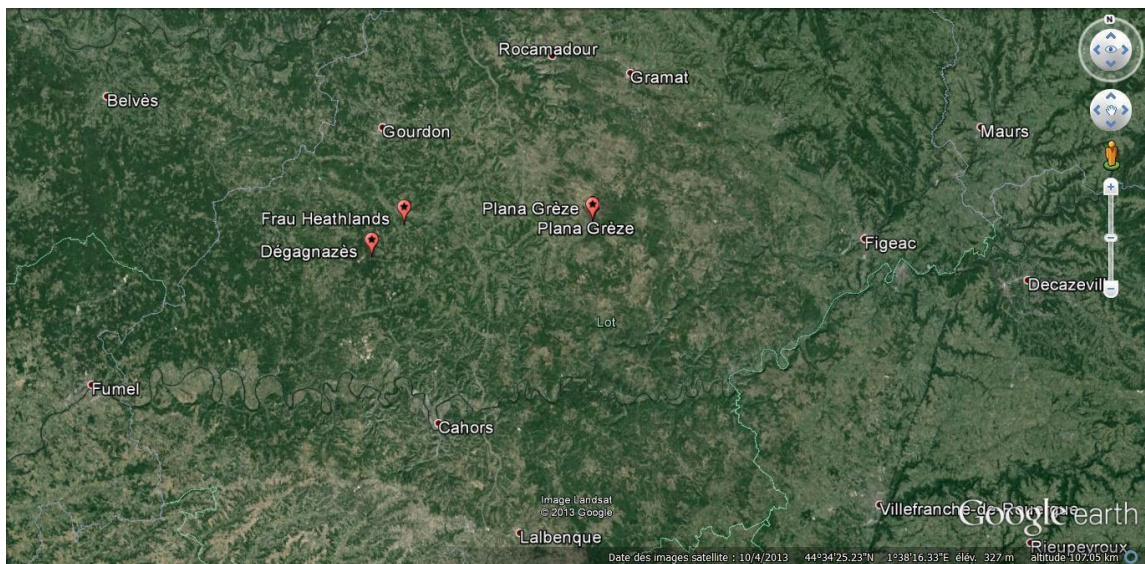




BUTTERFLIES of the LOT, FRANCE

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The department of Lot is in south-west France, substantially the area of the old region of Haut Quercy, bordered by Dordogne to the west, Correze to the north, Cantal to the north-east, Aveyron to the east and Tarn-et-Garonne to the south. The Lot is part of the modern Region Midi-Pyrenees.



Google map Lot

The Lot is essentially an agricultural department with Cahors, Figeac, Souillac, Gourdon, St.Cere and Labastide Murat the major towns, the latter with a population of less than 1000 inhabitants; overall population is now less than 200,000, the result of progressive depopulation of the countryside. Abandonment is evident almost everywhere.

Economic activity is based on Wine production around Cahors, aerospace engineering in Figeac, fruit growing and conversion into preserves in the north-east around Castelnau-Bretenoux, with tobacco, walnut and strawberry growing in the west. Arable farming exists where the depth of soil allows, with livestock rearing at low densities. There is evidence that more sheep rearing is being re-introduced on the causses, but a shadow of what it once was. Tourism is of major importance, particularly along both the main rivers.



The River Dordogne runs across and borders the north of the department, with the River Lot in the south; the A20 motorway, the main route to Toulouse and the Pyrenees, runs north-south through the Lot.

North of the R.Lot the road roughly divides the department between the high plateau limestone of the Parc Naturel des Causses de Quercy to the east (Causse de Gramat, Causse de Martel) and the Bouriane, an area where the limestone is covered by a layer of sideritic sandstone to the west, around Gourdon. The average elevation of the cause is 300-400m. To the south of the R.Lot is the area of white 'chalky' limestone with the Causse de Limogne to the east.

Butterflies of the Lot

Judging by Tristan Lafranchis' 'Les Papillons de jour de France ...' there are well over a hundred species to be seen in the Lot. This is reinforced by the website 'lepinet.fr' that lists about 130 species, although the writer has seen and identified less than 100. The west of the department shares similar habitat and species with much of the Dordogne.

The Skippers are well represented, with the usual difficulty of separating out the *pyrgus* members. Whilst Large Chequered Skipper (*Heteropterus morpheus*) can be found in a few locations, I have yet to find Chequered Skipper (*Carterocephalus palaemon*) although it has been recorded in the Lot.

Wood White (*Leptidea sinapis*) and Black-veined White (*Aporia crataegi*) to be seen almost everywhere in season; Berger's Clouded Yellow (*Colias alfacariensis*) is also common. Other Whites as in the UK, with occasional rarer species sighted. The two Swallowtails are widespread, as is the Duke of Burgundy (*Hamearis lucina*).

The Hairstreaks are also present, some more obvious than others with White-letter (*Satyrium w-album*) and Black (*S pruni*) particularly hard to find.

The Coppers are represented Small, Sooty, Large and Purple-shot (*Lycaenae phlaeas*, *tityrus*, *dispar*, *alciphron*), although I have not yet found the latter in the department.



Baton Blue *Pseudophilotes baton*



Silver-studded Blue *Plebejus argus*

The Blues are also present in a wide diversity with Large Blue (*Phengaris arion*) to be seen in moderate numbers across the department in the second half of June. Adonis Blue (*Polyommatus bellargus*) appears to be common and widespread, whilst Chalk-hill Blue (*Polyommatus coridon*) is not, just as in the Dordogne. In addition to other UK Blues, there are good and widespread populations of Provencal Short-tailed Blue (*Cupido alcetas*), at lower densities Green-underside Blue (*Glaucopsyche alexis*), Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*), Chapman's and Escher's Blues (*Polyommatus thersites*, *escheri*) although I have been unable to confirm the latter. Chequered Blue (*Scotilantides orion*) has also been recorded here but the nearest I have seen it is in the Cantal, just as for Purple-shot Copper. If you get the location and timing right, Baton Blue (*Pseudophilotes baton*) can be seen in reasonable numbers, as can be Silver-studded and Idas Blues (*Plebejus argus*, *idas*) but none of these is widespread. Of course, you may come across Geranium Bronze (*Cacyreus marshalli*) almost anywhere near habitations displaying colourful potted geraniums, including town centres!

The Browns (Nymphalidae – satyrinae) are well represented, often in abundance. In addition to our UK species, you may be lucky to find Large Wall Brown (*Lasiommata maera*) and Woodland Brown (*Lopinga achine*), the former on the causses, the latter in the Gourdon – Payrac area. Pearly Heath (*Coenonympha arcania*) is numerous and fairly widespread in season; I have not registered Dusky Heath (*Coenonympha dorus*) but it has been recorded. In addition to our Gatekeeper, Southern and Spanish Gatekeeper (*Pyronia tithonus*, *cecilia*, *bathseba*) are shown as present on occasion.



Duke of Burgundy *Hamearis lucina*



Dusky Heath *Coenonympha dorus*

Two ringlets, in addition to the UK species, are mentioned as being present, neither of which have I seen in the department: Autumn and Piedmont (*Erebia neoridas*, *meolans*). The same might be said to apply to the marbled whites: our own Marbled White, Esper's and Western (*Melanargia galathea*, *russiae*, *occitanica*), where I have not sighted either of the latter two in the Lot.

Both the Dryad (*Minois dryas*) and Great Sooty Satyr (*Satyrus ferula*) can be found, the former rather more widespread than the latter; Black Satyr (*S actaea*) has also been recorded but I have not had the good fortune to find it.

The department is well blessed with the grayling family and, on occasion, some species can be found in high numbers: Great Banded Grayling (*Brintesia circe*), False Grayling (*Arethusana arethusa*), Tree, Common, Rock and Woodland Grayling (*Hipparchia statilinus*, *semele*, *hermione*, *fagi*); I have not recorded Rock Grayling here and it may be registered as a result of mis-recording. One species that we have not found despite searching for many hours in 'suitable' habitat is the Hermit (*Chazara briseis*) perhaps now lost to the department in its retreat south.

The Emperors (Nymphalidae – apaturinae) are both recorded, and Lesser Purple Emperor (*Apatura ilia*) is quite widespread and sometimes has a good second brood, but Purple Emperor (*Apatura iris*) eludes me despite providing a potential site reference where a colleague managed a good photograph of the species!



Great Banded Grayling *Brintesia circe*

Lesser Purple Emperor *Apatura ilia*

The White Admiral (*Limenitis camilla*) and Southern White Admiral (*Limenitis reducta*) can both be found, with the latter being double brooded in the Lot. Poplar Admiral (*Limenitis populi*) I have not found in the Lot but it has been recorded.

Finally, the fritillaries (Nymphalidae – Heliconiinae, Nymphalinae). It is a joy to discover so many varieties of fritillary, often flying together and in good number. Silver-washed, Dark Green, High Brown and Niobe (*Argynnis paphia*, *aglaja*, *adippe*, *niobe*) are present, the Niobe being somewhat rarer.

Queen of Spain (*Issoria lathonia*) is widespread and relatively common; it is multi-brooded and, from observation, I believe it can over-winter as an adult.

The Twin-spot Fritillary (*Brenthis hecate*) is local in often isolated colonies in low numbers where the food plant (*Filipendula vulgaris*) flowers. I am quite clear that it is Dropwort, not Meadowsweet (*F.ulmaria*) that this species uses in the Lot. The Marbled and Lesser Marbled Fritillaries (*Brenthis daphne*, *ino*) are both found, the former widespread, the latter in just a few locations where suitable habitat exists.



Dark Green Fritillary *Argynnis aglaja*



High Brown Fritillary *Argynnis adippe*
 (form cleodoxa)

I have not found Pearl-bordered Fritillary (*Boloria euphrosyne*) in the Lot despite hours of searching what I believed to be suitable habitat; the same was the case for Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (*Boloria selene*) until I was able to photograph and confirm the species at a site we visited on a fairly regular basis – a question of getting the timing right! Violet or Weaver’s Fritillary (*Boloria dia*) is widespread and multi-brooded, and usually the first fritillary of the year to appear.

Surprisingly few Peacock (*Aglais io*) or Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*) are seen, but Comma (*Polygonia c-album*) and Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*) are widespread. The Map butterfly (*Araschnia levana*) appears to be widespread without ever being common.

Of the remaining fritillaries, Glanville, Meadow, Knapweed, Spotted and Marsh Fritillary (*Melitaea cinxia*, *parthenoides*, *phoebe*, *didyma*, *Euphydryas aurinia*) are widespread and, at times, in very good abundance, whilst False Heath (*Melitaea diamina*) and Provençal Fritillary (*Melitaea dejone*) can be hard to find, the former being local to its habitat, the latter perhaps a traveller.

Habitats

As a result of the largely rural nature of the Lot a good range of butterfly species, and often in abundance, can be found almost anywhere. We have observed how good open grassland has been used for housing or commercial development and there are fewer hay meadows. Old wood pasture has been abandoned allowing considerable scrubbing up of many former open areas, but roadside verges and old ‘green lanes’ (drover’s tracks) and the continued existence of areas of open grassland make butterflying a pleasure. The flora is a delight and provides a wide range of food plant for butterflies and moths.



The brief descriptions of locations that follow are taken from the publications of the Conseil General du Lot promoting the environmentally sensitive areas (ESA's) that can be visited by the public. Local tourist offices may have descriptive sheets of these walks. However, considerable reward can also be gained from exploring roadsides and areas of open land accessed via tracks and footpaths with, perhaps, the discovery of something special, almost anywhere in the department.

1. The Braunhie is an area of the Causse de Gramat promoted for open access, near Fontanes du Causse, east of Labastide Murat. It comprises grassland and former wood pasture but many areas are now scrubbing up as a result of abandonment. Over a season up to 80-90 species may be found and a good walk in summer will produce 30-40 species.
2. The Plana Greze is also part of the Causse de Gramat, and extension of the Braunhie to the south towards Caniac du Causse. A similar range of species diversity to the Braunhie walk and very rewarding, rising to higher ground. Probably best location for Niobe Fritillary and range of Hairstreaks.
3. In contrast, the Frau Heathlands to the south west of Gourdon, near Lavercantiere, are an area of acid heathland, unique within the Lot. Well marked footpaths allow for exploration with an excellent species list. It is here that you will find Large Chequered Skipper and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, for example. The Emperors are here together with Large Tortoiseshell, Southern White Admiral, and a full range of the larger fritillaries.
4. Degagnazes to the south can be linked in a walk from the Frau Heathlands or visited separately. This is an abandoned village that holds an annual agricultural/social event in early September. A combination of farmland, woodland and streamside habitats where you might find something different.
5. Close to Rocamadour there are two walks: one along the route of the R.Alzou via the derelict Moulin du Saut, and the other covering the Alzou and Ouyse rivers and dry canyons, distinctive of this area – arid hillsides, dry river valleys unless there is heavy rainfall on the causes. The latter walk once produced 40 plus species in a day, including many blues and Large Blue in good number.
6. South-west of Gourdon, again, and close to Les Arques, is the Masse valley, with quite a nice area of marsh and it is here you might find Large Copper and Lesser Marbled Fritillary, along with many other species. (There are several sites around the department like this. Another with excellent public access is at the Marais de Bonnefont near Marrinhac-Lentour, in the north-east towards St.Cere.



7. The Dordogne ‘backwater’ at Floirac, near Martel in the north of the department, is an example of a floodplain and former course of the river examples can be found all along this middle section of the river. Another excellent walk that provides ample opportunity to discover the wildlife of the Lot.

These walks are listed in the order of preference if simply searching for butterflies, but any of them will prove rewarding. Our own experiences in the Gourdon-Payrac-Souillac area, a mixture of residential, commercial and agricultural activity land use, provides confirmation that a majority of species can be found along roadsides, footpaths and tracks. The sites listed are the ‘icing on the cake’.

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