

## Some Basics of Butterfly Watching

Much of the fun and satisfaction of being an amateur lepidopterist comes from "collecting" sightings in the field, but many people new to butterflies and moths despair of ever learning to reliably identify any species other than (possibly) the Monarch. Like birds, butterflies can be challenging to study: they are small and shy of humans; they often fly rapidly and erratically (perching only briefly); they use flowers and foliage effectively to conceal themselves. But learning their colors and patterns, marveling at their delicacy and grace, and enjoying their behaviors makes all your efforts worthwhile!

Some helpful tips:

- ❖ **Practice, Practice, Practice!** Spend as much time watching butterflies as you can, everywhere: in your garden or yard, on trails and in parks--even weedy vacant lots. Visit different habitats (grasslands, forests, and wetlands) repeatedly throughout the year to maximize the number of species you see. Butterflies generally prefer the warm, sunny portion of the day to the cooler temperatures of dawn and dusk and will be most active from mid-morning to mid-afternoon when temperatures are at or above 60 F.
- ❖ **Is it a butterfly or a moth?** Contrary to popular belief, some moths *are* active in the daytime, especially those that can feed on nectar, such as sphinx moths. Most moths have stout, fuzzy bodies, feathery antennae, and rest with their wings spread. Butterflies tend to be more brightly colored, with slender hairless bodies, slim antennae ending in "knobs" and wings that are closed at rest. Butterfly caterpillars usually have smooth skin; "furry" caterpillars are usually moths.
- ❖ **Try quietly "staking out" areas where pollinators congregate, rather than chasing them.** This may be a blooming bush or patch of flowers offering nectar, or a moist area of soil or sand where they obtain moisture and minerals (an activity known as "puddling"). A bonus: you may have great photo opportunities, too!



- ❖ **Photographs: A "bad" photo is better than no photo at all.** Cell phone apps such as iNaturalist and websites like BugGuide provide identification help using photos. Photos are also vital for documentation of rarities and serve as study aids when learning common species. Tattered wings and faded colors may render identification difficult. Some species show sexual dimorphism (males and females have diagnostic colors or markings, or differ in size) or their appearance may vary by season. (For example, spring and fall Buckeyes show reddish wings; summer specimens do not.)

Left: Datana moth caterpillar and oak leaf. Right: Black Swallowtail caterpillar on fennel. Black Swallowtails consume only carrot family plants such as dill, parsley and fennel. (Photos by Elizabeth Stoakes.)



❖ **For caterpillar identification, often the most important question is: *What plant is it eating?*** Butterfly caterpillars in particular are usually restricted to one foodplant or one plant family (for example, Monarchs eat only milkweeds, fritillaries eat violets, etc.). A caterpillar's appearance may change as it grows, but its food will not. Moth caterpillars often consume a variety of plants, but their food can still provide clues to their identity. Photograph leaves and flowers or collect a sample if necessary (where permitted).

❖ **Attend an official butterfly count** (see our Events page for dates and details). These events provide great opportunities to observe multiple species with the help of experienced naturalists, and you can help contribute to the growing database of knowledge about lepidoptera populations and the resources they require.

❖ **BINOCULARS can be a tremendous aid to butterfly study, whether the object of your attention is near or far, allowing you to see colors and markings without scaring it away.** Birding binoculars are usually



adequate for butterfly-watching. However, if you are buying a pair specifically for insect study, models with a *short* "close focus" distance, such as 6 or 8 feet will prove most useful. (Some excellent birding binoculars cannot focus on objects less than 12 or 15 feet from the user.) *Butterflies Through Binoculars*, by Jeffrey Glassberg, provides a great resource for beginners and brings us finally to the most important tip of all...

❖ **Your FIELD GUIDE is your best friend; keep it handy during outings and study it thoroughly!** One favored title is *A Photographic Field Guide to the Butterflies of the Kansas City Region*, by Idalia's own Betsy Betros. In addition to the wonderfully concise life history profiles of each species, it also contains a wealth of information about metamorphosis, anatomy, host plants, and local habitats for these fascinating insects.

 **Happy Butterfly Watching!** 