

A short visit to Syria in May 1992 (Lepidoptera)

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Abstract. The author describes a visit to Syria during the first week of May 1992.

Résumé. Une courte visite en Syrie en mai 1992 (Lepidoptera)
L'auteur décrit un séjour en Syrie pendant la première semaine de mai 1992.

Samenvatting. Een kort bezoek aan Syrië in mei 1992 (Lepidoptera)
De auteur beschrijft een verblijf in Syrië gedurende de eerste week van mei 1992.

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Syria is regularly mentioned in earlier lepidopterological studies and papers, e.g. Amsel (1933), Osthelder (1931-1932), Ellison & Wiltshire (1939), Larsen (1974, 1983). At present many of the mentioned regions are no longer part of Syria but lie in present-day Lebanon, Israel and Turkey. Very little seems to be known of the Lepidoptera fauna of Syria within the actual borders of the country. During a holiday in the province of Hatay in southern Turkey, I took the opportunity to visit Syria. On the first of May, I went to Syria with the regular bus service from Antakya (Turkey) to Aleppo, Syria's second largest city. In Aleppo, I realised that my stay in Syria could be paid only in US dollars, while any other currency was refused. Because of this I decided to go no further south than Palmyra in the middle of the Syrian desert, and to return then to Aleppo through the valley of Euphrate river in eastern Syria.

On the road from Aleppo to Damascus, I made a first stop 30 km south of Aleppo. Open grazed places in and along (planted) pine-woods seemed interesting enough to have a first look at Syrian butterflies. There, I found some *Vanessa cardui* (Linnaeus, 1758), *Polyommatus icarus* (Rottentburg, 1775), 2 specimens *Zygaena grasilini* (Lederer, 1855) and one *Heliothis peltigera* ([Denis & Schiffermüller], 1775).

20 km further south, I made a second collecting trip in a dry, rocky landscape with many thistles. The whole area seemed to be frequently grazed by sheep. Here, I took besides *P. icarus* and *V. cardui* also one *Vanessa atalanta* (Linnaeus, 1758), 3 *Melitaea phoebe* ([Denis & Schiffermüller], 1775) and 2 *Adscita obscura* (Zeller, 1847). I also observed two *Zegris eupheme* (Esper, 1782), I captured one and without any doubt this specimen belongs to ssp. *tigris* Riley, 1921.

Further south, until Homs, I stopped at several places which seemed promising, but everywhere no or only very few common, already mentioned species, were seen. The whole area is cultivated very intensively.

In Homs I went eastwards, direction Palmyra. Until then, nothing could make me suppose that I was only a few kilometers away from an enormous desert. So it was amazing to see how, once left Homs to the east, the whole landscape changed in less than 30 km completely from green, cultivated land through rocky, grazed and flowery hill-land to a more or less stony desert. The

rocky, flowery, not grazed hill-sides, about 20 km east of Homs were very rich in butterflies. On a few square kilometers I noted several thousands of *Aporia crataegi* (Linnaeus, 1758), most of them sitting in groups on flowering *Vicia* plants. *Plebejus pylaon* (Fischer von Waldheim, 1832) was also rather common. The large, brightly-blue males with conspicuously large orange lunules without black margins on the upperside of the hindwings, must belong to ssp. *nichollae* Elwes, 1901. Here, *Iphiclides podalirius* (Linnaeus, 1758) was also common. Furthermore, I noticed *Lycaena thersamon* (Esper, 1784), *Adscita obscura* and one *Aspilates ochrearia* Rossi, 1794.

Driving through the desert to Palmyra, I regularly saw butterflies crossing the road. All appeared to be *V. cardui*. When reaching Palmyra, I was not only impressed by the enormous ruins, but also by the great green oasis. This all seemed to be very promising to visit. However, my high expectations were soon tempered when I visited the oasis. Under the palm-trees there is a complex of very intensively irrigated crop gardens, divided into small parts by stone walls. The whole gives the impression of a house garden. No wonder the butterfly fauna is poor; only *V. cardui*, *Pieris rapae* (Linnaeus, 1758) and *Nomophila noctuella* ([Denis & Schiffermüller], 1775) were seen. And although I entered the oasis at different places, it was the same everywhere.

More interesting was a cultivated area at about 25 km west of Palmyra. In the desert orchards and agricultural land are made and maintained by pumping water out of the ground. In and around these more or less cultivated areas I found : 1 ex. *Carcharodus alceae* (Esper, 1780), 3 ex. *Euchloe belemia* (Esper, 1799), 1 ex. *Colias crocea* (Fourcroy, 1785) and 15 ex. *Chilades galba* (Lederer, 1855).

In front of these cultivated areas almond trees are planted along the road. They were blooming at the time of my visit and it was unforgettable to see how many thousands of *V. cardui* were attracted to the flowers. Around Palmyra, I still explored many other sites, but all in vain. Nowhere any other species but *V. cardui* was seen, even not in promising dry river beds. I became convinced more and more that it was already too late for eremic species. Eastwards from Palmyra the desert is changing from a dry, stony landscape into sandhills. A very fine view, but here I even did not see *C. cardui*.

Reaching the Euphrate river in Dayr az Zanur I went north-west along the river. This whole area is very intensively cultivated and I drove many kilometers without seeing a site worth visiting. I presumed this would be the case everywhere and therefore I left the Euphrate and tried a more northern route in Ar Raqqa, but also without success. For kilometers and kilometers I did not observe anything else but cornfields in the desert. It was not until I crossed the Euphrate again, that I discovered an interestingly looking place near Manbij. Species recorded here were 2 *C. alceae*, 10 *P. pylaon nichollae* and 1 *Euchloe ausonia* (Hübner, 1804).

As in this part of Syria further investigations seemed useless, I drove back to Aleppo. My final trip in Syria brought me to the mediterranean part, about

30-40 km east of Latakia. Here is a very mild, agreeable green landscape. Vineyards mixed with maquis areas and pine-woods are dominant. One has the impression to be in the south of France! This region was rather rich in butterfly species : *Zygaena graslini*, *Carcharodus orientalis* (Reverdin, 1913), *Muschampia tessellum nomas* (Lederer, 1855), *Pyrgus melotis* (Duponchel, 1834), *Allancastria deyrollei* (Oberthür, 1869), *Gonepteryx rhamni* (Linnaeus, 1758), *Lycaena phlaeas* (Linnaeus, 1761), *Callophrys rubi* (Linnaeus, 1758), *Glaucopsyche alexis* (Poda, 1761), *Cyaniris antiochena* (Lederer, 1861), *Maniola telmessia* (Zeller, 1847).

Although my butterfly observations in the Syrian desert were rather disappointing, my stay in Syria left a fine memory. A trip through the desert is really exciting. To see a fata morgana is unique, but the small tornado's left a bigger impression. They last only for a few hundreds of meters, but seeing three or four simultaneously is really astonishing. And let us not forget the people in Syria; the Syrians I met were all very friendly. Several persons invited me to have some tea with them, and I was surprised so many spoke and understood English. Furthermore, the Syrian wine is really very good!

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