

SCHWANNENGESANG?

by Robert Angus

2009 was to be a momentous year for me – at the end of September I was due to retire from my lecturing job at Royal Holloway, a post I have held for almost 35 years. But until that milestone was reached, I had to plan my last year of beetle research while I still had my lab. and all its facilities. Some time ago I had decided that my final research project was to be centred on finding out as much as I could about the composition and distribution of the *Stictotarsus griseostriatus* (DeGeer) species complex, and although last year had seen some progress, including obtaining the karyotype of *S. g. strandi* (see **Latissimus 26**), some items eluded me, notably the identity of Swiss Alpine material referable to *S. griseostriatus* var. *nigrescens* Favre, as well as material from Corsica and the central Italian Apennines (Abruzzo). I therefore decided on an all-out assault, with careful timetabling of the trips.

From the Balfour-Browne Club meeting in Italy in 2008 it seemed that early June should be OK for the Abruzzo, and as luck would have it, the first week of June was a brief lull between the end of the degree exams and the meetings to award the degrees. So, that was duly booked – before the dreadful earthquake that struck the L'Aquila region in early spring. The high-altitude Corsican localities should, I thought, be clear of snow by the end of June/beginning of July, and still have overwintered beetles. So, that was booked. Then things appeared a bit hectic. My daughter Lizzie's PhD graduation at Liverpool was scheduled for the second week in July, and the following week we had the graduation of our students at Royal Holloway. The fourth week, beginning on July 20th, was free and still seemed early enough for the Alps, so I booked a Swiss trip for then. So, a busy summer! Then I fell to thinking. One of the questions raised by work in northern Norway and Finland in 2008 was the identity of the southern Norwegian coastal *griseostriatus*. I had found that stripy material from Finnish Lapland, which I expected to be *S. multilineatus* Falkenström, was in fact true *griseostriatus*. It seemed to me that if *griseostriatus* could in suitable habitats resemble *multilineatus*, the reverse might also be true and *multilineatus* in coastal rock pools might resemble *griseostriatus*. Nasty, especially as this is the type locality of *S. maritimus* Helliesen, a name far older than



Bare rock with *griseostriatus* pools, World's End

multilineatus. Study of Helliesen's work showed one of the type localities for *maritimus* was the island of Tjøme, south-west of Oslo and very near Torp airport, a regular destination of Ryanair. Not only that, but the nearby town of Tønsberg has a Youth Hostel. The penultimate (4th) week of April was clear, but might perhaps be a bit early. Email enquiries to Anders Nilsson found him a bit doubtful at first, but then he relented and suggested that the open areas frequented by these beetles might well be free of snow and ice by then. He felt that it could be worth a go. So, following the time-honoured practice of taking the advice that suits you, I booked the trip.

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The flight to Norway on April 20th was smooth and uneventful. Landing at Torp we (my wife Barbara and I) noted ominous piles of dirty snow which had been cleared from the runways, but, although the temperature was somewhat brisk as we left the plane, all was bright and welcoming. Torp is a pleasant, small airport and soon we were in our hire-car and away to Tønsberg and the Youth Hostel. We found this without difficulty and were made very welcome by the Warden, who had allocated us a family room with en-suite shower (not bookable on line). Scandinavian Youth Hostels are definitely good news – pleasant and affordable, and well-used, not just by holidaymakers. The fluorescent jackets worn by some of the fellow-diners at the breakfast table made that very clear! Still, it did not take long to purchase food for our picnic lunch, and we were away down to the rocky areas at the southern end of Tjøme Island, poetically named World's End. This is an amazing area – patches of scrub-woodland with bare rock rising from it, and on these outcrops small freshwater pools. All very beautiful, and made the more so by the prevernal flowers in the woods – white Wood Anemones and also brilliant blue Hepaticas. An hour's hard work yielded four *griseostriatus*, but not much else in the barren pools – in fact the only other beetle there was *Hydroglyphus geminus* (Fab.). Pools with more (peaty) vegetation had some other beetles, and the more brackish ones had prawns! Well pleased, we returned to Tønsberg to prepare our evening meal in the Youth Hostel's kitchen, and then take an evening stroll round the town. In the course of our five-day trip we took more *griseostriatus* in various localities at the south of Tjøme, but failed to find it on apparently suitable areas at the tips of the two peninsulas just west of Sandefjord. We also took a day off to visit the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo – something I would recommend to anyone. So, a successful trip, and a good start to the summer's adventures. And, I can reveal that the southern Norwegian *griseostriatus* are indeed that species.

Next, "the Italian Job"! Following the L'Aquila earthquake, I had grave misgivings about this trip. Quite apart from the practicalities – would it be possible to travel around in the area – would there be accommodation available locally – it seemed almost obscene to visit the area and use its facilities unless one was engaged in relief work. But that was when watching television in April. By June, I thought (hoped!) things would not be quite so desperate and any trade might be welcome. So, off I went!



The *griseostriatus* pool at Campo Felice

Stairway to heaven – to Lake de Melo

I arrived in Rome in pouring rain, and it took some time to actually find the car rental desk, and then the car itself. And when I did, I had been down-graded to a Fiat 500 – a Lawn Mower! Still, I did manage to get all my gear aboard and there has to be something a bit special about driving along the Aurelian Way, even in a Lawn Mower in pouring rain! So, on to the motorway and eventually up to the turn-off near L'Aquila, and the road up to the Campo Felice where Gianluca Nardi had seen *griseostriatus* taken in the 1990s. Then a nasty moment – the desired road was "closed for repairs"! Oh well, at this stage nothing for it but to study the map for an alternative way round. This worked, and I had no further trouble. I made my way up on to the Campo Felice without mishap, and before too long found the pool in the middle of the Campo, where the *griseostriatus* had been found. But it wasn't there. I worked my way right across this pool – a dug out stock-watering pool, with water crowfoot as well as other vegetation, and a very sticky clayey bottom. The pool reminded me of the stock-pond on the Omalos plain on Crete, type locality of *S. creticus* (now a synonym of *S. macedonicus*), and Campo Felice itself is quite like the Omalos plain, a karstic depression among the limestone hills. But all I got was a wader full of water, and a few rather nondescript *Hydroporus* and some small corixids. And still the rain fell, though more intermittently now, and not quite the deluge of Rome. I had noticed, courtesy of Google Earth, a second pool near the road, and I duly made my way over to it. No *griseostriatus* but, by way of compensation, an interesting black *Aphodius* of the subgenus *Liothorax*. *Liothorax* is the *Aphodius niger* subgenus, always interesting beetles



Collecting *S. ibericus* in the pools above Lac de Melo

and, in exciting places, often taken in the course of water beetle work. Jason Maté and I had described a new species of this group, *A. wilsonae*, from Spain, and we were not a little annoyed to find that Dellacasa, the Italian expert on the group, had dismissed it as a mere local variant of *A. niger*. A man unimpressed by chromosomal and DNA differences! Once I had the chromosomes of the Italian material, he would have to take more notice! With this happy thought I made my way down off the Campo to find accommodation. The first hotel I came to was the Hotel Campo Felice, and yes, they did have a room, and

they offered half board. So, problem solved! So, in the ensuing days I worked pools on the Campo Imperatore as well as doing more work on Campo Felice. No *griseostriatus*, but some useful Dytiscidae for Ignacio Ribera for his DNA studies, and a good sample of *Onthophagus fracticornis* for use in an MSc project on this species and the related *O. massai*, a Sicilian endemic which lived in England during the Last Interglacial. But the weather remained poor, and one abiding memory is "dissecting" a dung pat and finding the magnificent staphylinid *Emus hirtus* just hunched and shivering instead of rearing up to kill you for disturbing it! Still, a good trip – and the *Liothorax* turned out to be not *A. wilsonae*, but a new species closely related to it. So now we have the *A. wilsonae* species complex. As to the devastation, most of it I did not see – not unreasonably the town of L'Aquila was closed to visiting motorists, but I did see the blue tented encampments at the edges of all the villages, and little groups of people having their evening "chats" by

their parked cars at the edges of these encampments. It seemed very cruel that this suffering should be visited on these people, and one can only admire the way in which they were simply getting on with their lives. And so to Corsica! Corsica the beautiful! Corsica of the mountain tracks which are decidedly rugged and take no prisoners! On both the Corsican trip and the Swiss one which followed it, I was accompanied by my daughter Lizzie. Lizzie and I had been to Corsica in September 2008, but without finding the *griseostriatus*. We had, however, done some useful exploration, and the trip had also prompted me to study my maps closely. The beautiful and accessible Lac de Melo has fish in it and no *griseostriatus*. But careful study of the IGN walkers' map showed a small unnamed lake above the Lac de Melo, less than a kilometre south of Melo itself, but the other side of the main fold of the map! This lake is not visible from the track which leads from Melo up to the long-distance GR20 hiking trail, and no-one we spoke to in Corte knew anything about it! One thing I had done since the previous trip was to get a colour laser printer for my computer. With this I was able to print off selected areas of the main map, to have small easily handled "battle-maps" for field use. As in 2008, EasyJet does weekly flights (on Sundays) to Corsica (Bastia and Ajaccio) from Gatwick, but this year there are two flights each Sunday. We took the early flight to Bastia and by just after 12 were ensconced in our hotel (the HR) in Corte. So, the weather being good, we drove up the Restonica Gorge, booted up, and set off for the Lac de Melo. To hardened mountain-folk this is nothing, but to us it was quite a trek, especially after our early morning start! Nevertheless we got there still on good form, and after a brief rest in the grassy area where the stream goes into the lake, set off on the last pull to the upper lake. We were beginning to feel a bit tired and to wonder just where this lake could be. Then we noticed a stream coming over a lip of land to one side of the path. Streams have to come from somewhere was my Crie de Coeur, so we climbed up over the lip, and there were some nice upland pools – and there was the *griseostriatus*! I donned my waders (a new pair – the trouble in Italy had been serious leakage through perished rubber!), and as I brought netfuls to the sorting sheet Lizzie rounded up the beetles into a jar. Soon done, and time to head back. We weren't entirely sorry as we were both rather tired now, and the wind had got up. But soon we were back down to a well-earned *Orangina* in the Refuge at the car park. *Orangina* is wonderful stuff when you stagger off the hill! So, what a start! The Dream Scenario! Our first half-day on the island and we had a good sample of the *griseostriatus*. Dinner that evening in the Rivière à Vins in Corte (recommended to us by David Bilton and described by one guide book as "carnivore Heaven") was a decidedly cheerful affair! We sat at a table next to a couple from the Czech Republic, and, well, the wine flowed! Next morning we arose, not too early but not really hung over, and decided to try the walk to the Lac de Nino as this is the one place on Corsica where *Liothorax* is known, having been taken by Hans Fery. Dellacasa in his book on Corsican dung beetles records it as *A. niger*! The drive from Corte to the start of the shortest path to Lac de Nino took quite a long time – a very twisty and in places very narrow road. We set off, but it was very hot and after a while it became obvious that we were not going to get there in anything like reasonable time. Commending ourselves on our maturity, we abandoned the walk and headed back. At this stage I managed to get in contact with Franck Bameul, who had discovered on the Balfour-Browne Club Bratislava meeting that he was to be on Corsica at the same time as us. He and his family were staying near Ajaccio. He suggested joining us in Corte the following day and going up to Lac de Melo. Even though we had the *griseostriatus*, I thought this an excellent idea, and also thought Franck knew the place. Well, he had not been there before as it happened. It took a little while for him to reach Corte, largely because of road works, but we duly set off, armed with our picnics and equipment. It was very hot! In the steeper places, near the lake, the



With Franck Bameul in the grassy area by Lac de Melo – before the thunderstorm!

heat fairly bounced off the rocks! Nevertheless, we got there without incident and were soon taking a well-earned rest, admiring the ridiculously tame Alpine Choughs and having our lunch. Then we started collecting, mainly in the little pools in the grassy area where the stream goes into Lac de Melo. I fell to wondering if there might be *Liothorax* on this grassy area. I fished around the edges of grassy pools with my net, and found the "southern half" (elytra and the parts beneath them) of what appeared to be a small *Liothorax*. I hoped I wasn't too late in the year! Then I did a check round various cow pats, and to my delight took three

or four living specimens. Franck, meanwhile, was assembling quite a nice collection of water beetles in the little pools. Then I looked up! The clouds were massing in a most unfriendly way, and very soon the rain started. Serious stuff, with thunder. The only sensible thing to do seemed to be to try and shelter at the edge of the Wardens' hut there. The hut was locked and Corsican eaves don't project much, but at least it should offer some protection from lightening. The various other walkers there had the same idea, including one young couple with a baby in a papoose on its father's back. The papoose had a sort of roof, and the baby was fascinated by the whole experience, sticking its hands out to feel the rain. The rest of us did not find the experience quite so entertaining! We cowered there for a good hour till eventually the rain subsided and the thunder moved further away. So we made our way back. The tracks were running torrents and we were very glad to reach the Refuge. No *Orangina* this time, but hot tea! So, an interesting experience and no harm done, though poor Franck said he felt as though he had just done eight rounds in the boxing ring with Mike Tyson! He had, however, found a few *griseostriatus* in the pools.

After that Lizzie and I felt we needed a sabbatical from the mountains, so the next day we drove down to Porto Vecchio to the river where Franck had found his *Anacaena gaetanae*. He had given us careful directions to find the place, and this we did – and got the beetle, now duly chromosomed. But the weather had got into a rut, and both this day and the next we were treated to early afternoon thunderstorms. Then on the Friday we decided to go back to the Melo area, partly to get some absolutely fresh *griseostriatus* to take home, and partly to try for some more *Liothorax*. This time we made an early start, before the heat really got going. Lizzie set a cracking pace, to see if she could reach the lake in the hour suggested by the signposts. She probably would have done, but not so her elderly father! Still, we did it in decent time, and stopped for a picnic, photographing the choughs, and collecting *Liothorax*, in the grassy area. Then the climb to the upper area. It was further than I remembered, and there was also this curious feeling that our *griseostriatus* pools did not really match the lake as marked on the map. It didn't matter, but we were curious. So, on reaching the right general area we went a little further and then left the path. This time we found the lake marked on the map, and more *griseostriatus*. It did not take long to get a good haul, and we returned without incident.

The final day we decided to walk through the beautiful upland woods by the Col de Verde to an area where Hans Fery had found the Corsican variant of *Hydroporus memnonius* Nicolai, to get some for David Bilton's ongoing research. We had been to this area the previous year but all the pools appeared to be dry. This time I hoped that, earlier in the year, we would have more luck. Well, we didn't, and I didn't find any suitable pools that I could recognise. So, sadly that place beats me. And that concluded our trip. When we got back to Corte we found that the new swimming pool which had been under construction in the hotel garden was now functional, so we had a refreshing dip before dinner. The scientific postscripts are firstly that the *griseostriatus* is *S. ibericus* Dutton & Angus, secondly that the *Liothorax* is another new species, and thirdly that while the *S. ibericus* taken in the pools on our first day were a nicely balanced sample (sexually), with 16 ♂♂ and 18 ♀♀, the material from the lake comprised 28 ♂♂ and only 5 ♀♀ - a sort of high-altitude boot-camp for blokes!



Ever hopeful! Looking for *griseostriatus* in the Lac de la Bella Tola

So, the next morning (Sunday again!) we flew home in time for me to get some first chromosome preparations done before going up to Liverpool for Lizzie's PhD graduation, a pleasant occasion made even better by her being offered a postdoc at the Open University as a result of an interview undertaken during the journey back. This left the Swiss trip. We took the early morning Monday EasyJet flight to Geneva and were soon away in our hire-car, heading for St-Luc in the Val d'Anniviers. I had done this trip the previous August and had made very good time, allowing a good first day in the mountains, around the Lac de la Bella Tola. Well, this time we weren't so lucky. We were badly held up by road works near Lausanne so it was early afternoon by the time we got to the funicular railway at St-Luc. Still, we were soon up and setting off. But I was still limping with pulled lower calf muscles courtesy of our Corsican exploits, so progress was a bit slow. We did some exploration, and then returned to St-Luc to find accommodation. The hotel where I had stayed last year did not have a suitable room, but they advised us of the Pension Favre in the middle of the village. Pension Favre! Favre was the man who had described *S. griseostriatus* var. *nigrescens*! There was, of course, no connection, but it seemed a good omen. And it was a good pension too – and there is a very good restaurant just across the adjacent "Marmot Square".

Next day dawned fine and we went up to the Lac de la Bella Tola and some other pools, but alas no *griseostriatus* were to be had. Plenty of the legendary *Hydroporus foveolatus* Heer in the lake (see the review of Karl Sabbagh's "The Rum Affair" in **Latissimus 12**), some *Agabus lapponicus* (Thomson) in the pools, and abundant *Helophorus glacialis* Villa & Villa everywhere. This was disappointing as this lake was one of the few I had found last year which did not have fish and an associated total absence of beetles! During the long winter I had had ample opportunity to scrutinise the Swisstopo maps for additional target lakes, and one which looked particularly hopeful was a small one just west of the

Moiry hydroelectric reservoir on the other side of the Val d'Anniviers. This lake, by the shepherds' hut at Le Louché, looked sufficiently small and isolated to have escaped the attentions of the angling fraternity. Well, that was my hope, so on the Wednesday we made our way up to it. A fairly short and not too steep walk from the car park at the Barrage de Moiry, and we were there. But, oh gloom! There in the corner of the lake was a "Private Fishing" notice! However, there was some short water crowfoot-type vegetation on the bottom and a quick swish of the net revealed *Hydroporus palustris* (L.) as well *H. foveolatus*. And then further effort was rewarded with a single *griseostriatus*. At last! I managed to get four specimens before the rain stopped play. But the eaves of Swiss huts, unlike Corsican ones, have a generous overhang, and we were able to shelter successfully before walking back to the car in a gap between the showers. The beetles looked interesting – well striped and also somewhat bigger than the Corsican ones.

On Thursday the weather looked ominous but we hoped the rain would hold off and took the chairlift which is the other way up to the mountains from St-Luc, to try and get a decent sample of the *solieri*-type *Agabus bipustulatus* (L.) for David Bilton. This I had taken last year, but not enough. However, the rain really set in and we only just got back to the car before the deluge. The rest of the day was a washout! So, we had only Friday left, and we were flying back that evening. The weather was fine and we decided to go back to the Le Louché lake. The *griseostriatus* were not abundant, but they kept coming. Some were very dark, the elytra almost totally black.



The lake at Le Louché. The Private Fishing notice as at the lower right-hand corner of the lake and the bench with the small pools is at the top of the green slope, just below the line of grey scree

This and the very straight pronotal sides gave a somewhat peculiar facies and in a moment of panic I wondered if I was in fact taking *Oreodytes*. Quite wrong, of course, not least because the mental image referred to *O. alpinus*, which is not in the Alps at all! However, I decided to climb up to a sort of "bench" above the lake, where the map showed a number of small pools. I was immediately rewarded with an abundance of undoubted *griseostriatus*. So, picnic lunch, back to the car, and the start of the journey home. However, I reckoned there was time to dash up to the Grand St Bernard to have a final check on Favre's collection which is in the museum run by the Hospice there. We got there, had a good look round, and found three boxes of Favre's material on display – one with Carabidae, one with Scarabaeidae and some others, and one with Chrysomelidae. Sadly no water beetles and no one there knew anything about other material. Now we had to go as time was pressing and the weather closing in. We drove through torrential rain near the head of Lake Geneva, but worse was to follow! While stuck in the road works on the way in on Monday I had noted that the other side of the motorway was clear. What I had not noticed was that it had the works nearer Geneva, where we had driven past without noticing them. Time was getting very short, but in the end we got to the airport, returned the car, took the shuttle bus to the terminal, and

arrived at the automatic check-in with about 10 minutes to spare. Phew! We handed over our luggage and were told that the flight would be some hours late but would come. It did, about three hours late as a result of torrential thunderstorms in the London area which had resulted in a drastically reduced turnover rate all the airports. After we had had a good pizza supper we found our way to "Duty-free Paradise" – closed for the night! Such is life – eventually you reach Paradise only to find it closed!

The first scientific aftermath of this trip is that the *griseostriatus* are the real thing, and that the dark ones from the lake are simply Favre's var. *nigrescens*. So much for *S. griseostriatus* not occurring in the Alps! And just to emphasise the point, shortly after my return home I received from Lars Hendrich a sample of living *griseostriatus* from the Bavarian Alps, collected by Monika Hess. This also is true *S. griseostriatus*! The other thing of note is that the material from the high pool comprises 24 ♂♂ and only 2 ♀♀. So, another high-altitude boot-camp! From the lake I had 9 ♂♂ and 3 ♀♀.

And so that was that – the end of my hectic final year in the field before my retirement. Now I have retired. Royal Holloway made me an Emeritus Reader, which means, among other things, that I keep my Royal Holloway email. My collections have gone to the Natural History Museum in London, where I now enjoy the status of a Scientific Associate. So, swansong? Not if I can help it, though the pace of my research will have (mercifully!) to be a bit less hectic than during the year just past!

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BEATING DARWIN'S CLAM

Reference was made in *Latissimus* 26 (pp. 26-27) to Frances Crick's grandfather having supplied Darwin with a *Dytiscus marginalis* to the leg of which was attached a clam. Geoff Nobes has managed to go rather better with a *Dytiscus* that flew into a moth trap at Lynford Arboretum on 19 September 2009. Lynford is at TL8293 in West Norfolk, England. Flew, mark you, with a load of more than twenty river limpets on its back: did they obligingly part along the suture as the



elytra opened up? Although someone is trying to identify the molluscs, the beetle was released. It was a male, the lack of a yellow line along the back of the pronotum indicating either *D. semisulcatus* Müller or *dimidiatus* Bergsträsser. *D. semisulcatus* would be the more likely species in that area but the greenish-olive sheen suggests a *dimidiatus*. The certainty is that Darwin would have been very pleased to see it/them. Thanks to Ken Saul of the Norfolk Moth Group for thinking of us coleopterists.

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