

ABUNDANCE AND CURRENT STATUS OF  
*CHAZARA PRIEURI* POPULATIONS IN THE  
NORTHEASTERN IBERIAN PENINSULA



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Southern Hermit *Chazara prieuri* (Pierret, 1837) is a butterfly of rocky grassland and dry gulleys confined to Spain and north Africa, which is thought to be in decline.
2. To update the status of the species, searches for *C. prieuri* and habitat assessments were conducted in north-eastern Spain in 2024 in its former strongholds in the autonomous communities of Castilla-la-Mancha and Aragón.
3. A total of seventy 10 km squares where the species had been recorded were visited, with 143 separate 15-minute timed counts conducted in available habitats, in a first survey period (late June to early July; 76 timed counts) and a second period (late July to early August; 67 timed counts). The counts were conducted in a range of available habitats between 322 m and 1649 m altitude.
4. Adults of *C. prieuri* were encountered in only ten of the 144 timed counts, in six of the 10 km squares visited. All of the observations of the species were at altitudes between 1154 m and 1296 m altitude, in a restricted region of calcareous geology in the Iberian System of mountains between central and western parts of the province of Teruel and the eastern border of Cuenca. This region appears to represent the core distribution of the species in Spain.
5. The species was not seen in former localities to the north, south or west of its apparent core, despite the larval host plant *Lygeum spartum* being present in many places (especially in Huesca and Zaragoza).
6. The species was found in habitats characterized by minimal herbaceous vegetation and exposed substrates. These habitats include open areas with bare soil and sparse grass tussocks, cleared forests of Kermes oak (*Quercus coccifera*) interspersed with scattered shrubs such as *Genista*. Additionally, the species was found on small rocky hills amidst agricultural fields. Notably, observations were made in locations lacking nectar plants, where individuals were seen resting in the shade of shrubs, trees, or rocks.
7. Forty-seven sampling points were identified as optimal for future surveys. These points are characterized by patchy herbaceous vegetation, particularly grass tussocks, with scattered shrubs and trees (holm/kermes oak), creating the open habitat structure favorable to *C. prieuri*.
8. The main other butterflies found in the same locations as *C. prieuri* were other grass-feeding Satyrinae associated with rocky open habitats.
9. The dry, open habitats in the Iberian System near the borders of Teruel and Cuenca are crucial for the monitoring and conservation of *C. prieuri*. The apparent fragmentation of populations, likely due to agricultural expansion and grassland abandonment, highlights the need for targeted future surveys. Recommendations include focusing on areas within the identified core region, using satellite or aerial imagery to identify suitable habitats, and investigating the impact of anthropogenic factors on habitat quality and species distribution.

## INTRODUCTION

European butterfly populations have experienced a significant decline over the past decade (European Environment Agency, 2023). This trend is primarily driven by habitat loss and fragmentation due to land-use changes (Badii et al., 2015), particularly in grasslands and agricultural regions (Herrando et al., 2016). Climate change has exacerbated these impacts, particularly in Mediterranean temperate zones, where substantial declines in butterfly populations have been documented (Melero et al., 2016).

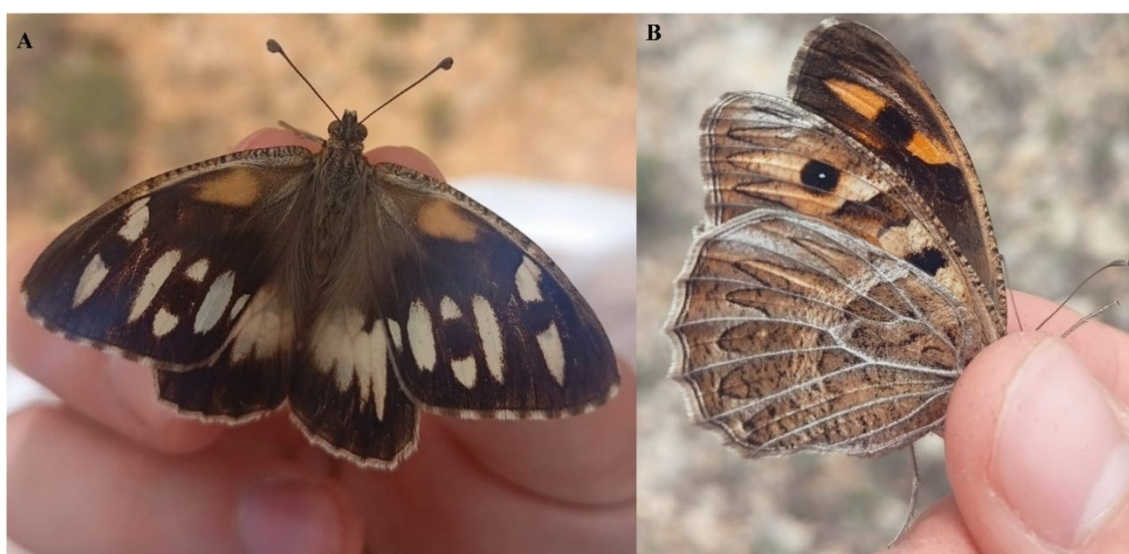
The Iberian Peninsula is of particular ecological interest due to its species richness and high degree of endemism (Williams et al., 2000). This is attributed to the peninsula's unique geographical position, acting as a transitional zone between the African continent and Western Europe, its historical role as a refuge during the Quaternary glacial periods, and its orogenic complexity (García & Arsuaga, 2003; Hewitt, 2011).

*Chazara prieuri* (Pierret, 1837) is a satyrine butterfly (Nymphalidae: Satyrinae) with an Iberian-Maghreb distribution. The Iberian populations are characterized by an orange chromatic variant known as the *uhagonis* form (Oberthür, 1875), which is absent in African populations (Fig. 1). This butterfly is typically associated with substeppe, xerophilous, and calcicolous habitats, favoring rocky slopes and ravines with sparse tree cover (García-Barros et al., 2011). The larval host plant is primarily *Lygeum spartum*, though other grasses, such as *Stipa tenacissima*, are also suspected to serve as hosts (Mariposas de Cuenca, n.d.). The species is classified as Least Concern (LC) on the European Red List of Butterflies (Van Swaay et al., 2010), Near Threatened (NT) in the Spanish Red Data Book of Invertebrates (García-Barros et al., 2011), and of Special Interest in the Autonomous Community of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain (Verdú et al., 2011).

However, the distribution of *Chazara prieuri* has declined in recent years. Preliminary data from the Butterfly Atlas Research Group at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid indicates that the species has disappeared from 44 out of the 46 10 x 10 km grid squares in which it was recorded before 2004 (95.7% of the previously recorded squares). Additionally, since 2004, the species has been newly recorded in 20 grid squares, bringing the current known distribution to 66 squares. Despite these findings, the precise distribution of the species remains uncertain due to potential mislabeling in museum specimens, and its elusive and low-abundance nature, which complicates population trend assessments and hinders effective conservation planning.

## OBJECTIVES

- To update and refine the current distribution of *C. prieuri* populations in the northeastern Iberian Peninsula, based on recent field surveys.
- To assess the abundance and population structure of *C. prieuri* within its suitable habitats.
- To identify potential environmental and anthropogenic factors contributing to the decline or stability of *C. prieuri* populations.
- To evaluate the species richness of other butterflies (Papilionoidea) associated with *C. prieuri* habitats, using them as auxiliary bioindicators of habitat quality.
- To prioritize areas for future monitoring and conservation actions based on the analysis of habitat suitability and observed population trends.



**Figure 1.** *Chazara prieuri*. A - Male ♂. B – Female, *uhagonis* form ♀

## METHODS

This study focused on *C. prieuri* populations in the northeastern Iberian Peninsula, specifically in the provinces of Huesca, Zaragoza, Teruel (in the Autonomous Community of Aragón), and Cuenca and Guadalajara (in Castilla-La-Mancha).

Sampling sites were selected based on historical records of the species and current habitat suitability. A total of 70 UTM grid cells (10 x 10 km) were chosen, comprising 24 cells with pre-2004 presence records, 16 cells with post-2004 records, and 30 new cells without any previous records. Within each grid cell, sampling sites were identified using information from published sources and personal communications regarding historical locations of the butterfly, supplemented by visual inspection of similar habitats using satellite imagery. In each grid, the most suitable area was selected based on key habitat features: sparse, medium to tall woodlands with patchy soils, featuring vegetation associated with alkaline-tolerant species (e.g., junipers, *piornales*, holm oaks, and thyme)

and tussocks of herbaceous plants, considered as potential larval host plants. Priority was given to natural habitat fragments with the highest landscape continuity, avoiding small isolated patches in favor of larger, well-connected areas, often bordered by agricultural fields.

Given that each grid cell was surveyed for the most viable potential habitat, not all sampling points conformed to optimal habitat parameters. Therefore, exploratory sampling was conducted in additional areas within each grid cell to identify potentially suitable habitats that might not have been initially apparent. This approach ensured a thorough assessment of habitat conditions and improved the chances of detecting *C. prieuri* in varied environmental contexts.

Once potentially suitable habitats were identified, 15-minute counts were conducted and geolocated using GPS (eBMS, 2024a) to record population abundances. Additionally, butterfly species richness (Papilionoidea), defined as the total number of species observed, was recorded for each count, along with detailed habitat description in each sampling area.

Sampling covered a wide range of potential and exploratory habitats, including low, medium, and high scrublands; mixed holm oak (*Quercus ilex*) and kermes oak (*Quercus coccifera*) forests; open scrub dominated by broom (“*piornales*”) with and without scattered Juniper (“*sabina*”) (*Juniperus thurifera*) and pine; closed pine and olive groves; dense pine forests with clearings and understory; and riparian forest areas with open grassland. Various types of thyme-dominated habitats with differing edaphic conditions were also investigated. The study sites ranged in altitude from 322 to 1.649 m. Habitats exhibited a range of anthropogenic impacts, including goat grazing, fallow lands, sunflower crops, and cereal cultivation. This diversity in habitat types and altitudinal range provided a comprehensive spectrum of conditions for assessing the presence and distribution of *C. prieuri*.

For each sampling site, the following habitat characteristics were recorded:

- **Altitude:** The elevation of the habitat.
- **Herbaceous Cover:** classified as either patchy soils, where herbaceous vegetation only partially covers the surface (Patches herbaceous cover), or full cover, where herbaceous plants completely cover the soil (Full herbaceous).
- **Sparse Tussocks of Grasses:** presence of potential larval host plants.
- **dominant vegetation:** the predominant plant species or communities, such as oak forests, riparian forest-scrubland, pinewood, grassland, *Genista* scrubland, holm (and kermes) oak forest, *piornal*, thyme scrubland, scrubland (with less frequent species like retamas, lavenders etc.), or juniper woodland.
- **Habitat Type:** Categories based on vegetation structure and habitat, including scattered shrubby patches, open scrubland, dense scrubland, woodland edge, scattered arboreal patches, open woodland, and dense forest.

- **Anthropogenic Impacts:** Signs of human activity or influence, including herbaceous crops, tree crops, grazing, gravel pits (areas with significant soil disturbance), livestock waste (nitrate-enriched areas near farms), and wind farms.

Two sampling periods were established to align with the species' flight period and detect fluctuations in their abundances. The first sampling took place from June 25 to July 2 (76 timed counts), and the second from July 26 to August 2 (67 timed counts), 2024. Sites where the species was not detected during the first visit were revisited at different locations within the same grid cells to increase the chances of detection. Additionally, during the second period, previously positive locations were resurveyed to refine abundance estimates. New sampling points within grid cells where *C. prieuri* had been detected in the first period were also established to better delineate the species' geographic distribution and presence.

A Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) was conducted to identify the habitat characteristics associated with the sampling points, with the aim of determining the key variables present in *C. prieuri* habitats and identifying areas of special interest for future surveys. Each sampling site was also categorized based on field observations (personal criteria), and these categorizations were then compared with the distribution of points in the MCA to ensure consistency. The MCA included binary variables representing habitat characteristics such as herbaceous cover, sparse tussocks of grasses, dominant vegetation, habitat type, and anthropogenic impacts. A value of 1 indicated the presence of a specific environmental characteristic at a sampling site, while a value of 0 indicated its absence. It is common in MCA for the initial components or dimensions to explain only a small percentage of the total variance, reflecting the complexity of categorical data and the distribution among the variables involved (Greenacre, 2017; Díaz Monroy & Morales Rivera, 2009). Axes with an  $R^2$  greater than  $\cong 15\%$  were selected for interpretation, and environmental variable vectors were included if their  $R^2$  exceeded 10%, offering insights into the most influential habitat characteristics for the species.

## RESULTS

### *-Chazara prieuri: Distribution and Abundance -*

A total of 143 15-minute counts were conducted, covering 117 sampling points with an area of 336.051 m<sup>2</sup>. *Chazara prieuri* was recorded in six 10 km grid cells in seven different localities (Figs. 2, 3). Among these, the species was found in four grid cells with records of presence after 2004, one grid cell where it had not been recorded since before 2004, and one newly surveyed grid cell. A total of 17 individuals were observed within the sampled area (Table 1), with a maximum of 4 individuals recorded in a single count (Table 1, Fig. 3). The species was detected in transects covering a total surface area of 24,822 m<sup>2</sup>, corresponding to an average density of one individual per 1,460 m<sup>2</sup>.

*-Habitat Characteristics-*

The specimens were found at altitudes ranging from 1,200 to 1,300 m on calcareous hills surrounded by flat areas used for agriculture (Fig. 4). The identified habitats share common features of low vegetation cover and exposed substrate, with specific variations:

- (A) An open area with bare soil and minimal herbaceous vegetation, highlighting the sparse distribution of larval host plant across the landscape (Fig. 4A).
- (B) A cleared forest of Kermes oak (*Quercus coccifera*), interspersed with sparse shrubs of *Genista*, thymes, and lavenders. The soil remains relatively exposed due to the limited vegetation cover (Fig. 4B).
- (C) A sclerophyllous grassland with scattered *Genista* shrubs. This habitat also features significant patches of bare soil, similar to the other areas (Fig. 4C).
- (D) Sparse tussocks of grasses scattered across the ground, with large patches of bare soil lacking vegetation (Fig. 4D).

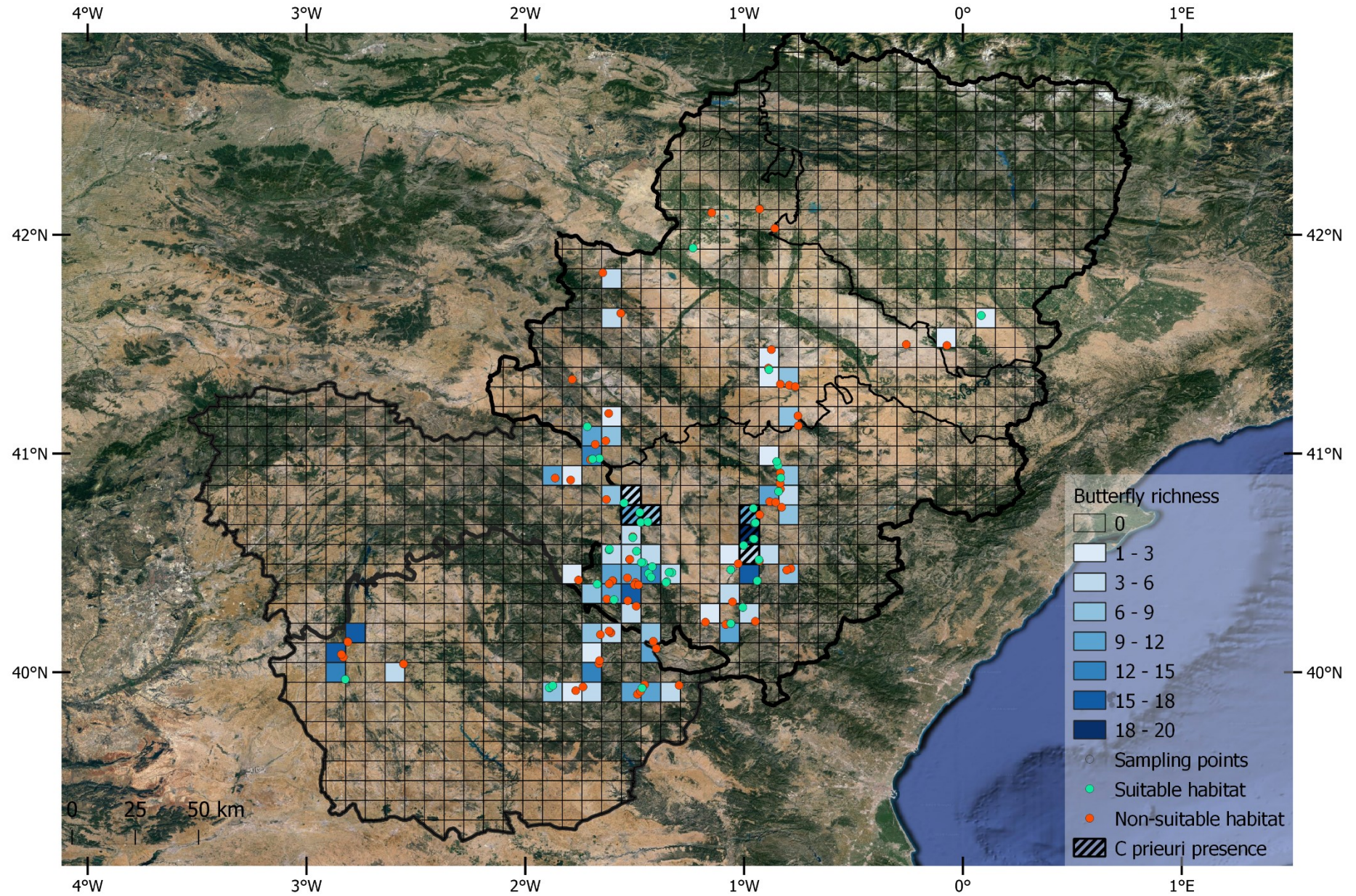
*- Behavioral Observations -*

Behaviorally, individuals were not observed in flight but were found resting on bare soil or in the shade of medium-sized herbaceous tussocks or trees.

**Table 1.** 15-minute counts in which *Chazara priouri* was found. The ID\_Count identifier provides additional geographic and environmental data for these counts, available in eBMS (2024b). M - N° of male individuals, F- N° of female individuals.

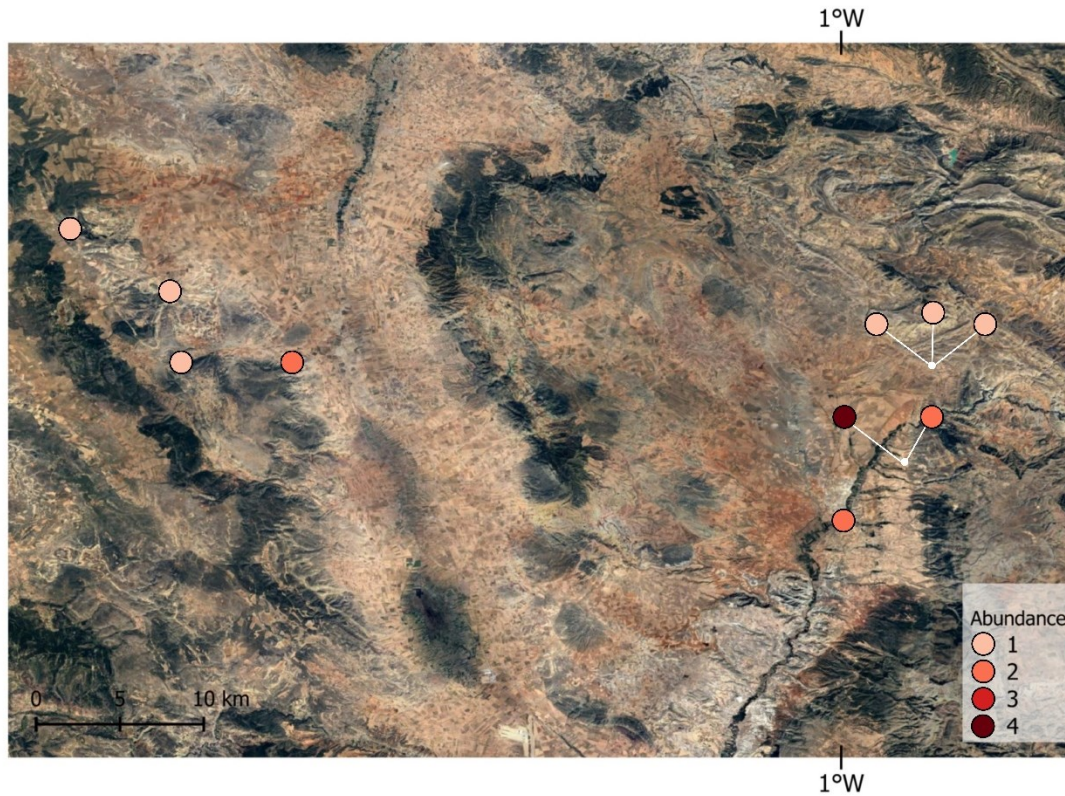
ID_Count	Grid reference	Locality	Date	Time	T°C	Altitude	M	F	Total count
26347302	40.6090643, -0.9546130	Orrios	27-VI-2024	12:11	24	1.218	3	1	4
26348678	40.6812965, -0.9528323	Fuentes calientes	27-VI-2024	13:15	24	1.296	1	-	1
26348679	40.6822798, -0.9506538	Fuentes calientes	27-VI-2024	13:32	24	1.293	2	-	2
26394201	40.7305971, -1.4766317	Ojos negros	30-VI-2024	14:23	27	1.161	-	1	1
26395201	40.6873970, -1.4397631	Villar del Saiz	30-VI-2024	15:55	27	1.154	2	-	2
26854330	40.5800201, -1.0018072	Orrios	28-VII-2024	11:40	26	1.166	1	1	2
26854327	40.6098451, -0.9533072	Perales de Alfambra	28-VII-2024	12:17	29	1.226	1	1	2
26854613	40.6829723, -0.9486970	Fuentes Calientes	28-VII-2024	13:14	28	1.251	1	-	1
26911273	40.7740063, -1.5481670	El Pedregal	31-VII-2024	12:57	30	1.221	1	-	1
26911784	40.6854469, -1.4725902	Villar del Saiz	31-VII-2024	14:35	32	1.279	1	-	1



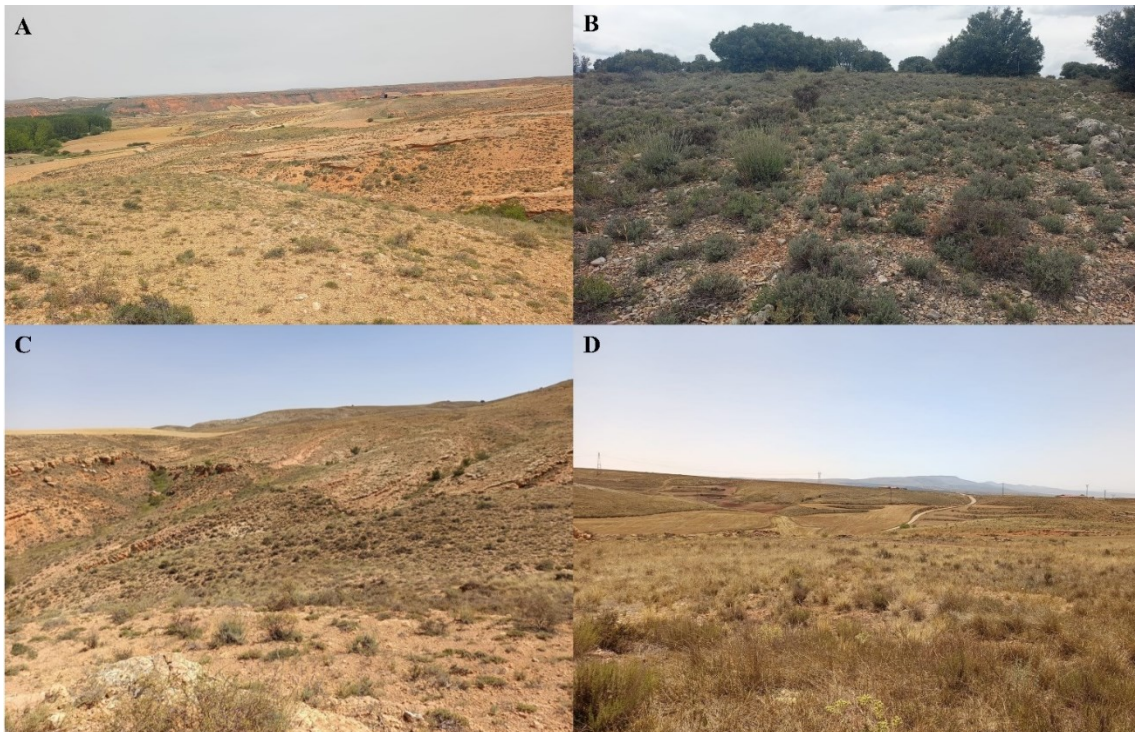


**Figure 2.** 10 x 10 km grid map displaying butterfly species richness, *Chazara priouri* presence grid cells, and sampling points from the 15-minute surveys.





**Figure 3.** Sampling points where *Chazara prieuri* individuals were observed. The colors represent the number of individuals recorded per 15-minute count.



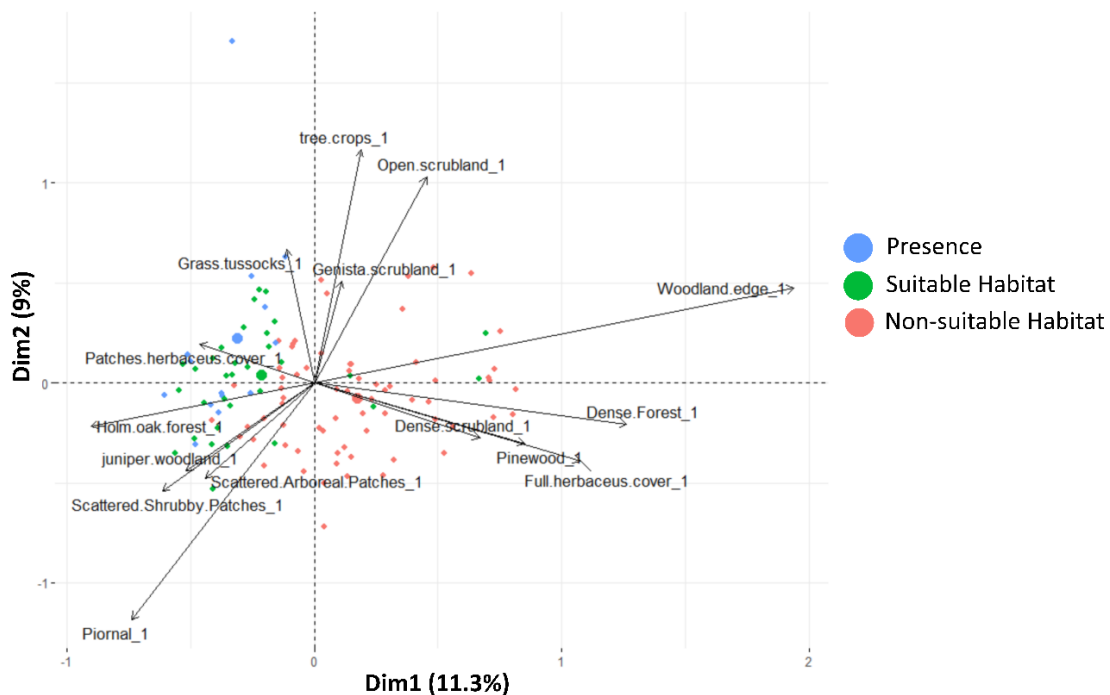
**Figure 4.** Habitat of *Chazara prieuri*. **A** - Orrios, Teruel **B** - Fuentes Calientes, Teruel **C** - Perales de Alfambra, Teruel **D** - Villar de Alsaz, Teruel.

### -Habitat Viability and Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA)-

The two dimensions explaining the highest percentage of variance accounted for 20.3% of the total (Fig. 5). The variables contributing most to Dim1 were patchy herbaceous cover, fully herbaceous soils, woodland edges, pinewoods, scattered shrubby patches, holm oak forests, and dense forests. Dim2 was primarily influenced by open scrubland, grass tussocks, herbaceous crops, tree crops, dense scrubland, scattered arboreal patches, and scattered shrubby patches.

A total of 47 sampling points were identified as areas of particular interest for future surveys (Fig. 2, Table 2). These points, which range in altitude from 322 to 1,634 m, exhibited a correlation with the presence of *C. prieuri* (Fig. 5). They are characterized by patchy herbaceous vegetation, especially grass tussocks, with scattered shrubs and trees (holm/kermes oak), creating an open habitat structure that is favorable for the species.

In contrast, non-optimal habitats for *C. prieuri* were found at altitudes ranging from 361 to 1,632 m and are characterized by dense forests, forest edges, pinewoods and areas with moderate to extensive shrub cover that cover the soil surface. Areas near woodlands and regions dominated by agricultural fields, whether herbaceous or tree crops, should also be avoided in future surveys, as they do not provide suitable conditions for the species.



**Figure 5.** Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) Biplot showing the distribution of *C. prieuri* sampling points in relation to key environmental variables (arrows) influencing habitat composition and structure with the greatest impact on Dim1 and Dim2. Includes suitable habitats for *C. prieuri*, presence locations, and low-priority resampling sites.

### -Butterfly Richness-

A total of 63 butterfly species were recorded (Table 2, Fig. 2), with *Hipparchia semele* being the most widely distributed, present in 50 grid cells, followed by *Melanargia lachesis* (47 grid cells), *Colias crocea* (36 grid cells), and *Pieris rapae* (34 grid cells).

*Chazara priouri* predominantly shared its habitat with the following species: *Hipparchia semele*, *Brintesia circe*, *Satyrus actaea*, *Hipparchia statilinus*, *Chazara briseis*, *Melanargia lachesis*, *Pieris rapae*, *Colias crocea*, *Pontia daplidice*, *Melitaea phoebe*, and *Polyommatus icarus*.

## DISCUSSION

Following a survey in the northeastern Iberian Peninsula, 70 grid cells were visited, covering a total of 117 sampling points, of which 47 exhibited optimal conditions for *C. priouri*. The species was detected at 7 of these points. Favorable habitats were characterized by sparse herbaceous vegetation, mainly grass tussocks, with scattered shrubs (*genista*) and trees (holm/kermes oak, juniper), creating an open habitat structure. In contrast, non-optimal habitats featured dense forests, forest edges, pinewoods, and areas with extensive shrub layers covering most of the soil surface. Additionally, areas near woodlands and regions dominated by agricultural fields, both herbaceous and woody crops, did not provide suitable conditions for the species, suggesting these should be avoided in future surveys.

### -Distribution-

The potential disappearance of northern populations, along with the decline of those in Cuenca, may lead to significant fragmentation of *C. priouri*'s range, disrupting gene flow between southern and northern populations. Conservation strategies should treat these populations as separate management units to prevent further isolation. The current distribution appears concentrated in a core population within the Iberian System, while northern regions, such as southern Huesca and northeastern Zaragoza, face a scarcity of suitable habitats due to vast expanses of cultivated land, despite the widespread presence of the larval host plant (*Lygeum spartum*). This suggests that any remaining populations in these areas are likely small and fragmented. Although some natural habitats were sampled, future surveys should leverage satellite or aerial imagery to better target suitable areas within these highly modified landscapes. More balanced sampling efforts across regions are necessary to accurately assess the species' true distribution.

### -Phenology and Population Fluctuations-

Low abundances of *C. priouri* in this study could be attributed to unfavorable conditions during the survey year. As insect populations can fluctuate significantly between years (Barnes, 1935), it is important to note that no significant differences in abundance were observed between sampling periods. However, the overall abundance of *C. priouri* was

low, with only 1-2 individuals recorded per count. Notably, some locations where the species was observed in June showed no presence in July, likely due to the low population density. Additionally, most sampled habitats exhibited a notable absence or scarcity of nectar resources, with no flowering plants found where *C. prieuri* was recorded. Summer-flowering plants, such as those in the genus *Carduus*, were dried up during both sampling periods. This suggests a possible phenological shift, with the flowering period potentially occurring earlier than usual. Such shifts could have severe implications for butterflies like *C. prieuri*, which rely on limited resources in xeric environments. This underscores the importance of long-term monitoring, especially for species in xeric regions facing desertification and rising temperatures. Climate change-driven phenological shifts might require earlier surveys in northern arid regions, particularly in early June, to capture the species' activity at its peak.

#### *-Habitat suitability-*

Our findings suggest that the structure and composition of the vegetation are key factors in determining *C. prieuri*'s presence. Suitable habitats for *C. prieuri* are characterized by open landscapes with minimal shrub and tree cover, offering refuge from high temperatures. These areas feature sparse vegetation and grass tussocks, which are essential for larval development. However, elevation does not appear to be relevant for *C. prieuri*'s presence, despite finding specimens within a narrow altitudinal range of 1200 to 1300 m. Both viable and non-viable habitats shared similar altitudes. Additionally, specimens were recorded in *piornal* vegetation at 1500 m during this year of sampling (Juan José Lucas López, personal communication, 2024). It is also noteworthy that temporary ponds were observed in some habitats where the species was detected, suggesting that water availability might play a supporting role in habitat and phenology suitability.

Although *C. prieuri* is known to exhibit hill-topping behavior (García-Barros et al., 2011), individuals in this study were found on small hills surrounded by flatlands largely used for cultivation. This suggests that hilltops in such modified landscapes may serve as critical refuges for the species in areas where suitable habitat is scarce. The reduction of suitable habitats due to agricultural expansion likely contributes to this behavior, as the species seeks out the few remaining open spaces.

#### *-Anthropogenic Impacts-*

The loss of optimal habitat due to agricultural practices appears to have significantly reduced the availability of suitable environments for *C. prieuri*. However, this could be linked to rural abandonment, where less optimal areas have transitioned into dense or intermediate shrublands, reducing the amount of exposed soil. This shift may be a consequence of the decline in extensive grazing, which historically maintained open grassland habitats. The resulting ecological succession towards shrub-dominated landscapes further limits the availability of habitats suitable for *C. prieuri*. Continued



research is needed to better understand the factors influencing the species' distribution, with multi-year monitoring essential for determining long-term trends, particularly in xeric regions.

#### *-Auxiliary Butterfly Species-*

The co-occurrence of *C. prieuri* with other butterfly species such as *Hipparchia semele*, *Brintesia circe*, *Satyrus actaea*, *Hipparchia statilinus*, and *Chazara briseis* suggests that these species may serve as indirect indicators of optimal habitat conditions for *C. prieuri*. These species share similar adaptations to extreme climates, characterized by high temperatures, prolonged droughts, and limited resources. Monitoring the populations of these more common species could provide valuable insights into environmental changes affecting *C. prieuri*'s habitat, without needing direct observations of this elusive butterfly. This approach could also be useful for predicting the impacts of climate change and habitat alteration, offering an auxiliary method for assessing the conservation status of *C. prieuri*.

#### *-Future Research and Conservation Recommendations-*

Given the highly specific habitat requirements of *C. prieuri*, targeted conservation and monitoring efforts are essential. The dry, open habitats within the Iberian System, particularly near the borders of Teruel and Cuenca, are critical for the conservation of *C. prieuri* and should be prioritized for monitoring due to their favorable conditions for the species. Outside this core area, continued exploration and long-term annual monitoring are necessary, especially in regions impacted by agricultural expansion and the abandonment of grazing, which have likely led to fragmentation and altered habitat availability. Additionally, studies on the availability and use of water and nectar resources throughout the species' phenology are crucial. Developing detailed habitat suitability maps and conducting connectivity studies will be valuable tools for identifying potential habitats, refining our understanding of the species' population distribution, and informing the design of micro-reserves in habitats at risk from anthropogenic pressures. These measures will be key in mitigating the effects of habitat fragmentation and ensuring the long-term survival of *C. prieuri*.

**Table 2.** Butterfly Richness Associated with the 143 Sampling Points at Each Locality and 15-Minute Count. ID\_Count identifier provides additional data for these counts, eBMS (2024b). Localities highlighted in green are considered viable habitats for the presence of *C. priouri*.

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