



Brunswick Wildlife Butterflies

If you participate in any outdoor activity from gardening to golf, butterflies will force you to watch them. When watching wildlife, I look for any motion and many times I end up tracking a butterfly in my binoculars instead of a bird. Like many others, I have been “forced” to start photographing butterflies, actively trying to identify them, and recording my observations. I will share below tips from my ongoing education.

The butterfly on the left is a Common Buckeye photographed on Bald Head Island in mid-October and the other is a Creole Pearly-eye photographed at UNCW’s Ev-Henwood Preserve near Winnabow in late August.

The Pearly-eye was the first official record of this species in Brunswick County. We have approximately 108 species of butterflies, ranking Brunswick third highest in North Carolina in number of species behind only Moore and Cumberland counties.

Both butterflies are members of the Brushfoot family. The pearly-eye belongs to the subfamily of Satyrs and Wood-Nymphs and the buckeye is a member of the True Brushfoot subfamily.

Many “field marks” are useful in identification. Size is a strong clue. Young butterflies are not smaller; once transformation to an adult is complete they are the same size as all adults of their species...with a little variation within a species such as females may be slightly larger than males.

Warning: there are moths in Brunswick County, some large and colorful, that may be mistaken for butterflies. The quickest way to differentiate them is by finding the “knobs”, not present on moths, on the tips of the butterfly’s antennae.

Butterflies have two wings on each side...a forewing and a hindwing...and distinctive features of wing shape may help identify them. For example, the extended “tails” on the

hindwing of swallowtails is a strong field mark for quickly narrowing your search to this family.

Some species have hindwings with jagged edges and the edge color and spot pattern on the hindwings of other species are good field marks. My Creole Pearly-eye was distinguished from its more common cousin, the Southern Pearly-eye, because it has five “eyes” on its forewing instead of four.

Use caution, however, when considering appearance. All butterflies have individual differences; however, within a species there are enough similarities to compare field marks and make the identification. Also, due to wing wear, a butterfly’s wings may look quite ragged and worn near the end of its adult life. I frequently see worn swallowtails missing the tail on one side.

Also, note the flight pattern and sitting posture of your butterfly. Does it fly fairly direct or is its path as erratic as a Miami driver on Interstate 95? Does it steadily flap its wings or flap a little and then glide? When sitting, are its wings folded above its head, spread flat out, or partly open in a V-shape?

Finally, understanding the butterfly life cycle is very important for finding and identifying butterflies. Metamorphosis is a four-stage process from egg to caterpillar (larvae) to pupa to adult. A butterfly also passes through four or five sub-stages (instars) as a larva where it eats voraciously and, since the skin of a caterpillar does not grow or stretch, it must shed its skin.

The pupa (chrysalis) becomes the stationary “bag” from which the adult will emerge...and after a couple of hours of stretching and drying its wings, it will take to the air.

Life expectancy of an adult (its flight stage) is only a few days for some species while others it may be a week or two. Some species “fly” for months. Some broods may have varying life cycles. Summer generations of Monarchs, for example, survive only a few weeks while the generation that migrates in the fall will survive six or more months.

Butterfly watchers need two important items...binoculars with close focus capability and a good field guide. My favorite field guide is *Butterflies of North America* by Jim P. Brock and Kenn Kaufman. It features over two thousand digitally-enhanced photographs of butterflies in natural poses, with similar species shown side by side for easy comparison. Range maps, showing population density and the season of occurrence, plus life history data and identification pointers are found on the page opposite of the images. The text also lists the larvae plant for each species (if known) which is a good way of stalking a species and observing its four stages of life.

My favorite locations for watching are along the Brunswick Coast...especially Bald Head Island and Oak Island...during the fall migration. Common Buckeyes move north for the summer, and, with other migrating species such as the Monarch, they move south along our coast in large numbers during the fall.

Once you become somewhat proficient with identifying butterflies, brace yourself...moths, dragonflies, and damselflies will start demanding your attention.

John Ennis

