

SOME COMMON BUTTERFLIES OF PEI:

by Lawson Drake

Butterflies and skippers, which closely resemble butterflies, are among the most beautiful of small summer creatures. They are animals of the sun, whether they are found in meadows, along country lanes, over garden flowers or in forest glades. At rest or in flight they are visual treats to be savoured on any bright day outdoors.



Black Swallowtail

The classification of butterflies and skippers varies a little from book to book, but difference of opinion between "lumpers" and "splitters" who determine these matters need not concern us. A widely accepted current scheme recognizes seven families of butterflies and one family of skippers. This is the scheme followed here. The species named by no means constitute a complete list of Prince Edward Island butterflies; they are simply the ones a casual observer is likely to encounter during summer outings.

The Papilionidae, or swallowtails, are the largest and most spectacular butterflies, brilliantly coloured and active. They usually have the rear corner of the hind wing elongated into a "tail," hence the name. The tiger swallowtail has yellow wings with black bars and edges. It likes garden flowers but will also be found at mud puddles and manure piles. It may be attracted to smoke. Since its caterpillars feed on many common deciduous trees, it is essentially a forest species. Look for it as early as mid-June. The black swallowtail, as its name implies, is a dark species. Its wings are black with two rows of yellow spots on the margins. The female shows some blue between the yellow spots along the margins. The larvae feed on parsley, celery, carrot and related plants, making the adult an insect of the weedy wayside and kitchen garden. It makes its appearance a little later in the season.

The Pieridae are the most common whites and yellows, medium-sized butterflies familiar to everyone. Frequently there are colour differences between sexes, the female being the more decorated with black dots and borders on the wings. The yellow common sulphur is seen early in the year, and gives rise to as many as three broods in a season. It loves open fields and roadsides, and makes summer clover fields gay with the flash of its wings. The pink-edged sulphur prefers scrubby areas, like blueberry barrens. The European cabbage butterfly is arguably the best known butterfly. It is white with black wing markings and its larvae feed on wild and cultivated crucifers, such as mustard and cabbage. While common in cultivated areas, it may be making its way into forests, to which it has already displaced our native white, the mustard or grey-veined white, whose larvae feed on cresses and toothworts.

The Lycaenidae are small, fragile and brightly coloured, with slender bodies and white-ringed antennae. They are commonly called coppers and blues, both aptly descriptive names. They are rapid flyers, and often pugnacious defenders of their territories. The American copper is a small species which shows the typical orange-red or coppery-brown