

Photographing butterflies- To Everything There is a Season

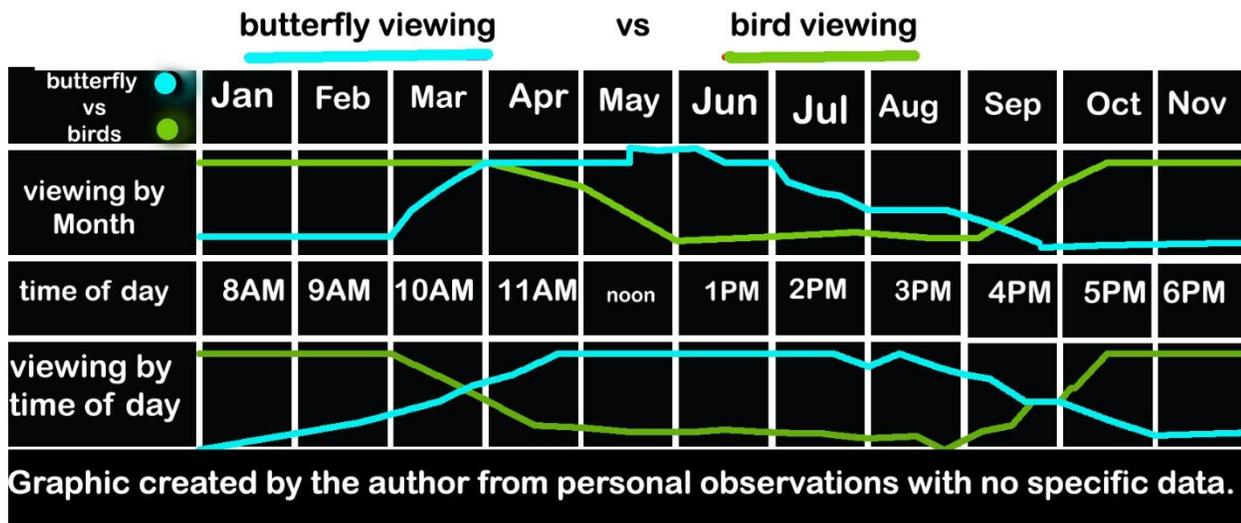
By Gary Christensen

Photographing butterflies can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience for any photography enthusiast. Just being outside in a natural setting is often rewarding enough but capturing the beauty of some of the most colorful creatures on earth is a special experience.

Butterflies can be found worldwide except for the extremely cold polar ice caps. Like most places, here in Central Florida there is a season for butterflies. They begin appearing in the warmer days in February and become scarce in early November. These cold-blooded insects need warmer air to fly and seek nourishment from our blooming native plants in Spring and Summer. Although tropical sage and the shrimp plant, (photo below) that blooms all year in Florida, will even attract an occasional butterfly in winter.

Butterfly Season

The chart below suggests the optimum months to photograph butterflies. If you are a birding enthusiast, you will notice that the season for butterflies is complementary to the best birding months. Bird photography usually calls for either an early morning or late afternoon shoot where butterflies can be captured mid-day (see chart).



Photography Gear & Settings

Almost any DSLR with a medium zoom lens will work great for butterfly photography. I find a 55-200 mm lens provides the mobility and flexibility for

capturing butterflies that are typically in constant motion. A f/stop setting of 5.6 – 8 will provide an acceptable range of sharpness (DOF) and be sure to increase your ISO in the 200 – 800 range to assure your shutter speed will stop motion. You will need at least 1/250 of a second but preferably 1/800 of a second to stop any motion from the butterfly and eliminate camera shake.

You can certainly try using a tripod with a ball head, but you will likely find that it restricts your range of motion to capture a moving butterfly. Mobility is very important to cover a large area where butterflies are present. Also, an external flash or reflectors will frighten butterflies away from your selected background. You can experiment with different lenses, but you will find a traditional macro lens has a short focal length requiring you to get too close which tends to frighten your subject. A good rule of thumb is to target standing 6-10 feet away from butterflies, so you don't frighten them away. These beautiful fluttering insects may sit and bask but are mobile so it can be a challenge getting sharp images. Be patient. Make no swift movements that may frighten them.

Attracting Butterflies

So how do you attract butterflies to your own back yard? Begin by planting native Florida plants that attract butterflies. Here is a short list of Florida flowering plants that are sure to attract butterflies.

- Purple Passionflower
- Tropical Sage
- Bottlebrush
- Firebush
- Plumbago
- Shrimp Plant
- Lantana
- Mexican Sunflower
- Painted Daisy
- Flame Honeysuckle



Note: You might find caterpillars enjoy eating your butterfly host and nectar plants... especially passionflower plants. However, they will continue to flourish. These flowering plants also attract bees and wasps so be careful as you capture butterflies in their habitat. Some of these flowering plants will attract hummingbirds as well!

Here are some plants to grow in northern gardens to attract butterflies:

- Butterfly bush
- Autumn sedum
- Bee balm
- Clovers
- Lantana (as an annual)
- Milkweed

Many of these plants are “nectar” plants and some are “host” plants, and a few are both. A host plant is where a species of butterflies lay eggs and the caterpillars feed on the plants. A nice example of a host plant is celery. The black swallowtail butterfly prefers celery plants and if you grow some in a container you can nurture the caterpillars in a screen enclosure take pictures and release the adult after it emerges. This is a great summer activity for children and/or the grandchildren. For more information and nurseries selling Florida native plants, contact the Florida Native Plant Society at

<https://www.fnps.org/>

Butterfly Locations Nearby

If you don't have your own butterfly garden, there are several locations in our area where you can capture butterflies. Here are a few suggestions:

- Turkey Creek Sanctuary – Port Malabar Blvd. Palm Bay
- Grissom Wetlands Viera
- Garden nurseries (ask permission to take photos)
- McKee Gardens Vero

References

Books for more information and butterfly field guides:

- Butterflies of Florida Field Guide (Butterfly Identification Guides)
Paperback – August 19, 2003 - by Jaret Daniels

- Attracting Hummingbirds and Butterflies to Your Backyard : Watch Your Garden Come Alive with Beauty on the Wing – May 4, 2001 by Sally Roth
- Attracting Birds, Butterflies & Other Winged Wonders to Your Backyard – April 1, 2005 by Kris Wetherbee

I created my first butterfly and hummingbird garden in New Jersey in 2005. It was a resounding success with daily butterfly visits. A large tulip poplar in my yard also attracted hummingbirds in early spring. All I had to do was plant my nectar plants and put out feeders to keep the butterflies and hummingbirds visiting all summer. Sitting in a folding chair with camera in hand rewarded me with hundreds of images.

Here are some of the butterflies in my gardens in NJ and Palm Bay:



Palm Bay

- Long-tailed Skipper
- Gulf Fritillary
- Giant Swallowtail
- Black Swallowtail
- Florida White
- White Peacock
- Cassius Blue
- Queen
- Monarch
- Gulf Fritillary

NJ

- Black Swallowtail
- Tiger Swallowtail
- Silver Spotted Skipper
- Monarch
- Cabbage butterfly (garden pest -caterpillars eat cabbage broccoli, radish etc.)

Photographing colorful butterflies in their natural habitat can be a rewarding and enjoyable experience for anyone who loves nature and photography. Attracting these beautiful creatures to your home garden not only makes for a beautiful landscape, but it is an important conservation project that's easy to create. Helping nature while capturing beautiful images... what could be better than that?