

**THE MILLET SKIPPER *PELOPIDAS THRAX* (HÜBNER, [1821])
(LEPIDOPTERA: HESPERIIDAE) NEW TO THE GREEK ISLAND OF
KERKYRA (CORFU)**

¹ DAN (G. W.) DANA HAR AND ² ANNE F. SORDINAS

¹ 35 Coldean Lane, Brighton, BN1 9GD
dan@corfubutterflyconservation.org

² Aghia Marina, Kalafationes, Corfu, Greece
anne@corfubutterflyconservation.org

Abstract

The Millet Skipper butterfly *Pelopidas thrax* (Hübner) (Hesperiidae) is added to the Lepidoptera fauna of Corfu (Kerkyra).

Introduction

Until recently, research on the phenology and distribution of butterflies on the island of Kerkyra (Corfu) in northern Greece has been limited and so the status of the island's butterfly assemblages has remained mostly unknown. To rectify this, the Corfu Butterfly Survey (<https://corfubutterflyconservation.org>) was launched on 1 January 2021 and will run until 31 December 2025. This survey is managed by Corfu Butterfly Conservation (CBC) which aims to encourage the conservation of Kerkyra's butterflies along with their habitats, so they can be enjoyed by everyone, forever. CBS has already established the presence of two skipper species in the genus *Gegenes*: the Pigmy Skipper *G. pumilio* (Hoffmansegg, 1804) and the Mediterranean Skipper *G. nostradamus* (Fabricius 1793). In the summer of 2023, a similar species, the Millet Skipper *Pelopidas thrax*, hitherto unreported on the island, was recorded in small numbers. The wings of the Millet Skipper are brown with small white hyaline marks. It resembles *G. pumilio* and *G. nostradamus*, but it is larger, has hooked antennae and has larger white wing spots (http://www.pyrgus.de/Pelopidas_thrax_en.html) (see Plates 1, 2 & 3).



Plates 1, 2 & 3. *Pelopidas thrax* observed during October 2023 in northern Kerkyra, at a location now known locally as Barry's Millet Meadow. Photographs by the authors.

male at a site further inland and additional records were made on 12, 14, 15, 16 18 & 20 October.

On several occasions, a male specimen was observed in the late afternoon displaying vigorous territorial behaviour, flying up and challenging other butterflies such as *G. pumilio* and *Ochlodes sylvanus* (Esper, 1777) before returning to its perch. Photographing this species can be difficult because when taking flight, it rises slowly from its perch but once in the air departs rapidly. Photography was relatively easy on 6 October when in semi-overcast conditions the maximum temperature was only 27 °C but on 9 October the maximum temperature was 4 degrees higher and the butterfly was far more active.

At the time of writing the Millet Skipper has been observed at four distinct locations, all in northern Kerkyra (see Figure 1.). These sightings were generally made at low altitudes, relatively close to the coast.

Discussion

The range of *Pelopidas thrax* includes West and Southwest Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Arabia, Africa, Kashmir, and the Far East. In Greece, it is found on the islands of Kastellorizo, Rodos, Kos, Kalymnos, Samos, Chios, Lesbos and Limnos. During 2021 the first records of sightings were made in Macedonia and mainland Greece. It was recorded in Thesprotia (mainland Greece, close to the Corfu Channel) by Xrysostomos Baraktaris on 30 August 2023 and in Thessaloniki on 29 September 2023 by Thomas Giannakis. Over recent years *P. thrax* has clearly spread westward into mainland Greece and beyond.

P. thrax is generally multivoltine and probably lacks a dormancy stage, although it is unclear if this is the case at the edge of the current migration wave. Of the individuals we observed one *P. thrax* showed reduced activity when the ambient air temperature decreased, over a 10-to-15-minute period on 6 October, when we were able to photograph the insect. This observation led us to speculate that because specific thoracic temperatures are known to be required for insect flight, perhaps this relatively large bodied, small-winged butterfly can only migrate when ambient air temperatures are high enough to permit sustained flight. Such a period may have occurred in the middle of August (2023) when the maximum daily temperature peaked at 38 °C (21 August) and was maintained at 37 °C for the following three days. On the day that Will George's original observation was made (30 August) the maximum daily temperature had dropped by 8 degrees to 29 °C (see Fig. 2.)

This leads us to hypothesize that a mass migration was triggered in mid-August by these high temperatures and that the solitary individuals we observed in September and October had remained on site since the initial August immigration because they were unable to continue their migration west. Whilst such migratory events could be attributed to climate change, it is worth noting that in the eastern Mediterranean periodic extinction and recolonisation by this species, through migration, has been recorded in the past.

CBC expects to continue observations of this species in the future to determine the extent of its distribution on the island and the influence of climatic conditions on its migratory behaviour.

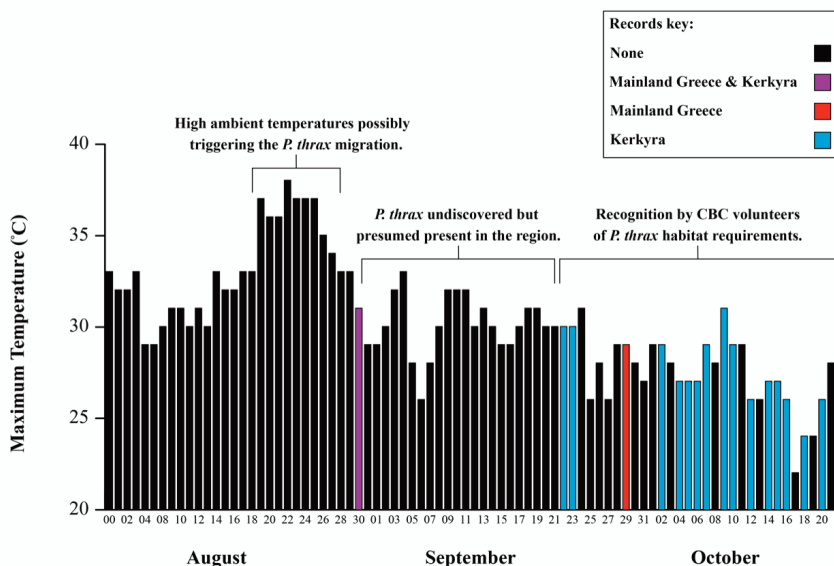


Figure 2. The maximum daily temperatures °C recorded on Kerkyra during August, September and October 2023 (<https://www.accuweather.com/en/gr/kerkyra>).

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