

Watchable Wildlife -- Butterflies

by Bob Garrison and Diane Ikeda¹

Bigger isn't always better. Though we often forget about insects and other smaller species when we think about wildlife, butterflies and moths display some of the brightest colors and most interesting behaviors of any group of animals. They can be found throughout the state and spring is prime butterfly season. And where do you look to find butterflies? Why on flowers of course. From an evolutionary standpoint, butterflies and flowers grew up together. During the Cretaceous period, 130 million years ago, flowering plants began to dominate the land. As new plant species evolved, butterflies, bees and many other insect species also evolved to take advantage of this new source of food. Today many flowering plants and insects are so closely linked that one cannot survive without the other.

Adult butterflies drink nectar from flowers through a straw-like mouth coiled tight when they are not feeding. Although adults may drink from a wide variety of flowers, caterpillars usually must feed on specific native plants. You can find butterflies in ornamental gardens, but visit native plant gardens or natural areas to find the greatest numbers and varieties.

This time of year, many native plants are in full bloom. However, weather conditions may speed up or slow down the flowering season. Your best bet for finding flowers and the butterflies they attract is by contacting local native plant groups or calling flower hotlines which list the best locations to view native flowers at the time you call. Also as a general rule, as summer progresses, the blooming location rises in elevation; starting along the coast and in the deserts and valleys in February and extending through August in the mountains.

Viewing Tips

Conservation First! -- do not collect or handle butterflies. Watching them in their natural habitat allows you to study their behaviors and actions undisturbed.

Try Binoculars -- Getting close to butterflies is very difficult. Butterflies have compound eyes which are ideal for spotting the movement of predators. Binoculars are great for getting a close-up view without scaring the butterfly off.

¹ Diane Ikeda is a plant ecologist with the Department's Plant Conservation Program.

Caterpillars Call the Shots -- The best bet for finding adult butterflies is to find the plants they lay their eggs on. Caterpillars generally must feed on one type of plant so the adults will be attracted to areas where that plant grows. Purchase a butterfly field guide to learn which butterflies and plants are linked.

Carry a Magnifying Glass -- While watching butterflies, you often find other fascinating insects, small animals and flowers. A magnifying glass or hand lens will reveal colors and patterns you never dreamed existed in the natural world.

Forget the Butterflies and Watch the Flowers -- Butterflies can be even more illusive than larger species of wildlife. Insect populations can boom or bust depending on the weather, so take along a plant book and enjoy the flowers.

Viewing Locations in California

Butterflies can be found in almost every part of the state, but adults are active in spring and summer when the weather warms and the flowers bloom. Start your search by traveling to an area where wildflowers are blooming. Warm, still days are best since cold-blooded butterflies are most active on warm days. Because blooming locations can vary from week to week depending on the weather, try calling a local chapter of the California Native Plant Society, a local garden club or visit a local botanical garden for their suggestions on where to find wildflowers. In Southern California, the Theodore Payne Foundation has a wildflower hotline with up to date recordings on regional locations to view flowers in the spring months. The hotline number is (818) 768-3533.

Reprinted courtesy of *Outdoor California*, California Department of Fish and Game (www.dfg.ca.gov)



www.naturetourismplanning.com.