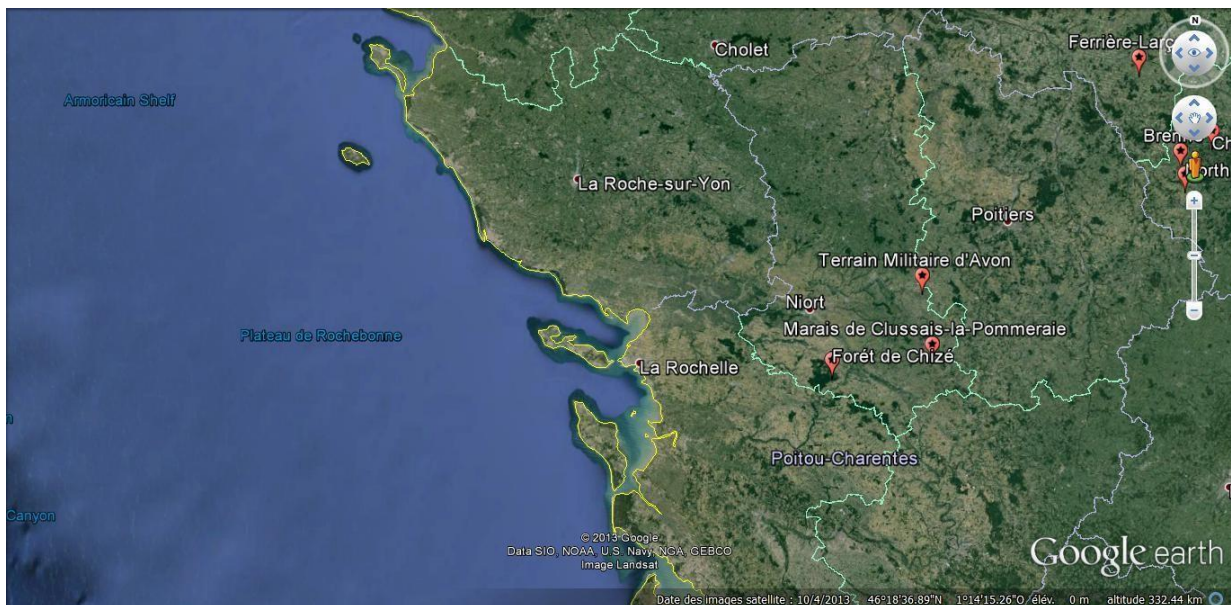




Poitou-Charentes

Contact Information: Neil Wilding email address: neil.wilding@wanadoo.fr

The Poitou-Charentes is one of 22 'régions' in mainland France (half way down the country, on the left hand side). It comprises four départements (counties) – Deux- Sèvres (principal town Niort), Vienne (Poitiers), Charente (Angoulème) and Charente-Maritime (La Rochelle). The surface area of the region is 26000 km², mostly low-lying with a maximum height above sea-level of 365m in E Charente. The geology is varied with areas of mostly Cretaceous and Jurassic limestone and others of granite and schist. The climate is temperate, boasting an average number of sunshine hours per year second in France only to that of the Mediterranean coast.



Google Poitou-Charentes



Most of the region is intensively farmed (principally arable with cereals, oilseed rape, sunflowers and vineyards but with some grazing, mostly cattle and a few sheep). There are, however ‘natural’ habitats including extensive woodlands, both deciduous and planted coniferous, limestone slopes, marsh, heath, hay meadows and coastal dunes. In the 20 years we have lived in the region we have seen a sad degradation in the quality of the flora and fauna, including that of the butterflies. However, there remain some 115 species of butterfly, including a few that are rare elsewhere in France, and with a little ‘inside information’ on sites to visit, the British butterfly enthusiast can anticipate very pleasing field trips in the area.



Websites: www.lepinet.fr (National reference site for butterflies and moths: click on « vous êtes confirmé >> espace lépidoptères » then « choisir un département » set the cursor on a department, a click will give a list of the butterflies (or moths) recorded in that department). www.6pattes.fr/ (Butterflies and macromoths of the Vienne – the site of Samuel Ducept, one of the coordinators of the atlas mentioned below)

Books: Tristan Lafranchis, 2000 - Les Papillons de jour de France, Belgique et Luxembourg et leurs chenilles. Still very useful even if the distribution maps leave something to be desired.

Butterfly Distribution Atlas of the Poitou-Charentes

The preparation of an atlas of the distribution of the butterflies of the Poitou- Charentes is well advanced and due for publication in 2014 (though perhaps best not to hold your breath!).

This will take the form of the corresponding dragonfly atlas (Libellules du Poitou-Charentes) published in 2009 (and acclaimed by Peter Mill in his review in Dragonfly News, Autumn 2010) and will provide precise information on the distribution, abundance, life cycle and conservation status of each species. It will be in French but accessible with a minimal knowledge of the language through the distribution maps and photos. The data has been collected by more than 150 observers distributed over the region and is co-ordinated by the departmental natural history associations (Deux-Sèvres Nature Environnement; Vienne Nature; Charente Nature; Nature Environnement 17). If anyone has data on species, they have observed in the region please send them to me and I will gladly see that they are included. See www.vienne-nature.asso.fr/atlas-papillons.html for more information (in French) about the forthcoming atlas and the work that has been done in its preparation.

SELECTED SPECIES

Hesperiidae. Red-Underwing Skipper (*Spialia sertorius*) occurs frequently on chalky soils where its food plant (salad burnet) is present. Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus armoricanus*) is fairly abundant in grassland and woodland rides. The other *Pyrgus* species to be found in the area, Olive Skipper (*Pyrgus serratulae*), Safflower Skipper (*Pyrgus carthami*) and Cinquefoil Skipper (*Pyrgus cirsii*) are all rare as are Chequered (*Carterocephalus palaemon*) and Silver-spotted Skipper (*Hesperia comma*). Large Chequered Skipper (*Heteropterus morpheus*) is, however, relatively abundant in certain woodland areas in June and early July. It is unusual in being a species restricted to the west of France.



Large Chequered Skipper *Heteropterus morpheus*

Pieridae: Black-veined White (*Aporia crataegi*) is locally common in a range of habitats but Western Dappled White (*Euchloe craemeri*) is largely restricted to the coast of Charente-Maritime, the first individuals appearing in April. There are no recent records of Bath White

(*Pontia daplidice*). Clouded Yellow (*Colias crocea*) is common and Berger's Clouded Yellow (*C. alfacariensis*) occurs where the food plant (horseshoe vetch) occurs. Pale Clouded Yellow

(*C. hyale*) is rarely seen, normally on migration in September. Many early records of Pale Clouded Yellow are probably Berger's. The Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni*) is widespread and the Cleopatra (*G. cleopatra*) is occasionally recorded in the south of Charente-Maritime and Charente.

Papilionidae: Scarce Swallowtail (*Iphiclides podalirius*) is widespread but Common Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon*) less so and in smaller numbers. Both occur in our garden in the south of Deux-Sèvres where Scarce Swallowtail oviposits on peach and Common Swallowtail on carrot.



Scarse Swallowtail *Iphiclides podalirius* Swallowtail *Papilio machaon*

Lycaenidae: The hairstreaks are well represented with 3 *Satyrium* species - Ilex Hairstreak, (*S. ilicis*), Sloe Hairstreak (*S. acaciae*) and Blue Spot Hairstreak (*S. spini*) in addition to the British ones. These occur in June but only Ilex Hairstreak is reasonably abundant (in scrubby woodland). The others are very local.

Amongst the coppers, Sooty Copper (*Lycaena tityrus*) and Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*) are those which most interest English visitors. Both are locally common. With 3 generations, they can be found from May to September.

Interesting species of blue include Provencal Short-tailed Blue (*Cupido alcetas*) which has become very common in recent years; the beautiful Green-underside Blue (*Glaucopsyche alexis*) present in suitable habitats in May; Large Blue (*Phengaris arion*) is often common where marjoram occurs - in our region the butterfly oviposits exclusively on this host and not on thyme; Alcon Blue (*Phengaris alcon*) is restricted to a few sites in the Vienne; Scarce Large Blue (*Phengaris telejus*) to 2 sites in Charente; Baton Blue (*Pseudophilotes baton*) was formerly abundant in the region but now occurs in only a few sites in Charente; Turquoise Blue (*Polyommatus dorylas*), and Escher's Blue (*Polyommatus escheri*) are restricted to very few sites.



Silver-studded Blue (*Plebejus argus*) is abundant on the dunes of the Charente Maritime coast and also occurs locally on grassy sites inland. Idas Blue (*Plebejus idas*) occurs at one site only in the south of Deux-Sèvres but Reverdin's Blue (*Plebejus argyrognomon*) is normally abundant wherever its larval foodplant, crown vetch, grows; Mazarine Blue (*Cyaniris semiargus*), is often abundant in natural or semi-natural grassland. Geranium Bronze (*Cacyreus marshalli*) is now well established in the region and is seen most commonly visiting flowers of geraniums in towns and villages in the west



Green-underside Blue *Glaucopsyche alexis* Alcon Blue *Phengaris alcon*

Nymphalidae: Lesser Purple Emperor (*Apatura ilia*) is much more widespread than Purple Emperor (*A. iris*), occurring normally in woods near rivers or streams. It is bivoltine, the first generation appearing in June, the second in August/ September (when individuals stray into our garden to feed on fallen pears). The Purple Emperor occurs in established deciduous forests and is on the wing in July. White Admiral (*Limenitis camilla*) and Southern White Admiral (*Limenitis reducta*) are common in deciduous woodland. They have long flight periods, the former from June to August in one generation and the latter from May, exceptionally April, to September, probably in 2 generations.

The Vanessids include Camberwell Beauty (*Nymphalis antiopa*) rare in woods most frequently in the Vienne. The European Map (*Araschnia levana*) is common, often not far from water, 3 generations remarkable for the spring form, so different from the subsequent generations. Large Tortoiseshell (*Nymphalis polychloros*) is common. I well remember my pleasure in releasing individuals of this species that had overwintered in the loft during our first year here. Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*) was very common up to about 2005 but has since all but disappeared from the region for reasons not fully understood.



The meadowland fritillaries have always been a novelty to me, brought up in Britain. Glanville (*Melitaea cinxia*), Knapweed (*M. phoebe*), Meadow (*M. parthenoides*) and Spotted (*M. didyma*) fritillaries are all fairly common, in 2 générations. Heath Fritillary (*M. athalia*) is more a species of woodland rides than of meadows in our region. Marsh Fritillary (*Euphydryas aurinia*) is locally common in May in moist meadows and in woodland rides where the foodplant (devil's-bit scabious) occurs.

The larger fritillary species (*Heliconiinae*) include the Cardinal (*Argynnis pandora*), which occurs from May to September on the dunes by the coast. The females oviposit directly in the sand of the dunes. Perhaps they can detect the presence of dormant violets. The Cardinal is migratory and is occasionally seen far inland. Marbled Fritillary (*Brenthis daphne*) is probably the commonest of this group [more common than Dark Green (*A. aglaja*) and High Brown (*A. adippe*) Fritillary], occurring in most woods in the region and in suitable gardens. Lesser Marbled Fritillary (*Brenthis ino*) is restricted to a handful of sites scattered over the region and Twin-spot Fritillary (*Brenthis hecate*) to a single site in Charente.

Weaver's Fritillary (*Boloria dia*) is a common species of woodland rides, light scrub and sometimes meadows. Pearl-bordered (*Boloria euphrosyne*) and Small Pearl-bordered (*B. selene*), though, are much rarer, restricted to about 10 and 20 sites respectively scattered over the region.

Amongst the browns (Satyridae), one should mention the Woodland Brown (*Lopinga achine*), restricted to certain ancient woodlands; Pearly Heath (*Coenonympha arcania*) common in light woodland on calcareous soils; False Ringlet (*Coenonympha oedippus*), formerly common in marshy areas in the west of the region but now largely restricted to heathy marshland in the extreme south of Charente and Charente-Maritime where it is still locally abundant (this is another species unusual in that it is largely restricted to the west of France) ; Great Banded Grayling (*Brintesia circe*), widely distributed but seldom seen in large numbers, whereas the similar Woodland Grayling (*Hipparchia fagi*) is much more local, occurring in light woodland, where it can be numerous; Tree Grayling (*Hipparchia statilinus*) is present at a few sites in the south of Charente-Maritime; False Grayling (*Arethusana arethusana*), occurring in August and September is locally abundant; and finally the Dryad (*Minois dryas*) which is locally abundant in light woodland on alkaline soils.



False Ringlet *Coenonympha oeidippus*

Best months: May is probably the month when, given some sunshine, one can see the largest number of species. June and July are excellent, too. The diversity is rather less in August and September though there are still good things to be seen. If you are interested in seeing particular species or you'd like more specific advice on sites to visit, then ask me. I will be happy to assist bone-fide EIG members in confidence.

Selected sites (a personal choice – there may well be better!):

Forêts de Chizé et d'Aulnay. South of Deux-Sèvres on border with Charente-Maritime. Mixed deciduous forest with broad flowery rides, some areas very open after disastrous storms in 1999. Good for wide range of woodland butterflies including Large Chequered Skipper, Duke of Burgundy, many Fritillaries, White Admirals, Lesser Purple Emperor, Ilex Hairstreak plus alkaline grassland species (in the rides).

Terrain Militaire d'Avon. E Deux-Sèvres, near Pamproux. Extensive grazing with small hedged fields and rich alkaline flora. Access is limited. Sloe hairstreak, Black Hairstreak (*Satyrium pruni*), White-letter Hairstreak (*Satyrium w-album*), Large Blue, Escher's Blue, Adonis Blue, Reverdin's Blue, Silver-studded Blue, Glanville, Knapweed, Spotted & Meadow Fritillary, Berger's Clouded Yellow ...



Marais de Clussais la Pommeraie. SE Deux-Sèvres, between Lezay and Sauzé- Vaussais. Series of marshy meadows with rich flora, managed by the Conservatoire d'espaces naturels de Poitou-Charentes. Large Chequered Skipper, Black-veined White, Large Copper, Black Hairstreak, Green-underside Blue, Dryad.

Forêt de Moulières. Vienne, NE of Poitiers. Coniferous and mixed forest with broad rides and heathland on acid soil. Variety of species including Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Alcon Blue.

Bois de Charroux. Extreme south of Vienne, between Charroux and Pressac. Scrubby woodland and damp meadows. Good range of woodland species with Chequered Skipper, Marsh Fritillary on roadside verges.

Forêt de la Braconne. Charente, NE of Angoulême. Mixed deciduous forest with similar range of species as Forêt de Chizé but richer with Safflower Skipper, Blue-spot Hairstreak, Sloe Hairstreak, Woodland Brown and Woodland Grayling.

Forêt de la Coubre. Charente-Maritime, West of La Tremblade. Sand dunes and established coniferous forest. Silver-studded Blue, Cardinal, Grayling (*Hipparchia semele*)

Forêt de Benon. NW Charente-Maritime, bordering Deux-Sèvres, N of Surgères. Mostly deciduous, damp forest with broad rides and open areas. Many of the species to be seen in the Chizé Forest plus Marsh Fritillary and Woodland Brown.

Landes de Montendre et Corignac. Southern tip of Charente-Maritime. Red- Underwing Skipper, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Tree Grayling, Short-tailed Blue (*Cupido argiades*)