

Unusual persistence of an aberrant *Mellicta* species – probably *M. parthenoides* (Meadow Fritillary) (Lep.: Nymphalidae)

We have lived in south-west France for over twenty-two years, but it was only in 1998 that we moved into our present house in the small hamlet of Graddé, nestling in a valley adjacent to the Grésigne Forest in the Département du Tarn. Most of the undulating hills are vine covered, and our next-door neighbour owns most of the surrounding land. Permission to wander about his fields has been readily given.

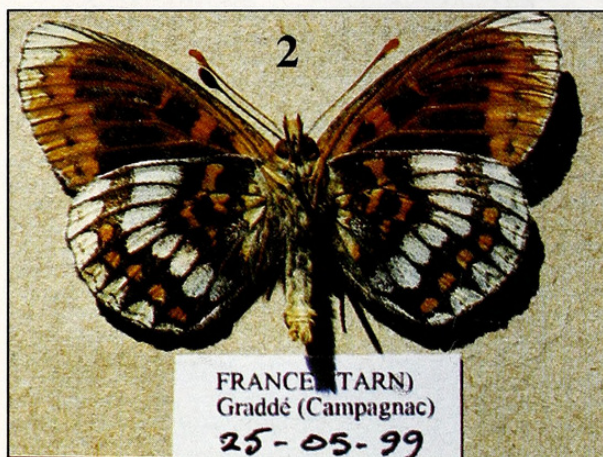


Plate D. An unusually persistent aberration of a *Mellicta* species.

1. upperside; 2. underside; 3. habitat at the site where the butterflies are found.

During the summer of 1998 my wife and I found ourselves at the extreme limit of his vines, a piece of unused ground bordering the garrigue and within a few hundred metres of the mature sessile oak *Quercus petraea* of the Forest. There were Large Blues *Maculinea arion* in this corner – we therefore returned at an earlier date in 1999 to see what other delights awaited discovery. Amongst others on 25 May 1999 were Marsh fritillary *Eurodryas aurinia*, Heath fritillary *Mellicta athalia*, Meadow fritillary *M. parthenoides*, Violet fritillary *Clossiana dia*, Osiris Blue *Cupido osiris* and Green Underside Blue *Glaucopsyche alexis* all in plentiful quantities. Suddenly an unknown butterfly flew in and out of the vegetation – Brambles *Rubus fruticosus* and *R. caesius*, Marjoram *Origanum vulgare*, Bindweed *Convolvulus arvensis*, Creeping Cinqufoil *Potentilla reptans* and others. It was a dark orange-brown butterfly with orange patches showing in the sunlight. Thoughts immediately turned to a Piedmont Ringlet *Erebia meolans* – a rare visitor seen on a couple of occasions. However a bright white, flash from the underside, meant it was not this species. A chase ensued and, after the spectacle of a portly, balding, aged Englishman leaping in and out of the Brambles, which must have confirmed the opinion of the local inhabitants as to ‘Les Anglais fous’ it was finally captured. Since we were unable to recognise the species it was photographed (Plate D) and the photos forwarded via Colin Plant to Dr. Christopher Luckens in Southampton. Dr Luckens responded that “the butterfly is clearly a *Mellicta* – either *athalia* or *parthenoides*. As the date given is 25 May I am inclined towards *parthenoides* as this is double-brooded in the Tarn and also the impression that the butterfly is slightly smaller than *athalia*. If it is *athalia* it would conform to var. *cymothoe* Bertolini”.

In October 1999, the tractors moved in, the area of vine-covered fields was increased by this site and the wild habitat disappeared. That was that, or so we thought. However, within 800 metres of this destroyed site, the ground rises slowly and large fallow areas are the predominant features. One south-facing gently sloping field of about 400 x 400 metres has two sides ending at the forest edge and a third ending with a small lane. Apart from one or two crops of Lucerne, grown to feed the local cattle, the field has been left alone, the limestone soil being extremely rocky. This area is quite closely matched, in terms of habitat, with our first fritillary site. In mid May 2002 we were strolling about in this area in a temperature of 28°C, when another example of the aberrant fritillary suddenly appeared. Although not as extreme as before, the markings were the same and it was clear that this aberration had persisted. The following years 2003 and 2004, more fritillaries with greater or lesser variations on the identical theme were encountered. The total numbers of these oddities is only one or two per year, but they only appear within a three-week period in May.

An enquiry has been made as to the workings of this field; and we have been assured that no chemicals have been used – the proximity of the AOC vineyards would prohibit this. It is strange that after extensive exploration of the area (fortunately we are now retired, and therefore have the time) we have found no other areas where this aberrant form occurs.— MICHAEL MARNEY, Graddé, 81140 Campagnac, FRANCE (E-mail: marney.michael@wanadoo.fr).



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