

Butterflies of Hungary

Greenwings Holiday Report 29June - 6July 2017

Led by Gabor Orban and Andrea Katona from Ecotours-Kondor



Introduction

The third Hungary Butterfly tour by Greenwings started as usual in **Aggtelek National Park** and continued in **Bükk National Park**, both in the North-East part of Hungary.

Each protected areas are famous for a long list of butterfly species, several bird species and other wildlife as well. Aggtelek National Park was founded in 1985 both to protect the landscape and species, but also the underground world of the **largest stalactite cave in Europe** between the villages of Aggtelek and Jósvalő. The most famous part of the cave system is the Baradla cave which is 26 km long, part of it is in Slovakia. The whole cave system and the surface is a **World Heritage Site**. The Bükk National Park is almost a decade older and protects the largest surface in Hungary with its more than 40,000 hectares.

Bükk Hills are about 2-3 hours drive North-West of Budapest and are the middle part of the Northern Hungarian mountain range, while Aggtelek region is a bit further North providing a bordering range with Slovakia. Both areas built up by limestone. Bükk is higher, with characteristic rocky outcrops, but more

covered by dense woods, especially Beech, which is in Hungarian Bükk, but also Oak forests with scattered Birch and Sallow. Aggtelek region is not so high and not as much covered by dense woods. Both hilly regions are mainly built up from mezozoic limestone, thus they are very rich in different karst formations from dolinas through sinkholes till hundreds of caves. Some of these caves were used by prehistoric people; several famous archeological findings were discovered in the region.



Our small group spent a bit more than a week in this unique area looking for mainly butterflies, ending up with **86 species of butterflies**, most of them photographed as well. On our very first full day of butterflying we had 50 species for the tour in the Aggtelek National Park. Every full day except one we had seen between 42 and 52 species daily. Of course we had **plenty of birds and other wildlife** around as well.

Peter, David, Jan & Sue and John & Elaine were our guests led by Gabor Orban, a professional zoologist guide and his wife, Andrea Katona who is also a licenced nationwide guide, so the good client and guide ratio was guaranteed throughout the holiday.



This trip report will first outline the 8-day-long programme then describes the daily diary, followed by a gallery and species list.

Day 1, Thursday 29th June: Arrival in Budapest and transfer to Aggtelek National Park

Day 2, Friday 30th June: Northern part of Aggtelek National Park.

Day 3, Saturday 1st July: North-Eastern part of Aggtelek NP

Day 4, Sunday 2nd July: Aggtelek & Upponyi Hills

Day 5, Monday 3rd July: Hor Valley, lower Bükk

Day 6, Tuesday 4th July: Western & Central Bükk

Day 7, Wednesday 5th July: South-, South East Bükk

Day 8, Thursday 6th July: Return to UK



Day 1, Thursday 29th June: Arrival in Budapest and transfer to Aggtelek National Park.

The group arrived at Budapest airport around midday and Andrea waited everybody with a Greentours sign, helped the group to find Gabor with the minivan. Out of 6 six participants with 4 we knew each other from previous tours either in Hungary or in Belarus, so we greeted each other happily. For John & Elaine this was their 5th tour to Hungary, so it seems they are really addicted!!! 😊

After leaving the airport we hit a ring highway first, making a semicircle around Budapest and then continued to East towards Aggtelek National Park. This National Park is at the Northernmost corner of the country, actually continuing into Slovakia. After about an hour we stopped at a petrol station which had a shop and proper facilities.

This site was perfect to enjoy a picnic with some fresh pastries, coffee, tea and some cookies which Andrea and Gabor served and also gave a chance to find the first butterflies and birds.

Gabor pointed out a tree with Imperial Eagle nest, but we could not see the birds around. But everybody could enjoy close views of Crested Larks, Yellow and White Wagtails. We also saw Kestrel, Common Buzzard and Marsh Harrier later on.



Much further alongside the road to everybody's surprise we had 2 Eastern Imp Eagles really close to the road. After reaching Miskolc, second largest and not so attractive city in Hungary we continued our journey on smaller roads. Gabor and Andrea explained some of the history of the country and told stories about the region. We stopped at a small village, Szalonna (which translates word by word as Bacon 😊) to get some money out of the wall. Finally we reached Aggtelek region and stopped at the edge of a local village to take a landscape photo with the huge Fire Salamander sign made out of rocks on a slope which is the symbol of the National Park. This was the first proper place to look for butterflies, so we started to list Essex and Large Skipper, Small and Large White, Wood White, Eastern Short-tailed Blue, Dusky Meadow Brown, Small Heath, Marbled White, Idas Blue.

Also managed to find Yellowhammer, Common Buzzard on a barn, House Martin, Barn Swallow, Tree Sparrow and White Stork.

This was the only day when birds outnumbered butterflies. The total number of butterfly species were found during the holiday was 86.



Day 2, Friday 30th June. Northern part of Aggtelek National Park.

This day was the first real full day during the holiday and resulted an incredibly long list of species with 50 by the end, out of which 42 was new. Not a bad start!



We started alongside a parking lot with Silver-washed Fritillary, Wood White and Meadow Brown, but soon we found a breathtaking male Lesser Purple Emperor, actually a clythie form which is more orange than the nominate form. Birds tried to derail our attention, especially Nuthatch, Grey-headed Woodpecker and Golden Oriole. We also had Peacock and Small White here.

We walked along a lovely stream with some patches of vegetation around which was a good place for Scarce Swallowtail, more Wood Whites, Large White, Essex Skipper, second generation of Map and Brimstone. After admiring a few Beautiful Demoiselles we found another male Lesser Purple Emperor, again a clythie form. Meleager's Blue and White Admiral was new. In the meantime we managed to observe quite close above our head a beautifully marked Honey Buzzard. A bit further we added Heath Fritillary, Red Admiral, Comma, Great Banded Grayling and Ringlet to the list. Suddenly 4 Ravens crossed above us while we were amazed by another set of new species, Marbled Fritillary, a dashing male Purple Emperor, Chestnut Heath and a Chequered Blue.

Number of butterflies dropped as we went through a forested patch and crossed a small gorge, but still we had Great Banded Grayling, Ringlet, Comma and White Admiral here as well.



Next we reached a large flowery meadow which had obvious signs of the famous Hucul horses. Some of the droppings attracted many butterflies, but other ones chose more colourful and more aromatic food sources. We had Spotted Fritillary, Great banded Grayling, Chequered Blue, Large Grizzled Skipper, Heath Fritillary, Meleager's and Idas Blue. We chased several Scarce Coppers and seen at least half a dozen Lesser

Purple Emperors as well. Black-veined White was a great new one and we had Peacock and Swallowtail here as well.



Later on we returned in the same way to Josvafo village where Gabor and Andrea set up a great picnic alongside the stream. Ice cold freshwater was supplied by a crystal clear well. Here we filled out our water bottles with crystal clear water which was pumped up from deep layer-water filtered through thick limestone layers. Gabor explained that Hungary should be very proud having this system providing free drinking water to everyone more than 150 years by now, all over the country.

During the afternoon we drove a little bit further and visited an area close to Aggtelek.

We reached a large grassy and flowery meadow where the trail passed limestone outcrops and went between the large open field and a bushy edge which offered a chance to find some Hairstreaks. Everybody had a chance to discover the area in his or her pace. We had Lesser Purple Emperor, Great Banded Grayling, Marbled White, Glanville -, Marbled - , Lesser Marbled and Heath Fritillary, Map Butterfly. There were a couple of Scarce Coppers around as well. We searched Hairstreak with some success since we could find after some careful checking of the edges of bushes Sloe & Ilex Hairstreaks. Silver-washed Fritillary was present and we could identify a worn Twin-spotted Fritillary as well. Another 2 Fritillaries made our list here longer, a beautiful Queen of Spain and a small Weaver's Fritillary. We had so many butterflies around that we forgot to look for birds, but we surely had a Black Redstart and also heard Quail calling from the meadow.

This all happened not too far from the main entrance of the famous Baradla Cave system. The cave and also the surface above it is a Unesco World Heritage site At one time this was thought to be the longest cave system in the world until the discoveries in the New World as Gabor explained.

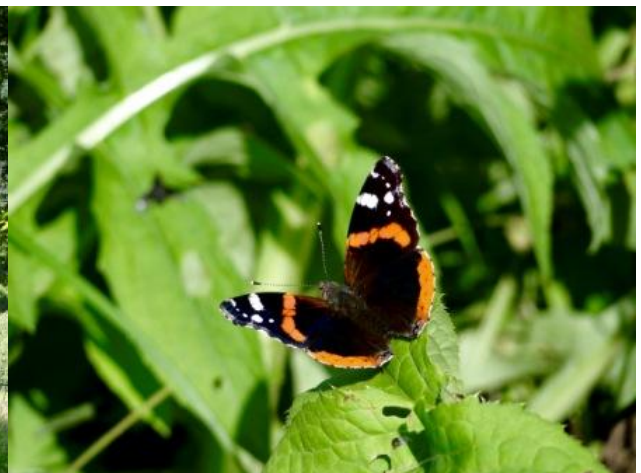
As temperature started to drop butterfly activity slowed down and we were running out of steam as well, so finally we retreated to our hotel and prepared for dinner. The list was long, but we happily discussed it, also Gabor explained the plan for tomorrow.



Day 3, Saturday 1st July. Eastern part of Aggtelek National Park

Today after another great full buffet breakfast we set out around 9 o'clock. This time with a short drive first we checked out an area in the hope of finding a Poplar Admiral. Later on during the holiday we repeated this checking regularly, whenever we passed this area. Unfortunately during the whole night it was raining quite heavily and it still not looked very promising.

We passed Josvafo village with some White Stork nests and travelled to the North East corner of the National Park. We passed a huge, iconic Fire Salamander which has been carved into the hills. After leaving a small local village we continued on a dirt road where Gabor stopped the van suddenly because he flashed with the van a Camberwell Beauty. We got out of the van with express speed and searched this elusive species but in vain. We continued a bit further where we parked and Andrea told a story about the Austro Hungarian times when the Austrians blow up the local fortress which was on top of the hill from where we started our walk. Gabor added the importance of a local Wolf project lead by the National Park and WWF.



We walked in alongside a huge meadow, found some Marbled Whites, Safflower Skipper, 9-spotted Moth, Large Skipper and Ringlet. But due to the poor weather it was not very promising. Gabor explained that there are 2 possibilities, either we try another open area or we walk into the nearby forested patch which is home of Poplar Admiral. However chance was quite limited we could not resist so we visited the forest. Unfortunately the weather deteriorated later further and we could not find one of the largest butterflies of Europe. By the time we reached a small fishpond it started to rain quite heavily, but we could find shelter at a picnic area. When a forestry car came we sent out the bravest girls who managed to hitchhike it! The

forestry truck was perhaps made half a century ago in the Soviet Union, so was not the most comfortable one but still we were happily bouncing back to the place where we parked our van. We were very grateful for the guy and also for the tourist centre which let us use the restrooms before we continued our journey. Later on Sue realized that she left her iPad in the car, so we searched the vehicle and found it in a garden, doors open and the device safely there. It is so much different here than in a city! ☺



Gabor modified the plan and decided to drive up to an amazing limestone slope. Luckily rain has stopped and we had incredible panoramic view on karstic slopes and endless hills and forests further. The slope was covered by flowers and soon everybody went to all directions chasing butterflies. In the meantime Andrea and Gabor set up the picnic at this enigmatic place. But who cares food when you have Adonis and Mazarine Blue around and what is more Alcon and Large Blue as well! There were plenty of Fritillaries as well, especially Spotted and Heath Fritillary, but Weaver's as well. We also chased a strange creature, an Ascalaphus which belongs to Neuroptera. Marbled White was very common, but there were a few Wood Whites as well. We also found Eastern Baton Blue which was new on the tour. We managed to identify Pale Clouded Yellow as well.



Was not easy to leave this place, but Gabor promised a surprise if we drive through a forest to a nearby area. At the edge of the forest at some bushes we tried to find Hungarian Glider. For a while it seemed we will not be successful, but our persistence was worthwhile: finally we had a view of a butterfly gliding majestically and it was bigger than a previously seen Common Glider, also of course the wing pattern was

different as well. We also had here Peacock, Red Admiral, Comma, Map Butterfly and Silver-washed Fritillary. Meadow Brown, Marbled White and Ringlet was also common here as well.

We heard Black and Gray-headed Woodpeckers and although Gabor tried to call them closer we could get just a Greater Spotted Woodpecker. Raptors included Honey Buzzard and Common Buzzard while among other birds we should mention White Stork, White Wagtail, Black Redstart, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Great and Coal Tit. We had again Raven, but Turtle Dove was new. Other wildlife included a female Stag Beetle, a beautiful Green Lizard, another Ascalaphus and a Fire-bellied Toad.



Day 4, Sunday 2nd July Aggtelek National Park and drive down to Bukk through Uppony Hills

After again a substantial breakfast we discussed the different options for today. Gabor explained one of the potential areas nearby Aggtelek and another one around Tornakapolna with different species, but group members so much loved Josvafo and the habitats around the stream that we decided to revisit that area.

But before reaching that place we of course stopped shortly to check out the large car park area, still hoping to get a glimpse of a Poplar Admiral. Despite a serious search we could not find it, but we had Silver-washed Fritillaries, High Browns, Scarce Swallowtail and a male Lesser Purple Emperor, this time the nominate ilia form.

At the stream we had Dingy Skipper, Meleager's Blue, High Brown and Scarce Swallowtail. We also saw Green Woodpecker and Common Jay.



Further up alongside the trail we had Red Admiral, more Meleager's Blues, Brown Argus, White Admiral and Marbled Fritillary. One of the horsedrops must have had plenty of irresistible minerals since we counted 11 species of butterflies on it! Further new species included a female Adonis Blue, Green-veined White; Ian and Sue found Speckled Wood, while David had a Woodland Brown.



Finally we travelled towards Bukk Hills with our loaded van. This time we ventured into some hidden valleys of the Uppony Hills. We crossed some rolling hills and in a small, isolated village we searched a small dirt road which took us to a flower rich large meadow with plenty muddy patches, so it was ideal for several butterfly species with loads of nectar and mineral sources around.

Here we had our picnic and in the meantime enjoyed the songs of River Warbler, Eurasian Bee-eaters and some Hawfinches.

There was a long list of butterflies we found here, which included good number of Peacock, Red Admiral, Comma, Marbled White, Meadow Brown, Ringlet and Map Butterflies around.

Out of several species of Fritillaries what we found in this very productive region we would mention Silver-washed Fritillary, High Brown Fritillary, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Marbled and Lesser Marbled Fritillary and Heath Fritillary. We found Woodland Grayling as well. Blues were represented by Short-tailed Blue and Eastern Short-tailed Blue which gave a perfect possibility to compare these closely related species.

A Scarce Copper, a Small Copper and a beautiful female Large Copper added some new colours to the above variety of species. Lesser Purple Emperor was found here as well, but a Large Tortoiseshell was very popular as well.



We felt we could spend even more time here, but we had to continue to the Bükk Hills, so we travelled further South and just before we would reach Eger, the local capital of the county, we turned East up on the only main road which crosses the Bükk Hills. We gradually climbed up through dense forests, beautiful beech wood and had a few panoramic views of the Southern Bükk Hills before we turned and drove down to the beginning of a valley where our local guesthouse situated in a tiny village.

During the day we also added Wildboar and Brown Hare to our mammal list. At the bushy meadows we had plenty of Red-backed Shrikes everywhere and it was good to see that in this part of Europe Tree Sparrows were still abundant as well. Black Redstarts and White Storks were common at villages we crossed and it was lovely to hear regularly Common Nightingale's crescendo flute alongside streams.



We had a great day with loads of butterflies seen out of which several was new for the tour, so our total gradually grew by the end of the day.

We had a good dinner and a few drinks at our lovely family style hotel before we turned into bed with the hope of a good night sleep to start the next day fresh.

Day 5, Monday 3rd July Hór Valley & Lower Bükk

Next day we were full with energy to discover a new area and find some new species. We really hoped to have some more sunshine which would be a key for a successful day.



After breakfast we had a short drive through some small villages to the edge of the Bukk Hills with an amazing valley. We parked here at the National Park's relatively new centre and walked till former limestone quarry.



Despite it was still not sunny and warm enough we started to pick up good species such as Common Glider, Scarce Swallowtail and Rock Grayling. We also had the meridionalis subspecies of Spotted Fritillary. 2 Ravens and a Common Treecreeper wanted to creep on our birdlist, but we continued to concentrate on butterflies. From time to time we found Common Blue and Chequered Blue plus Silver-washed Fritillary.

At the former quarry first we heard and then Gabor spotted as well for us a Rock Bunting. 2 Common Buzzards flew across as well.

Meadow Brown and Grayling was common, but we also had Adonis, Idas and Meleager's Blue. We saw a couple of Lesser Marbled Fritillaries as well.

Later on from this point we started to drive up through the valley across beautiful old woods stopping once or twice, before we reached a huge open meadow carpeted with wildflowers. This seemed an ideal butterfly habitat and indeed we spent several hours here finding more and more species, busily photographing and admiring them.



First we had Short-tailed Blue, Silver-washed Fritillary, Large White, Red Admiral, Swallowtail and Marbled Fritillary. Then we had a nice surprise, a valezina form of a Silver-washed Fritillary. Everybody managed to have a good look at it and also some photos were taken of course.



Birds here included Jay, Nuthatch, a family of Red-backed Shrikes, Great Tit and we heard again Black Woodpecker.

We decided to have our picnic lunch here and after that finally we started to have some sunshine which brought a couple of dragonflies out including a beautiful Norfolk Hawker. With the warmer air Emperors became more active so pretty soon we had first a Lesser Purple Emperor and then a Purple Emperor as well. We added Holly Blue and Map Butterfly as well to the daily species list.

Since it was still not sunny and warm enough we decided to travel back in the same way through the forest and try to find some open meadows with a bit higher temperature and a bit of sunshine.

We stopped at the edge of Tard village where we had a large group of Blues, mainly Short-tailed Blues and a few Holly Blue. Large and Marble Whites were abundant as well. The bushes were full with Red-backed Shrikes and at the end of the trail we found a small Bee-eater colony as well.



Later we continued to another site not too far from Szomolya village alongside a stream with bushy edges and a small meadow where we found similar species. We added a few more bird species here such as Barn

Swallow, Turtle Dove, Goldfinch, Skylark, Linnet and of course plenty of Red-backed Shrike. We also heard Quail and Golden Oriole.

Finally we returned back to our lovely hotel, passing on the way one of the most famous wine cellars of the region. The owner was selected not just once during the years Wine Maker of the Year, especially with his Bull's Blood.

We had another incredible feast as a dinner and of course some of us could not resist to try the red wine as well.



Day 6, Tuesday 4th July

Central Bukk

After another incredible buffet breakfast we first drove to West and then up through the historical town of Eger. It is a charming capitol of the county with much more than 1000 years of history. Gabor parked at a great lookout point from where Andrea could explain the fascinating history of the town which is famous for having plenty of mediaeval buildings, a huge catholic cathedral, but also the Northernmost original 16th century minaret, left behind by the occupying Turkish forces. "The fall of the crescent Moon" is the title of the novel written by Geza Gardonyi which was translated into more than 100 languages and describes the heroic battle of Eger in such a way that you can imagine it, almost like watching a movie.

After this interesting sightseeing we crossed part of the Bukk Hills again and stopped at different sites.



The first stop was after passing a small gorge at an opening large meadow. Here we found Silver-washed and Knapweed Fritillaries, Marbled White, Meadow Brown and Heath Fritillary. Green Woodpecker showed itself and we also had Marbled Fritillary, High Brown, Peacock and Red Admiral. It was great to find Common Glider and again Short-tailed Blue. The smell of a killed Wildboar chased us away. We stopped shortly at another nearby place but it did not look quite busy by butterflies at the moment so we continued further up towards the centre part of the Bukk.



We stopped alongside the main road from where it was possible to see some of the characteristic limestone peaks of the Bukk Hills, such as Tar Ko. From the parking area we walked shortly to a small meadow which seemed sheltered from stronger winds. It was obvious that not a long time ago, late Spring the area was hit by extreme storms, tons of wood was fallen and still waited to be transported.

Well, still this was a perfect spot where we spent a lot of time to find new and new species and watch or photograph all the interesting things around. Without making a full list we would mention Heath Fritillary, Ringlet, Marbled White and Marbled Fritillary, but a meridionalis form of a female Spotted Fritillary attracted more of our attention. Interestingly we found here both Ilex and Green Hairstreak as well. The most attractive Fritillaries here were Twin-spotted, False Heath and Lesser Marbled Fritillaries.

Further on we stopped shortly at a former lime and charcoal burner sites, both were old traditions in the Bukk Hills. This site also offered an incredible panoramic view. Later we went down through a local village into an attractive valley with alternating driving, stopping, walking and discovering the area.

We had large number of Silver-washed Fritillaries around and among them we found again a valezina form which we chased for a while with bins and cameras. Queen of Spain was present in good numbers and we found again Lesser Purple Emperor's ilia subspecies and also a dashingly coloured male Purple Emperor. You can not be bored with these species! ☺ Of course we had Comma, Peacock, Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Large and Wood White as well. There were several Scarce Coppers around as well. Finally we had a great view of a Black Woodpecker flying across.

Further down at a huge meadow we added Green-veined White, more Silver-washed Fritillaries, Red Admiral and a very attractive Dark-green Fritillary.

It was a great day with a big variety of different habitats, very good number of butterflies and also some new species, so we travelled back through the dirt forestry road to the civilization quite happily. Here another incredible dinner waited us after which it was not easy to finish the checklist.



Day 7, Wednesday 5th July South and Eastern Bükk

After another dangerously rich breakfast first we decided to return to Tard Valley. The first great surprise was a male Sooty Copper, which was followed by Small Copper. There were several Scarce Swallowtails, Marbled Whites and a few Small Heath as well.

At the Bee-eater colony we also had Red-backed Shrikes, Starlings, 3 Hawfinches, Turtle Dove and Greater-spotted Woodpecker.

Dingy Skipper, Holly Blue and Map Butterfly was added to the list here as well.

Later on we continued our travel to Kisgyor area where stopped for taking photos of a White Stork nest which proved to be a good coffee stop as well.

Not too far Gabor suggested a second stop alongside a stream where we walked a short trail hoping to find Pallas's Fritillary.

First we had a group of Scarce Swallowtails, a few Blues and Skippers which we had before, but just when Gabor tried to explain the difference between Silver-washed and Pallas's Fritillary Sue pointed out a large sized Fritillary quite close to us. We checked and yes, it was a Pallas's Fritillary, the only specimen we have found during the tour. Also here we found one Cardinal as well and a Dark Green Fritillary, so it was perfect to compare all these species at one site. A lovely Duke of Burgundy was new which everybody could see well. At the same site River Warbler and Nuthatch was quite active, most of us managed to see both! Other birds included Green Woodpecker and Blackcap.

We noted Map, Scarce Copper, Red Admiral, Large White, Holy Blue and Meadow Brown as well.

Later on we drove up to a dry plateau where we had our picnic in the shade. We walked around a bit at the open dry meadow as well, but apart from plenty of Great-banded Graylings, Marbled Whites, Spotted and Marbled Fritillaries we could not find too many things, so we decided to continue a bit further.

At a fork of the forestry road we parked again and checked both the edges of the forest and the scrubby meadow. It was quite incredible to have literally hundreds of Silver-washed Fritillaries. This definitely was one of the highlights of the holiday. There were plenty of Marbled Fritillaries and Marbled Whites as well. We found a few Common Gliders and Scarce Swallowtails as well, but the next highlight was surely a cleodoxa form of High Brown Fritillary and another valezina form of Silver-washed Fritillary.

Well, we were surely not bored and happily enjoyed this tranquil place. A Comma and a Sloe Hairstreak was also found, while Ravens were crossing above our heads.

We went back through Kisgyor to the main road South of the Bükk and travelled East, but since we still had time Gabor suggested a detour towards Saly. Here in a side valley we found **Lesser Purple Emperor, Silver-washed Fritillary, Comma**, Duke of Burgundy, Holly Blue, Peacock and Scarce Swallowtail. We were surrounded by loads of Jays as well.

Day 8, Thursday 6th July

Crossing the Great Hungarian plain back to Budapest

On our final day we had to say goodbye to our hosts in the Bukk Hills and leaving the area after having our last breakfast. Instead of hitting immediately the highway Gabor suggested to cross it first and check out shortly a nearby spot especially for finding a beautiful Eurasian Roller. This worked out, we all managed to see this beautiful bird. We also had Turtle Dove and a dragonfly which was identified to be a Keeled Skimmer. Butterfly-wise it was not very exciting, we had just Meadow Brown, Marbled White and Comma.

After some travel on the highway we had another stop from where we could watch an Imperial Eagle's nest and luckily we had the parents as well above in the sky.

Finally we arrived back to the airport with plenty of time to check in and go through the security check and even buy some Hungarian delicacy.

Summary

It had been a wonderful holiday in great company, with 86 different butterfly species seen during the week. Even though this was a butterfly holiday it was obvious that the areas we visited had a very rich wildlife, birds, mammals, dragonflies, wildflowers and many more.

Acknowledgements

Greenwings would like to thank Peter, David, Jan & Sue and John & Elaine all your patience and enthusiasm throughout the trip. You were great travelling companion; Andrea and Gabor was really happy to share their knowledge with you and we hope to see you on another memorable Greenwings butterfly holiday soon! How about Belarus or Romania? ☺

