ENVIRONMENT

The simply beautiful butterfly

WHETHER you are an ardent naturalist, a trained entomologist, a devoted gardener or just a casual observer, chances are you can appreciate the simple beauty of a butterfly. Active, cheerful and often colourful, butterflies are wonderful subjects to observe.

THREE common local butterflies – the white peacock, donkey eye and scarlet peacock.

Butterflies are insects, and the free flying adults that you enjoy represent the final stage in a remarkable life cycle that begins when an egg is laid by an adult butterfly, often on a nice green leaf. When the egg hatches, the young caterpillar begins feeding. Occasionally, these caterpillars will shed their skins to give them more room for growing. It may spend weeks just eating and eating, storing all the nutrition it will need to transform into an adult. To do this, it will affix itself to some sheltered position and form a pupa (something like a hard shell). Within this pupa, the caterpillar reassembles itself and when complete, the flying adult butterfly will emerge!

There is tremendous variation in the colours and patterns that appear on the wings of adult butterflies. Bright colours can be displayed as part of courtship displays,both to attract attention and as an indicator of the individual's state of health. Distracting patterns can break up the insect's pattern so that an attacking predator ends up with a mouthful of wing rather than critical body parts (butterflies can still operate if parts of the wings are damaged). In some species, bright colours indicate to predators that the butterfly contains foul tasting chemicals and should not be eaten. Not all species are colourful, and many have cryptic, darker tones, to help camouflage and protect the butterfly. Others again have bold eyespots which are believed to fool predators into thinking the butterfly is some other type of animal and scare them off.

Not all adult butterflies feed on flower nectar. Some feed on the juices of ripe fruit, some on decaying organic matter and some will not feed at all (depending solely on their internal stores). Butterflies will often supplement their diets by taking in dissolved salts from mud puddles, bird droppings or even animal blood from exposed wounds!

The reason adult butterflies feed on nectar is not to get nutrition for growth, rather it is to get the sugars needed to continue their short but very active lives. The reality is that butterflies do not tend to live very long. Most will be dead in a month and, given the unforgiving environment with predators, rain and wind, many will die within days. This may seem like a woefully short period of time to exist for, but actually a butterfly spends the majority of its life in its larval stage as a caterpillar.

Caterpillars can have very specific food plants, sometimes willing to feed on only one specific family or even a single species of plant. For this reason, if your garden or favourite patch of bush has a variety of plants it is more likely to have a variety of caterpillars and, by extension, a variety of adult butterflies.

Harmless and engaging as they are, collecting butterflies was a common hobby for children in Trinidad and Tobago in times gone by. Undoubtedly, butterfly collecting played a part in helping many a naturalist to develop their appreciation for the natural world. Indeed, the quintessential image of a Victorian era naturalist would be incomplete without a butterfly net. Nowadays, digital photography makes maintaining a collection of butterfly photographs easy and fun.

In Trinidad and Tobago, we have approximately 770 species of butterflies. Three of the more common species that you are likely to encounter are the scarlet peacock, white peacock and the donkey eye (note that common names are not universal, so that other names will be in usage).

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TT home to 770 butterfly species

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All three can be found in a range of habitats from wasteland, gardens, open fields, marshes and forest edge. As a result, chances are that you have seen them around.

The scarlet peacock (Anartia amathea) is predominantly red with patches of white and brown.

The white peacock (Anartia jatrophae) is mostly a pale cream crossed by various spots and lines.

The donkey-eye (Junonia genoveva) tends to be a dark chestnut colour with bold eye-spots.

You can easily attract these beautiful butterflies to your garden by planting shrubs such as lantanas or zinnias. Reducing or eliminating the use of pesticides is also advised as these may be fatal to both caterpillars and adults.

Butterflies are most numerous in the latter half of the year when the rains stimulate the emergence of adults that were pupating and there is an abundance of fresh vegetation on which the adults can lay their eggs.

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One comment that we often hear from members of the public is that they do not see as many butterflies today as they did as children. This is likely as a result of the gradual disappearance of garden and open weedy lots in our towns and cities.

There was a time when the Queen's Park Savannah was an overgrown pasture, rich with butterfly life and when houses in the suburbs of Port-of-Spain quite regularly had lovely gardens.

Sadly, many of us fail to appreciate the importance of green spaces. The extent to which persistent pesticides in the environment affect our butterfly populations is not precisely known.

Yet another anthropomorphic threat that butterflies face is the now yearly occurrence of bush fires.

Despite these threats, many of our butterfly species can still be found but you just might have to look a bit harder than you used to. So, take some time to observe these winged gems the next time you see them and appreciate the many obstacles they have had to overcome to be there. Hopefully they will be with us for a long time to come.

Today's feature was written by Kris Sookdeo. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org.