

## Var, France

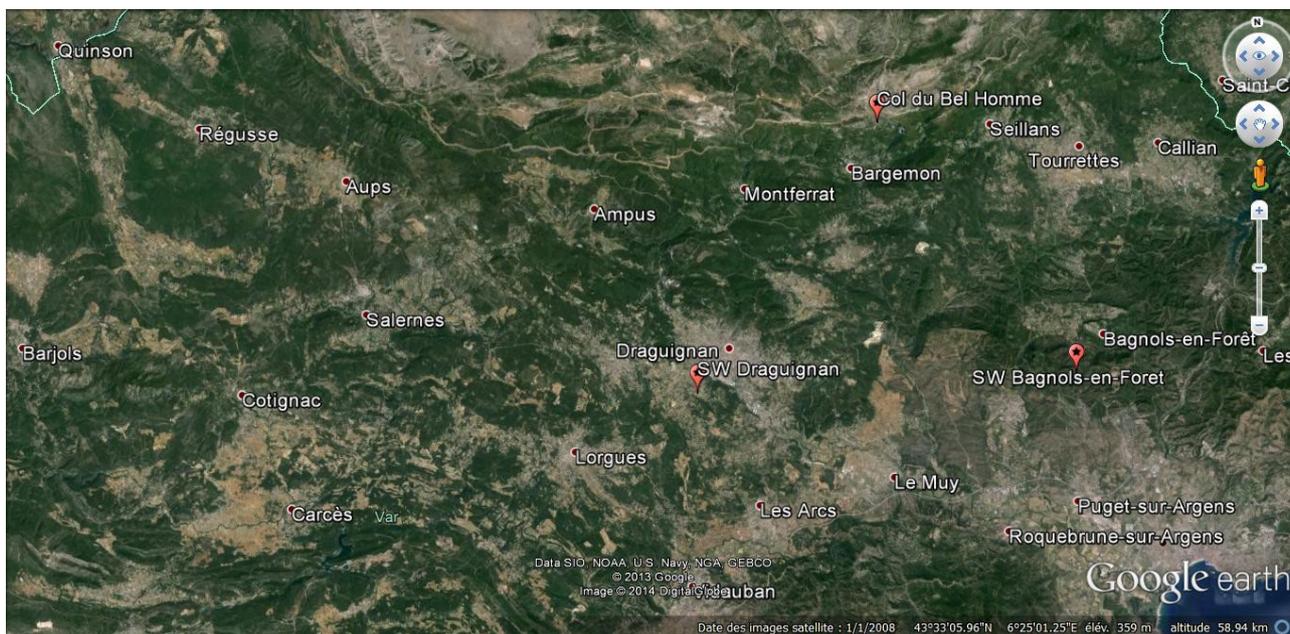
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Please note that RG is in France from mid-April to mid-October with only occasional email access in that period.

**Websites:** [www.butterfliesoffrance.com](http://www.butterfliesoffrance.com) – by RG, focussed mainly on Var.

**Species:** The south-eastern region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur is probably the richest region in France for diversity, with 155 species occurring in Var and 182 in the neighbouring Alpes Maritimes to the east.

Var is one of 85 “départements” (broadly equivalent to counties) on the south coast. It is quite a large département, even by French standards, and broadly occupies the region between Marseilles in the west and Nice in the east, but not actually including either of these major cities. Toulon is probably the largest city in Var.



Google earth Var

**Terrain:** while the coastal regions are well developed, Var is largely undeveloped elsewhere except for a few larger towns such as Draguignan, and for much of northern Var it is wilderness. The A8 Autoroute (la Provençale) runs E-W through Var and makes a convenient north-south dividing line. Much of Var is maquis, scrubland vegetation composed primarily of leathery, broad-leaved evergreen shrubs or small evergreen oaks. Garrigue is a poorer version of maquis, found in areas with a thin, rocky soil, as is most of the area north of the A8, where the altitude rises to around 1000m, the terrain having more in common with the Alpes de Haute Provence to the north than the coastal region of Var. Much of the northern region is occupied by the military training ground Camp de Canjuers, the movement of tanks adding an extra hazard for butterfly watchers.

South of the A8 the butterfly season starts very early and April and May are exceptional months. It is quite possible to see 60 species before the end of April. However, by mid-June this region is becoming baked and the flowers and butterflies rather disappear until September. North of the A8 the altitude increases and the flight periods are correspondingly later. Late August and September are excellent months in the north.

Distribution: butterfly populations are widespread across Var. Almost any area that is undeveloped (i.e. not urban or used for vineyards) will produce good numbers of species. Uncut flower meadows will, as almost anywhere in France, be excellent. Here are some particularly good areas:

- the region west of la Roquebrussanne (approx 10km south-west of Brignoles)
- the region south-west of Draguignan
- the region south-west of Bagnols-en-Fôret
- the region between Fayence and Mons
- the Col du Bel Homme and its surrounds

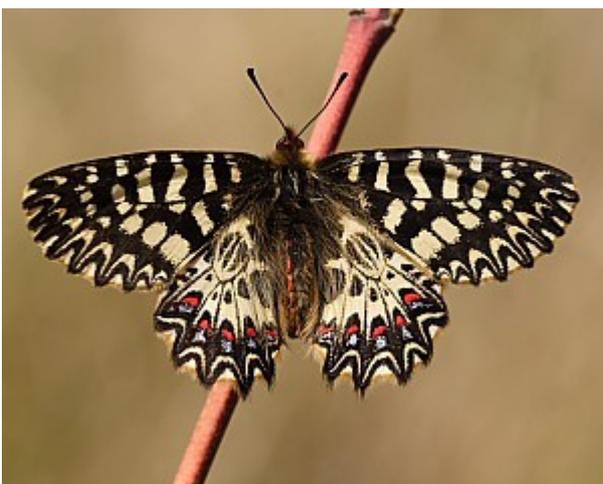
As Var has many rare and highly-sought after species, and collectors are occasionally seen with nets, I am reluctant to reveal publicly details of sites for the more sensitive species, but would be happy to provide specific information to EIG members on request, on a confidential basis.

Much of southern Var is the Massif des Maures (bounded by the coast and the A8/A52 Autoroute ) which I have found to be quite disappointing in terms of the number of species and the size of their populations. However, within in this region, rich nectar sources such as buddleia are usually very well attended.

Curiously, there are a number of species which are not found in this region of south-eastern France, or are found only rarely, such as Map (*Araschnia levana*), Purple Emperor (*Apatura iris*), Lesser Purple Emperor (*A. ilia*), Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (*Boloria selene*), White Admiral (*Limenitis camilla*), Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni*). These species seem averse to the heat and are “replaced” by their more heat-loving relatives e.g. *L. camilla* by Southern White Admiral (*L. reducta*), *G. rhamni* by Cleopatra (*G. cleopatra*), *B. selene* by Pearl-bordered Fritillary (*B. euphrosyne*), and even Peacock (*Aglais io*) and Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*) are rarely encountered.

#### **Selected “interesting” species distributions:**

Festoons: both “French” Festoons, Southern Festoon (*Zerynthia polyxena*) and Spanish Festoon (*Z. rumina*) occur in Var. The range of *rumina* extends from the west to mid-Var and *polyxena* extends from the east to occur in most of Var. In Var and surrounding areas they co-exist and their mutual larval foodplant *Aristolochia rotunda* grows across the region. The *polyxena* flight season starts in early April and runs to mid-May and *rumina* is about two weeks later. *Polyxena* is seen across Var but rarely more than a few in any locality.



Southern Festoon (*Zerynthia polyxena*)

Hairstreaks: in late May a mass emergence of *Satyrium* species occurs: False Ilex Hairstreak (*Satyrium esculi*) in thousands, but also good numbers of Blue-spot Hairstreak (*S. spini*), Ilex Hairstreak (*S. ilicis*) and Sloe Hairstreak (*S. acaciae*), with limited numbers of White-letter Hairstreak (*S. w-album*). They feed avidly on the yellow *Helichrysum* flowers. Strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*) grows throughout the Massif des Maures and is the larval hostplant of Chapman's Green Hairstreak (*Callophrys avis*), as well as, perhaps oddly, Two-tailed Pasha (*Charaxes jasius*). Provence Hairstreak (*Tomares ballus*) is quite a rarity but quite difficult to spot in flight so maybe be under-recorded; its flight season seems over by the end of April. Spanish Purple Hairstreak (*Laeosopis roboris*) occurs in the western half of Var, usually near water.



Blue-spot Hairstreak (*Satyrium spini*)



Spanish Purple Hairstreak (*Laeosopis roboris*)

Blues: Osiris Blue (*Cupido osiris*) is perhaps more widely distributed than Lafranchis suggests. Chapman's Blue (*Polyommatus thersites*) is also often encountered, especially the spring brood. Turquoise Blue (*P. dorylas*) and Escher's Blue (*P. escheri*) are encountered regularly in small numbers in the higher altitudes of northern Var. Amanda's Blue (*P. amandus*) occurs in one site at 400m altitude, the lowest end of its altitude range according to Lafranchis, and it emerges here in mid-May, again much earlier than indicated by Lafranchis. Provence Chalk-hill Blue (*Polyommatus hispana*) emerges in May in large numbers, often not straying far from *Hippocrepis comosa*, with a second brood in late summer. Furry Blue (*P. dolus*) occurs in a very few scattered locations. Black-eyed Blue (*Glaucopsyche melanops*) occurs in small numbers in some locations north of the A8 but its flight season seems over by mid-May. Lang's Short-tailed Blue (*Leptotes pirithous*) becomes very common in southern Var in September, although it is not clear whether this is a second generation or because of migration. Geranium Bronze (*Cacyreus marshalli*) is also widespread and common but highly sedentary, so often overlooked.



Amanda's Blue (*Polyommatus amandus*)



Provence Chalk-hill Blue (*P. hispana*)



Lang's Short-tailed Blue (*Leptotes pirithous*)

Fritillaries: Niobe Fritillary (*Argynnis niobe*) is by far the most common *argynnis* species and the earliest to emerge in May; it is of the southern form *eris*. Dark Green Fritillary (*A. aglaja*) and High Brown Fritillary (*A. adippe*) are encountered much less frequently. Cardinal (*A. pandora*) is quite widespread and clearly double brooded May and September. Twin-spot Fritillary (*Brenthis daphne*) occurs in a few localities where *Filipendula vulgaris* grows.



Twin-spot Fritillary (*Brenthis daphne*)

Pierids: Provence Orange Tip (*Anthocharis euphenoides*) seems quite ubiquitous in April and May. Portuguese Dappled White (*Euchloe tagis*) does occur but in a few rather remote localities.

Satyrids: The range of Western Marbled White (*Melanargia occitanica*) extends from the west in central Var and it seems quite widespread in the western half of Var in May and June. The *hipparchia* and related species emerge in August in the higher reaches of northern Var. False Grayling (*Arethusana arethusa*) and Tree Grayling (*Hipparchia statilinus*) are out in huge numbers and I have found one healthy colony of Hermit (*Chazara briseis*) at 950m. Woodland Grayling (*H. fagi*) occurs widely but in low densities. Spring Ringlet (*Erebia epistygne*) occurs in April but I have only found it in one locality. Heat-loving species such as Southern Gatekeeper (*Pyronia cecilia*), Spanish Gatekeeper (*P. bathseba*), Dusky Heath (*Coenonympha dorus*), are not uncommon. Autumn Ringlet (*E. neoridas*) is very common in northern Var from August onward.



Spanish Gatekeeper (*Pyronia bathseba*)

Pyrgus: Rosy Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus onopordi*) is the first *pyrgus* species to emerge in April, with only Grizzled Skipper (*P. malvae*) for company so no ID problem as the host of confusingly similar *pyrgus* species have not yet emerged. Yellow-banded Skipper (*P. sidae*) is quite widespread in May. Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper (*P. armoricanus*) and the so-called Cinquefoil Skipper (*P. cirsii*) emerge in large numbers in late summer. Safflower Skipper (*P. carthami*) occurs in the northern regions of Var.



Rosy Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus onopordi*)

### **Selected sites/regions**

#### West of la Roquebrussanne:

This area is at around 500m altitude so the season starts a little later. One site is excellent for *Z. rumina*, *B. euphrosyne*, and occasional *G. melanops* in May. In June *S. esculi* emerges in huge numbers, with good numbers of Nettle Tree Butterfly (*Libythea celtis*), and *L. roboris*. In early July *A. dolus* may be found, but is generally uncommon and sporadic.

#### South-west of Draguignan:

This is relative lowland at 200m altitude. It is superb in May with *A. euphenoides*, *B. hecate*, *C. osiris*, *P. sidae*, Tufted Marbled Skipper (*Carcharodus flocciferus*) and both *Zerynthia* species.

#### South-west of Bagnols-en-Fôret:

Altitude 400m, so the season is a little later than lowland and coastal areas. Excellent for *Z. polyxena*, *P. amandus*, and *B. hecate*.

Between Fayence and Mons:

Largely unspoilt rocky garrigue-type terrain at around 800m altitude. Much of this area (as the Col du Bel Homme) is part of the Canjuers military training area. Key species include *C. osiris*, *P. dorylas* and *escheri*, *G. melanops*, Great Sooty Satyr (*Satyrus ferula*), *E. neoridas*, *H. statilinus*, *A. arethusa*.

Col du Bel Homme and its surrounds:

At an altitude of 950m and almost completely undeveloped, this wilderness is superb for Satyrids, especially *Hipparchia* species, plus *C. briseis* and *A. arethusa*. There is also a huge emergence of *P. armoricanus* and *cirsii*, and Silver-spotted Skipper (*Hesperia comma*) in August, in unusual company with *A. pandora*.