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Palmetto



Bartram's Ixia ● FLOR500 Project ● Butterflies in Northeast Florida

Sharing Memories With Butterflies

Article and photos by Bill Berthet

I'm a butterfly hunter and have traveled the world to photograph interesting butterflies, but there are some amazing butterflies right here in Northeast Florida. I have wonderful memories of photographing butterflies in Jennings State Forest, Branran Field Mitigation Park Wildlife and Environmental Area, Ralph E. Simmons Memorial State Forest, Sawmill Slough Preserve on the University of North Florida campus, and at Little Talbot Island State Park, one of the few remaining undeveloped barrier islands in Northeast Florida. It's not hard to find butterflies, if you know where and when to look.

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Photos:

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|--|--|---|---|
| 1. 'Sweadner's' Juniper Hairstreak (<i>Callophrys gryneus sweadneri</i>) | 5. Dotted or Seminole Skipper (<i>Hesperia attalus slossonae</i>) | 8. Eastern Pygmy-Blue (<i>Brephidium isophthalma</i>) | 12. Eastern Tailed Blue (<i>Cupido comyntas</i>) |
| 2. Yehl Skipper (<i>Poanes yehl</i>) | 6. Appalachian Brown (<i>Satyrodes appalachia</i>) | 9. Mourning Cloak (<i>Nymphalis antiopa</i>) | 13. Dusky Road-Side Skipper (<i>Amblyscirtes alternata</i>) |
| 3. Berry's Skipper (<i>Euphyes berryi</i>) | 7. 'Sweadner's' Juniper Hairstreak (<i>Callophrys gryneus sweadneri</i>) | 10. Mourning Cloak (<i>Nymphalis antiopa</i>) | |
| 4. Dion Skipper (<i>Euphyes dion</i>) | | 11. Meske's Skipper | |

Sharing Memories With Butterflies

Jennings State Forest

Ever been down a dusty potholed road? Live Oak Lane can sometimes be that way, but during the months of September and October, this lane, continuing to the power line road, has a long parade of Spanish needles (*Bidens alba*), as well as *Carphephorus*, *Liatris*, *Elephantopus*, *Vernonia*, and other flowering plants that attract critters. During a six-hour survey last September, I observed 45 different butterflies and recorded the findings on the North American Butterfly Association website (<http://sightings.naba.org/sightings/850>). Notable finds included 'Sweadner's' Juniper Hairstreak (*Callophrys gryneus sweadneri*) on elephants foot (*Elephantopus* spp.), and Yehl Skipper (*Poanes yehl*) S2/S3 whose immature stage feeds on switchcane (*Arundinaria gigantea*) (photos 1, 2).

Butterfly diversity and numbers increase near the moist or water-filled areas along the power line road – check hog wallows or seasonally flooded drainage areas. Carolina redroot (*Lachnanthes caroliniana*) is the flower with the power to attract some seldom seen butterflies, including Berry's Skipper (*Euphyes berryi*) S1/S2, and Dion Skipper (*Euphyes dion*) S2/S3 (photos 3, 4). Wearing snake boots, walk this area, about two football fields in size. If you're fortunate you may find one or two redroot plants in a small opening, hidden and surrounded by tall grasses, where Berry's Skippers are nectaring. What a thrilling moment when you find and photograph a butterfly this rare! In Florida, sedges in the genus *Carex* act as the host plant for both of these skipper species.

Branan Field Wildlife and Environmental Area

This 386-acre area, 13 miles southwest of Jacksonville, was established in 1989 as a Gopher Tortoise mitigation preserve through the Florida Fish and Wildlife Mitigation Park Program. During the months of August and September, in open pine flatwoods, you may scare up Dotted or Seminole Skippers (*Hesperia attalus slossonae*) S3, nectaring on *Liatris* and *Vernonia* (photo 5).

My Home Butterfly Garden

Sometimes exciting memories are made in your own butterfly garden. Arriving home on a sunny, windless Saturday afternoon in September, I looked out the driver's side window and exclaimed "WHOA NELLIE...could it be...?" and ran to grab the camera. A few quick clicks and the butterfly was gone. After checking the *Butterflies through Binoculars* field guide, I was able to identify the rare Dukes' Skipper (*Euphyes dukesi calhouni*) S1, that had been nectaring in the front yard. This butterfly's immature stage feeds on sedges in the genera *Carex* and *Rhynchospora*.

Sawmill Slough Preserve

On an April afternoon walk in this 382-acre wooded wetland habitat, stretching through the western portion of the University of North Florida campus, I came across a brown butterfly about

two inches in size, perched on a rotting tree trunk. It was the seldom seen Appalachian Brown (*Satyroides appalachia*) S2 (photo 6). I took one step closer and the butterfly flew off like a bullet, back into its swampy habitat. This butterfly's immature stage feeds on sedges in the genera *Carex* and *Rhynchospora*.

Little Talbot Island State Park

While driving towards the ranger station, watch for 'Sweadner's' Juniper Hairstreak (*Callophrys gryneus sweadneri*) perched or flying high on or near the tops of its host tree, red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) (photo 7). If Spanish needles (*Bidens alba*) are in bloom, check to see if one of these rapidly flying, gorgeous green hairstreaks has stopped for a snack.

One of the tiniest butterflies in Florida, the Eastern Pygmy-Blue (*Brephidium isophthalma*) (photo 8) can be found nectaring on fogfruit (*Phyla nodiflora*) growing near the salt marsh tidal flats where this teeny butterfly's predominant host plants – annual glasswort (*Salicornia bigelovii*) and perennial glasswort (*Salicornia ambigua*) grow. This butterfly's immature stage can respire in the water, helping it adapt to the harsh salt marsh environment, and the daily ebb and flow of tides.

Ralph E. Simmons Memorial State Forest

This forest's 3,638 acres include longleaf pine/turkey oak scrub/wiregrass communities, sandhills, seepage slopes, bottom land forest, and slope forest along the St. Mary's River, which borders Georgia. Butterflies abound, and from January to March, they are attracted to trees in the genus *Prunus*. Looking like semi-round twenty foot tall snowballs when in full bloom, Chickasaw plum, flatwoods plum and black cherry all attract numerous pollinators.

During the months of March and April, the longleaf pine/turkey oak scrub/wiregrass communities start displaying new growth, including the lovely sundial lupine (*Lupinus perennis*), the host and nectar plant of the Frosted Elfin (*Callophrys irus arsace*) S1.

At the same time, flowers in the genus *Vaccinium* take center stage in attracting nectaring invertebrates, and you may get a rare glimpse of the Dusky Roadside-Skipper (*Amblyscirtes alternata*) S1/S2, a timid and small fast flying skipper that can be a challenge to photograph.

If all the stars align just right you may get to enjoy watching a Mourning Cloak (*Nymphalis antiopa*) SU, as it glides down in a zigzag pattern from the canopy of the forest, landing on fresh horse dung (photos 9, 10). Good luck getting a close photo! I have observed this butterfly's gregarious immature stage feeding on sugarberry (*Celtis laevigata*) and Carolina willow (*Salix caroliniana*).

September and October can be oozing butterfly diversity and numbers along trails that have flowers in the genera *Lachnanthes*, *Carphephorus*, *Liatris*, *Diodia*, *Dalea*, *Vernonia*, *Solidago*, and *Elephantopus*. Along with the largest diversity of the year, there also can be large numbers of a single seldom seen butterfly. For instance, I saw 24 Meske's Skippers (*Hesperia meskei straton*) S2/S3, in a few hours (photo 11). Nineteen were on one side of

the trail nectaring on *Carphephorus* and *Liatris*, flanked by nine more nectaring on flowers in the genus *Dalea*.

In March 2009 I spotted a small blue butterfly and figured it was a Summer Azure (*Celastrina neglecta*). Raising my trusty Eagle Optics 8 x 42 binoculars I noticed tails. Azures don't have tails, so this was the Eastern Tailed Blue (*Cupido comyntas*) S2, (photo 12). Several months later and nearly in the same spot, I caught my one and only glimpse of the American Snout (*Libytheana carinenta*).

Over the past five years, I have observed and photographed upwards of eight fall brooded Dusky Road-Side Skippers (*Amblyscirtes alternata*) S2, nectaring on *Diodia* in late August to the middle of September along the "Diodia" trail at Simmons State Forest (photo 13). Talk about frustrating – while you are crawling, trying to get

close enough to obtain a good image of these little guys, they are saying, "See ya later!" as they disappear off into the pine forest.

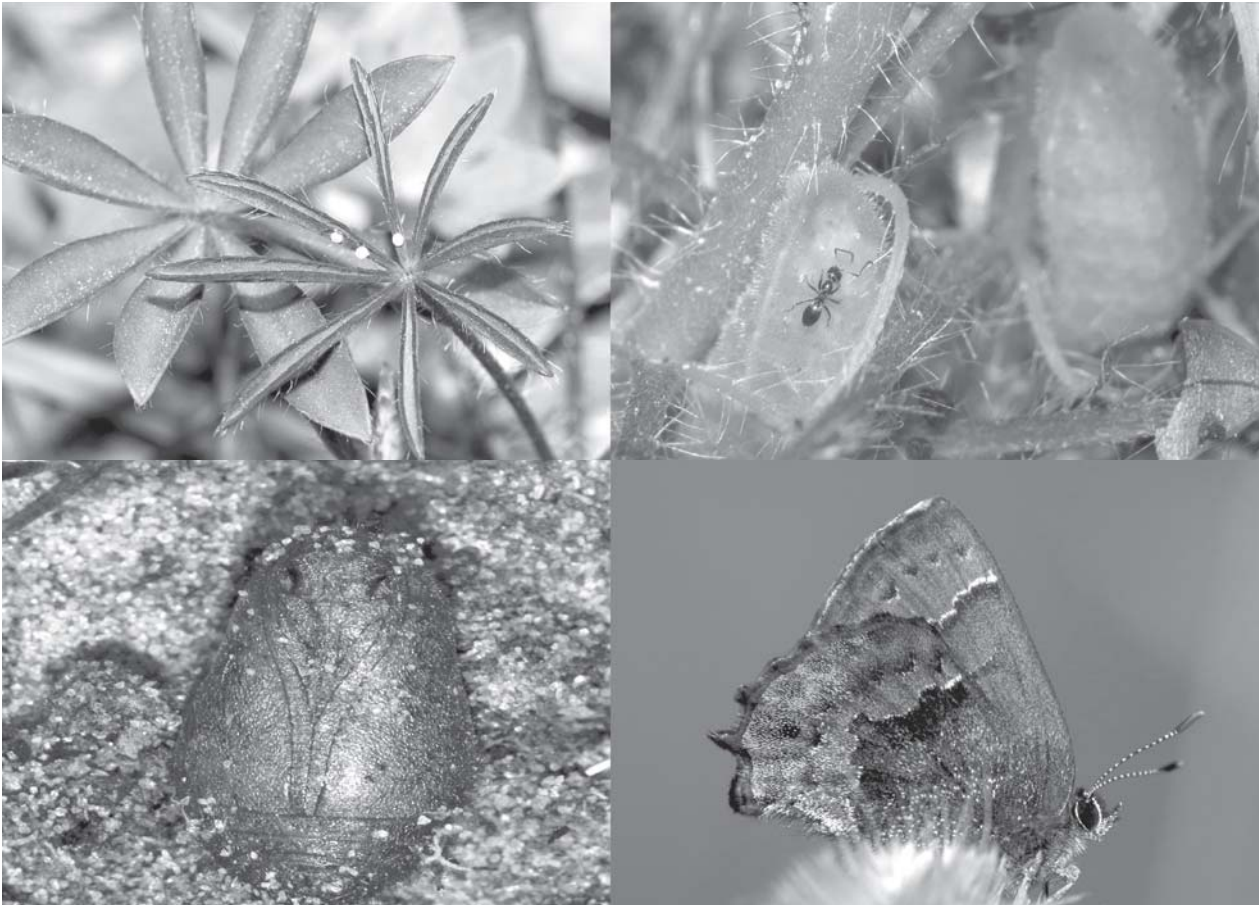
Exploring the bottomland forest, I saw my first Lace-winged Roadside-Skipper resting on an open leaf. What a gorgeous sight, illuminated by a light gap penetrating through the forest canopy! Another amazing experience was discovering and photographing a Hackberry Emperor (*Asterocampa celtis*) lapping up sap oozing from the bark of a tree.

Over years of looking for and photographing butterflies around the world, I have used the mantras "Today's The Day" and "Hope Springs Eternal" for keeping my motor running strong. I hope you will decide "Today's The Day" and visit some of the wonderful natural areas listed here. You never know what you'll see flying by.

A Note About Ranking

Some of the butterflies mentioned in this article are rare and are ranked from S1 to S3. Ranks are based on many factors, including abundance, geographic range, relative threat of destruction, and ecological fragility. The Florida Natural Areas Inventory, (fnai.org) a nonprofit organization dedicated to gathering, interpreting, and disseminating information critical to the conservation of Florida's biological diversity, defines state ranks for Florida as follows:

- S1 = Critically imperiled in Florida due to extreme rarity (5 or fewer occurrences or less than 1000 individuals) or extreme vulnerability to extinction due to some natural or man-made factor.
- S2 = Imperiled in Florida due to rarity (6 to 20 occurrences or less than 3000 individuals) or vulnerability to extinction due to some natural or man-made factor.
- S3 = Either very rare and local in Florida (21-100 occurrences or less than 10,000 individuals) or found locally in a restricted range or vulnerable to extinction from other factors.
- S4 = Apparently secure in Florida (may be rare in parts of range).



Metamorphosis of the Frosted Elfin Butterfly (*Callophrys irus arsace*). March – April, Ralph E. Simmons Memorial State Forest, Nassau County, Florida.



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Editorial Content

We welcome articles on native plant species and related conservation topics, as well as high-quality botanical illustrations and photographs. Contact the editor for guidelines, deadlines and other information.

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Official definition of native plant:

For most purposes, the phrase Florida native plant refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation. More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

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