

Central Australian Butterflies and Their Food Plants

Compiled from notes and talk by Stuart Traynor to the Australian Plants Society, 2004

Ever wonder how the Monarch Butterfly got its name or for that matter how the term 'butterfly' came about? *Butterfly* is an old English term used to describe a yellow coloured butterfly and *monarch* after King William of Orange. When the British first saw this incredible organism they gave it an equally impressive name.

The Monarch Butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), known as Wanderer Butterfly around Alice Springs, travels remarkable distances – over 4000 km from Mexico north from March to October. Most die along the way with offspring continuing the journey. One of the food plants along the way is milkweed – from the *Euphorbiaceae* family, which has a thick milky sap. It first appeared in Australia in 1870 after a period of island hopping; and is now well established in eastern and south-eastern Australia and occurs occasionally in the NT. More common in central Australia is the Lesser Wanderer (*Danaus chrysippus*) especially in years with more than average rainfall. The larvae (caterpillar) feed on members of the *Asclepiadaceae* family such as:

- Native Pear *Cynanchum floribundum*
- Bush Banana *Marsdenia australia*
- Bush Bean *Rhyncharrhena linearis*
- Caustic Vine *Sarcostemma viminale*

Some of the most common butterflies in gardens around the Alice region are the Meadow Argus, Caper White and Painted Lady. After good rains when many of the native plants are flowering butterflies amass around water edges and can be seen in large numbers around the region.

Butterflies can be distinguished from moths by the fact that they are mainly active during the day, have clubbed antennae and have a thinner abdomen. Many butterflies are also much more brightly coloured than moths – though there are exceptions.

The caterpillars of the Caper White (an attractive white, black and yellow butterfly) can completely defoliate plants like Native Passionfruit, which luckily can recover and make new leaves once caterpillars build their chrysalis and turn into butterflies. Caper Whites are also long-distance travellers in some parts of Australia – some have been known to cross the Bass Strait between Victoria and Tasmania.

Another distinctive visitor to Alice Springs gardens is the Chequered Swallowtail, a large black butterfly with a lacy pattern of cream spots and patches, and orange eyespots towards the tail. It lays its eggs on the leaves of orange trees and other citrus fruit. The spiny black caterpillar has stunning yellow, orange and blue spots, and can eat its way through a large number of citrus leaves over the warmer months.



Lesser Wanderer (*Danaus chrysippus*). Image by C. Heenan (Land for Wildlife Central Australia).

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| Common Name | Scientific Name |
|---|---|
| Dingy Swallowtail | <i>Papilio anactus</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Native cumquat • Citrus trees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Eremocitrus glauca</i> |
| Chequered Swallowtail | <i>Papilio demoleus</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Native Verbena | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cullen patens</i> |
| Common Migrant | <i>Catopsilia pyranthe</i> |
| Lemon Migrant | <i>Catopsilia pomona</i> |
| Orange Migrant | <i>Catopsilia scylla</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The caterpillars of these three butterflies all go for cassias | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Senna spp.</i> |
| Small Grass Yellow | <i>Eurema smilax</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These also go for cassias. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Senna spp.</i> |
| Narrow-winged Pearl White | <i>Elodina padusa</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wild Orange | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Capparis mitchellii</i> |
| Caper White | <i>Anaphaeis java</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caper Bush/Native Passionfruit | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Capparis spinosa</i> |
| Meadow Argus | <i>Junonia vallida</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Munyeroo • Buttercup Pigface | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Portulaca oleracea</i> • <i>Portulaca intraterranea</i> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Goodenia spp.</i> • <i>Convolvulus spp</i> |
| The caterpillars also like the introduced verbenas and so may feed on the local members of this family: Clerodendrum, Dicrasyllis and Newcastleia. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thistles • Banana • Plantain or Ribgrass | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Centaurea spp</i> • <i>Muse lanceolata</i> • <i>Plantago lanceolata</i> |
| Plantain is a widespread weed of poor lawns. It's native of Europe and central Asia that has followed the progress of European colonisation around the world. | |
| Australia Admiral | <i>Vanessa itea</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shade Pellitory • Dwarf Nettle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Parietaria debilis</i> • <i>Urtica urens</i> |
| The genus <i>Urtica</i> includes the introduced stinging nettles. | |
| Painted Lady | <i>Vanessa kershawi</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everlasting daisies • Scotch Thistle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Helichrysum spp</i> • <i>Onopordum acanthium</i> |
| Common Eggfly | <i>Hypolimnas bolina</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lesser Joyweed • Munyeroo • Buttercup Pigface • • Paddy's Lucerne • Shrub Sida | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Alternanthera denticulata</i> • <i>Portulaca oleracea</i> • <i>Portulaca intraterranea</i> • <i>Ruellia tuberosa</i> • <i>Sida rhombifolia</i> • <i>Sida rholenae</i> |
| Common Grass Blue | <i>Zizina otis</i> |
| This is Australia's most common butterfly. The caterpillars feed on various native peas, as well as, clover and lucerne. | |
| Pea Blue | <i>Zizina otis</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rattlepods • Darling peas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Crotalaria spp.</i> • <i>Swainsona spp.</i> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lampides boeticus</i> |
| Icilius Blue | <i>Jalmenus icilius</i> |
| The caterpillars feed on a number of wattles, including mulga and possibly cassias. | |
| Amaryllis Azure | <i>Ogyris amaryllis</i> |
| The caterpillars feed on mistletoes. | |