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IN NABOKOV'S NET

*SEARCHING FOR HIS BUTTERFLIES
IN THE MOUNTAINS OF THE ARIÈGE*

Introduction to the web-based application

I am not a scholar of the literary works of Vladimir Nabokov, nor do I know a great many of the details of his life. I am rather, a biogeographer and cartographer, who spends a significant chunk of his time in remote regions of the high-mountains of Europe, looking for rare butterflies across the French Alps and the high Pyrenees, both of which remain critical regions of insect biodiversity in Europe.

Over the last five decades, populations of butterflies across Europe in particular, have been decreasing for the well-known reasons of climate change and habitat loss (see [European Red List of Butterflies](#)¹). To understand this loss of biodiversity, biogeographers, like myself, use a combination of fieldwork and historical research, in private and museum collections, to map and model the [shifting habitats and distribution of these beautiful and ephemeral insects](#)².

The search for rare butterflies in the high mountains is not really a science, nor does it require too much technical mountaineering skill, and although it has many elements of both, it is

¹ Chris van Swaay et.al., *European Red List of Butterflies* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Communities, 2024). <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/RL-4-011.pdf>

² John Hessler, *In the Realm of the Ants: A machine learning & wavelet analysis of the acoustic behavior of the larva of the Lycaenidae butterfly genus Maculinea*. Web-application (2025) <https://arcg.is/199OPb1>

mostly a path of extreme patience, more akin to the metaphysical aspects of meditation, than to anything else. It is in this context that I encountered the early Pyrenean explorations and collecting of Vladimir Nabokov.

It is well-known to readers of this journal that beginning in his childhood, and for most of his adult life Vladimir Nabokov was interested in and collected butterflies. After moving to the United States, in 1940, he worked for a time as curator of Lepidoptera in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, at Harvard University. And later, while a professor of literature at Cornell University, he went on extensive collecting trips across the American West. His collecting trips continued when he and his wife, Vera, returned to Europe and retired to the Montreux Palace Hotel, in Switzerland, in 1959. All that was later, however.



I recently created a web-based application called, [*In Nabokov's Net*](#), which concentrates on an earlier time--on a specific trip that Vladimir Nabokov made to the mountains of the French Pyrenees and in particular to the department of the Ariège, in 1929. It is a period of his collecting that is little studied and mentioned only briefly in biographies of the writer³. In the 1920s Nabokov was not the literary or entomological superstar he would become, and he had made few butterfly collecting trips in the mountains of Europe.

In 1928 however, the German translation and serial rights for his second novel, *King, Queen, Knave* yielded enough of a surplus to enable him to go, with Vera, on the first of the many butterfly excursions they would make together during their lives. From February to April 1929, the pair would settle into the Hotel Thermal du Boulou, in the village of Boulou, thirteenth miles from the town of Perpignan, and after, into the village of Saurat, in the Pyrenees of the Ariège, until June.

³ The trip to the Pyrenees in 1929 gets little treatment from a collecting perspective in Brian Boyd's seminal biography *Vladimir Nabokov: the Russian Years* and almost no mention in Kurt Johnson and Steve Coates, *Nabokov's Blues: the Scientific Odyssey of a Literary Genius*. It does receive some attention in Brian Boyd and Michael Pyle's *Nabokov's Butterflies*, but there is little in the way of detail.

During this several month's long trip, Nabokov collected extensively, and in 1931 published an article that filled in some of the gaps, in what, at the time, was the mostly unknown Lepidopteran fauna of the region. The paper, entitled, "Notes on the Lepidoptera of the Pyrenees Orientales and the Ariège", appeared in one of Nabokov's favorite journals, *The Entomologist*. It was his second publication in the journal, the first being, "A Few Notes on Crimean Butterflies," from 1920.

For entomologists and biogeographers "Notes on the Lepidoptera of the Pyrenees Orientales and the Ariège" is a critically important paper, as it is one of the few from the pre-war period that details the species of butterflies then present in the Ariège, from a collector whose identifications can mostly be trusted⁴. In summer of 2024, as part of a biogeographic survey I am doing of the genus *Erebia*, I followed in Nabokov's footsteps and explored the rich butterfly fauna of the region during a long stay, living in an eighteenth-century hunting lodge, nestled in the woods and on a large estate, a 30-minute walk from the village of Saint Giron.

From this base I explored the Ariège's deep valleys and high mountains, cataloging and photographing the butterflies of this region of exceeding natural beauty. The web-application, [*In Nabokov's Net: Searching for His Butterflies in the Mountains of the Ariège*](#), is the story of my walking in Nabokov's footsteps, and more importantly a record of the butterflies that he, and those who came to the mountains of Ariège before and just after him, found.

[*In Nabokov's Net*](#) places Nabokov's early work in the Pyrenees into the larger context of the history of butterfly collecting in the region and considers his article within the broader outlines of the what was known of the biogeography of butterflies at the time of his visit. The Ariège was during Nabokov's stay, and to a certain extent remains, a fairly remote region of the Pyrenees.

Nabokov's trip to the Ariège in 1929 was brief. But during his short stay he managed to collect a significant number of examples of the region's butterfly fauna. His visit to the Ariège began on April 24, 1929, at the Hotel de Commerce in the village of Saurat. He found the Hotel too small and inadequate, and so the main part of this trip was spent in a small rented room above a shop on the village's main street.

⁴ David Corke, "The butterfly fauna of central Ariège, Pyrenees, France in the 1920s and 2002," *Entomologist's Record and Journal of Variation* 115 (2003) 77-94.

In many cases it has been difficult to trace Nabokov's exact movements while he was in Saurat. Unlike some of his contemporaries working in the region, in *Notes on the Lepidoptera of the Pyrenees Orientales and the Ariège*, Nabokov does not always specify the exact collecting locations, but simply writes that he mostly traveled by foot and climbed to places like the nearby Col du Port and Carlong. All of the locations that he mentions and where he collected specimens are mapped in [In Nabokov's Net](#).

After leaving the Pyrenees, in late June, Nabokov brought his collection back to Berlin and was able to confirm many of his identifications using the entomological collections of the *Museum für Naturkunde*. The collection, according to Nabokov's own account, in *Speak Memory*⁵, travelled with him when he left Berlin for Paris, but sadly, was lost sometime in the chaos of the following years.

This statement is however strangely in conflict with a caption to a photograph taken by Vera while in the Pyrenees, and which appears between page 256 and 257 in the same book, *Speak Memory*. In the caption Nabokov writes, "Spring moths would float in through the open window on overcast nights and settle upon the lighted wall on my left. In this way we collected a number of rare Pugs in perfect condition and spread them at once (they are now in an American Museum)". If accurate, this certainly indicates that a number of Nabokov's early European specimens must have been brought with him to the United States or somehow found their way abroad.

One of the most surprising finds detailed in [In Nabokov's Net](#) is that from his Pyrenees collections, there appear to be, as noted in his caption, examples that do survive. Two specimens of the species *Melitaea deione*, have recently located at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard and are discussed in the detail in the web-application.

Why these two particular specimens survived is unclear, as they part of several examples of the same species that he collected on the trip to the Pyrenees. Nabokov writes that on April 9th he caught "a fresh *Melitaea deione*, and saw one or two others, all on one spot by the side of a brook near the hotel."

The specimen mentioned above was collected just a few days before he and Vera left Boulou and moved to Saurat. Based on the specimen label, the surviving examples at Harvard

⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1951) 125. "A collection of South European stuff that I started in exile vanished in Paris during World War Two."

were however, caught later, in Saurat, on the consecutive days, May 17th and 18th. The two *Mellicta dejone* in the Harvard collections represent two of a handful of rare specimens collected by Vladimir and Vera Nabokov that survive from the years before they fled Europe and arrived in the United States. They are truly special butterflies.

As the research for [In Nabokov's Net](#) continued, another specimen, this time from Nabokov's childhood collecting, was also found in the Museum of Comparative Zoology collections. It is probably the oldest specimen that survives and that was collected by Nabokov. The specimen is from the same genus as the Pyrenean specimens and is an example of *Mellicta athalia*. According to the label he captured it in 1912, while on an early trip with his family to France and the Esterel Mountains of Provenance and the Alps-Maritime.



The web-app, [In Nabokov's Net](#) contains images of all the above specimens and many others that contextualize the history of the butterfly fauna in the Ariege and the Pyrenees, from the nineteenth century to the present. The format of a web application allowed for many images of butterflies from museums and in the field to be presented, along with archival material and interactive maps of some of the known collecting locations of Nabokov and others. It was not produced to be the last word on the subject, but rather as visual and interactive guide to the context of Nabokov's earliest published butterfly collecting and to help us understand, from a biogeographic perspective, the importance of historical collections and collectors to present day research.

