

# An unexpected resident butterfly of northern Oman: the Arabian Grizzled Skipper *Spialia mangana* (Lepidoptera: Hesperiidae)

by Gary R. Feulner



Figure 1. The Arabian Grizzled Skipper *Spialia mangana* on the slopes of Jebel Kawr, northern Oman.

In early December 2007, on my first visit to the middle slopes of Jebel Kawr in northern Oman, a formidable limestone massif adjacent to the Jebel Akhdar, I encountered a small skipper butterfly that was evidently the Arabian Grizzled Skipper *Spialia mangana* (Rebel 1899 (Figure 1).

*S. mangana* is an uncommon and little known butterfly principally recorded from arid parts of the Horn of Africa (southern Ethiopia, northern Somalia and neighbouring areas) and southern Yemen (Larsen 1983, 1984a, 1984b). It has also been collected at least twice from Dhofar, by P. Granville White at 'Ayun (an arid site on the inland side of the coastal mountains) and A.R. Pittaway at 'Ayn Razat (beside a stream at the base of the coastal escarpment) (Larsen & Larsen 1982; Larsen 1980, 1983). Torben Larsen himself failed to find *S. mangana* in either Yemen or Dhofar, despite searching for it (Larsen 1983).

Because identification of skipper butterflies is generally difficult and because my record of *S. mangana* represents a considerable extension of its known range, I sought expert confirmation as soon as my photographs were available. Larsen wrote back immediately and enthusiastically: "How unexpected ... and how absolutely amazing! There are several Dhofar and Yemen butterflies that I could imagine in northern Oman/UAE, but *Spialia mangana* was not one of them. But your pix are unequivocal and well capture the 'essence' of the butterfly."

My observation was made at ca. 1100m on a gently sloping pavement of limestone bedrock with scattered and rather heavily grazed plants (Figure 2), ca. 1.5 km above the remote village of Sant (today somewhat less remote, with a relatively good graded road and regular minibus traffic for primary and secondary school students). Approximate geographic coordinates are: Lat. 23°06'30"N, Long. 57°04'30"E.

The arid, rocky habitat is apparently typical for the species (Larsen & Larsen 1982; Larsen 1983, 1984b). My sighting was in early afternoon on a sunny day, with the ambient temperature estimated at ca. 27°C. The *S. mangana* (I saw only one) was tiny and behaved in a manner typical for many skippers, perching on the open bedrock and making occasional sorties before returning to the same or a nearby perch. It remained within the same 6m radius during the 10-15 minutes that I observed and photographed it.

I remarked on the presence of traditional agriculture at Sant and speculated that this could be the source of one or another crop plants that might be supporting the butterfly, but Larsen was confident that this was not the case: "I can imagine few species less likely to be an agricultural import than *Spialia mangana* and it is definitely a non-migrant. So it has to be a hold-over from times when the Afrotropical fauna was more widely distributed." See Larsen (1984a) for a more comprehensive discussion of the biogeography of Arabian butterflies generally.



Figure 2. The barren, rocky habitat of *Spialia mangana* at Jebel Kawr.

In the immediate area there were several plant species new to me and/or uncommon in northern Oman, including the Jebel Akhdar. It is possibly significant that among these was *Melhania muricata*, *Melhania* being a known larval food plant of the related Zebra Grizzled Skipper *Spialia zebra*, which ranges from East Africa through Southern Arabia to Baluchistan and the Punjab (Larsen & Larsen 1982; Larsen 1983).

At the time of the initial sighting I observed only two other butterflies on the nearby slopes (a Pierrot *Tarucus* sp. that could not be further identified and a Grass Jewel *Chilades (Freyeria) trochylus*) despite spending some three and a half hours in the area, although in a more wooded wadi bed environment nearby the following were abundant: Caper White *Anaphaeis aurota*, Giant Skipper *Coeliades anchises* and Desert Orange Tip *Colotis liagore*.

On a repeat visit to the same area two and a half weeks later, I again encountered a single *S. mangana*, only about 25m from my original observation site. On the second occasion a modest number of Giant Skippers *C. anchises* were also present on the slopes, and the *S. mangana* several times reacted, when a Giant Skipper violated its 'airspace', by darting up and briefly giving chase. The effect was somewhat comical, given the disparity in size between the two. Also observed on the same slopes on the second occasion were single individuals of Salmon Arab *Colotis fausta*, Blue Spotted Arab *Colotis phisadia*, Small Cupid *Chilades parrhasius* and Pomegranate Playboy *Deudorix livia*.

Additional butterfly species were observed beside the *falaj* immediately above Sant, including Desert Orange Tip *Colotis liagore*, Mediterranean Pierrot *Tarucus rosaceus*, African Babul Blue *Azanus jesus* and Plain Tiger

*Danaus chrysippus*, as well as most of the other species already mentioned above. Some 8 km away, another *Spialia* sp., probably *S. doris* (the Desert Grizzled Skipper) or *S. mafa* (the Mafa Grizzled Skipper) was observed on the barren, stony slope of a low, eroded terrace.

Five species of Grizzled Skippers (*Spialia* spp.) have been recognised in Oman. Apart from *S. mangana*, all of them have also been found in the UAE or immediately adjacent areas (Wilayat Mahdhah, Wilayat Musandam) (Larsen & Larsen 1982; Larsen 1983; Gillett 1995). All are relatively small butterflies and males and females are alike. All have dark brown uppersides with relatively extensive white spotting. The undersides are paler brown or khaki-coloured with diffuse white spotting and/or banding. *S. mangana* is perhaps the easiest to distinguish in the field, if seen well. Diagnostic features include fewer and smaller white spots overall on the upperside of the wings, the absence of any tiny marginal white spots on the upperside (present in each of the other *Spialia* spp.) and a well defined white band across the underside of each hindwing.

The discovery of *S. mangana* continues the progressive recognition in Northern Oman of small populations of arid Afro-tropical species previously known in Arabia only from Yemen and Dhofar, e.g. Brown Playboy *Deudorix antalus*, African Cupid *Euchrysops osiris* (Gillett 1997) and Somali Cupid *Euchrysops lois* (Gillett 1999). Moreover, it seems that *S. mangana*, like *E. lois*, cannot be satisfactorily accounted for by the possibility of recent immigration in response to favourable conditions and/or agricultural cultivation, but must be considered a previously unrecognised relict species.

## References

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