in his garden at Chartwell but without success. Sadly, it is of course no longer a British species. You will find Black-veined Whites in plenty on Mt Ventoux. They are unmissable there. And, as well as Swallowtails, you can expect some Scarce Swallowtails (*Iphiclides podalirius*) and Apollos (*Parnassius apollo*) and also you may see the lovely black Great Sooty Satyr (*Satyrus ferula*).

### ***When should I go?***

Swallowtails are on the wing from May to September and may have two or three broods; Black-veined Whites fly from May to July in a single brood; Apollos from May to August, usually with one brood. So any of the summer months will be good, but I recommend going in the second half of June if you can. You won't be disappointed!

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