

# Pyrenees in close-up

The western Pyrenees in June is a macro photographer's paradise for alpine flowers and insects. **Robert Thompson** recalls the highlights from a recent workshop and reveals his favourite sites in this wild and spectacular landscape...

The view from the meadows  
beyond the village to the Cirque  
De Gavarnie and its waterfall  
Nikon D800 with 24-70mm Nikkor,  
ISO 100, f/16, tripod

**T**he Pyrenees are an impressive range of mountains stretching some 480km from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean and forming a natural boundary between France and Spain. The region is blessed with remarkable scenery and exceptional flora and fauna. The alpine meadows bring colour to the landscape, and the roadside verges are simply overflowing with flowers and insects, making it a real paradise for the macro photographer.

These mountains encompass a number of massifs, which divide the range into distinct areas. Some peaks exceed 3,000m and retain snow on their highest summits all year round. Deciduous forests carpet many of the mountain slopes, and fast flowing rivers with impressive waterfalls are a familiar sight across the whole landscape.

I need little in the way of an excuse to visit this remarkable landscape. I have explored much of the southwest and central Pyrenees photographically on a number of occasions and ran a photographic workshop in June near the small village of Gavarnie, situated about 3km from the famous Cirque de Gavarnie – a well-known region, rich in invertebrates and flowers and a magnet for botanical and insect photographers.

### **The colosseum of nature**

The Cirque de Gavarnie is a remarkable sight and was once described by the French writer Victor Hugo as the ‘colosseum of nature’. It is a large, glaciated amphitheatre of staggered, almost vertical igneous rock rising some 1,400m into the sky, and is perhaps the best-known landmark within the western Pyrenees belt. Plunging from the vertical rock face is a 400m waterfall known as Gavarnie Falls, the highest in Europe, which can be seen from the adjoining meadows almost 3km away. The surrounding area is an excellent location to run a workshop and with so much



*“The butterfly fauna is especially rich with over 200 species recorded throughout the region”*

The Apollo (*Parnassius Apollo*) is a large iconic species of butterfly often associated with the upland regions in the Alps. We came across it in a number of locations during our stay. Nikon D800, 200mm Micro Nikkor, ISO 200, f/8, monopod



**Pyrenean Columbine (*Aquilegia pyrenaica*) was a common sight along many of the roadside verges above Gavarnie, but swayed in the slightest of breezes.**  
*Nikon D800, 200mm Micro Nikkor, ISO 200, f8, tripod*

diversity you can easily switch your plans if and when conditions require it. The Cirque de Gavarnie has been recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

The climate of the Pyrenees varies between regions, so expect to get baked one minute and drenched the next. It's often warm and sunny in the morning followed by rain and the occasional thunderstorm in the afternoon. The combination of the Mediterranean and Alpine climates

produces a wide variation in plant and insect life. Over 3,000 flora species have been recorded – more than enough to swell the memory cards of any macro photographer. A number of these are endemic and restricted to specific areas within the mountains. The main flowering period peaks in late June and early July, but an early visit in the spring will see the foothills carpeted with irises, yellow rattle, gentians, narcissus and, later in the season, orchids.

### **Butterfly abundance**

The insect life in the area is also numerous and diverse. Beetles, grasshoppers and countless crickets are abundant among the lush vegetation. The butterfly fauna is especially rich with over 200 species recorded throughout the region. Apollos, swallowtails, various skippers and countless ringlets and blues thrive in the lower pristine hay meadows and roadside verges, as do a number of day-flying moths, including burnets, foresters and hummingbird hawk moths, which can be seen hovering among the flowers.

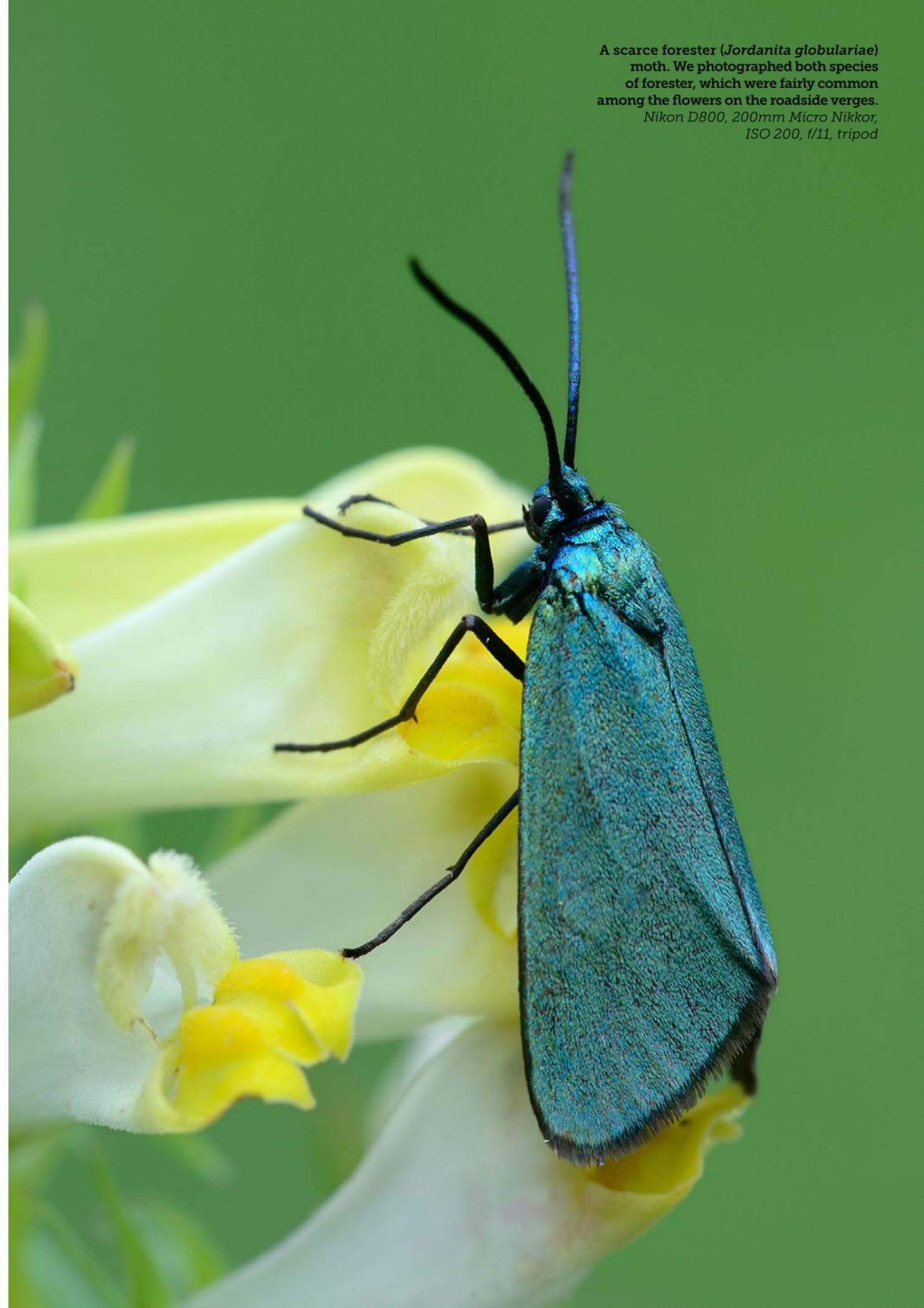
*“The combination of the Mediterranean and Alpine climates produces a wide variation in plant and insect life”*

Identifying many of the blues is often a problem unless you manage to obtain photos of both the upper and undersides of the insect. With so much subject material and activity around you it's sometimes difficult to know what to target next.

### **Workshop meanders**

Our base for the workshop was Luz-Saint-Sauveur, a small but lively spa town to the north of Gavarnie village, which catered more for our needs and had a reasonable number of places to eat for those that wanted a change from the hotel's cuisine. The driving time from Luz-Saint-Sauveur to Gavarnie is only about 25 minutes, but we invariably made several stops along the flowery roadside verges to photograph the many species of butterfly and other insects and plants that came our way. Some of our time was spent in the meadows and general area around the Cirque, which was particularly good for butterflies and day-flying moths.

**A scarce forester (*Jordanita globulariae*) moth. We photographed both species of forester, which were fairly common among the flowers on the roadside verges.**  
*Nikon D800, 200mm Micro Nikkor, ISO 200, f/11, tripod*



This wart biter (*Decticus verrucivorus*)  
is one of the most abundant crickets to  
be found in most sites  
*Nikon D800, 200mm Micro Nikkor,  
ISO 200, f/11, tripod*



## Macro Matters

The river here was vibrant, fast flowing, with melt water coming from the snow-capped rock faces. Alpine marsh orchids were common along the track and we spent some time working these and several other species, including greater butterfly, fragrant, vanilla and burnt-tip to name but a few. The weather was exceptionally sunny on a number of days, which made close-up photography extremely challenging, and we had to resort to diffusion in many situations, which slowed things down a little. We confined most of our insect photography to very early in the morning and late evening when

temperatures were on the cooler side, and the sun had dropped significantly.

### Spectacular scenery

We made several trips to other locations including the Ossoue Valley and Cirque de Troumouse, and also spent time in the Barrage des Gloriettes, a local nature reserve and another well-known haunt for endemics including Pyrenean Eryngium and Pyrenean Saxifrage. It is also a reliable location to see lammergeiers, alpine choughs and griffon vultures. The scenery in this region is impressive with the Gave d'Estaubé flowing through the valley and providing an attractive foreground against

the snow-capped Cirque d'Estaubé. The area is particularly good for a wide range of insects, including black-veined whites, various fritillaries, ringlets, skippers, apollo, idas and turquoise blues.

On one of the warmest days we headed to the Lutor Valley stopping briefly at the small town of Cauterets, then driving up through spectacular pine woodland and numerous waterfalls, which generated a lot of interest from the group. We finished at the Pont d'Espagne and headed up to Lac de Gaube, an area of spectacular scenery and flora including butterflies which we had previously not seen, such as clouded apollo, pearly heath, mountain ringlet,

sooty copper and mountain clouded yellow. Then there was the profusion of grasshoppers and crickets that legged it under our feet!

It is easy to be overwhelmed when you encounter a place such as this, and one could easily spend all of your time working the side roads to the exclusion of everything else. Some of our best images were taken on the many small flowery by-roads where there was a lot more shelter from the wind and suitable shade later on in the evening. Most of the region is under protection and is perhaps the last area of truly unspoilt wilderness in Western Europe.

## Travel information

### Getting around

Toulouse is a major hub airport and the 200km journey time to Luz-St-Sauveur takes around three hours by car. Just follow the signs for Lourdes and from there it's signposted to Gavarnie. NB: Petrol stations are few and far between so make sure you fill before you leave.

### Food & provisions

Food can be a problem if you are not staying in a hotel; many small restaurants are not open, even in late June. This is especially the case in some of the smaller villages, but you can always travel to Luz-St-Sauveur for food and other essential items.

ATMs are scarce so go easy on the cash!

### Recommended hotels

#### Luz-Saint-Sauveur

*Hôtel Montaignu*

This is an excellent 3-star hotel, which serves good food and makes a perfect base to explore the surrounding landscape.

#### Gavarnie

*Hotel le Marbore*

The hotel is in the village of Gavarnie in the Pyrenees National Park. The rooms have private bathroom facilities and WiFi too! It serves traditional French cuisine.

*Hotel Vignemale*

This friendly hotel is situated close to the Gavarnie Falls and is a bit more basic in its facilities. It also runs excursions to the Cirque and the Brèche de Roland.

There are also various camping sites and some guesthouses in the surrounding area.



**Above:** Black-veined white (*Aporia crataegi*) is a very common butterfly present in most of the sites we visited

*Nikon D800, 200mm Micro Nikkor, ISO 200, f/8, monopod*

**Far left:** Pearly Heath (*Coenonympha arcania*) is a butterfly that for some reason has always eluded me. We only saw several during our time there so I was particularly glad to have nailed this shot!

*Nikon D800, 105mm Micro Nikkor, ISO 200, f/8, monopod*



**Robert Thompson** is an accomplished freelance natural history photographer, writer and naturalist, living in Ireland. He is an acclaimed macro specialist and author of a number of books on natural history and photography. His work is widely published in the UK, Ireland and internationally.

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