Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

EXOTIC BUTTERFLIES Z36

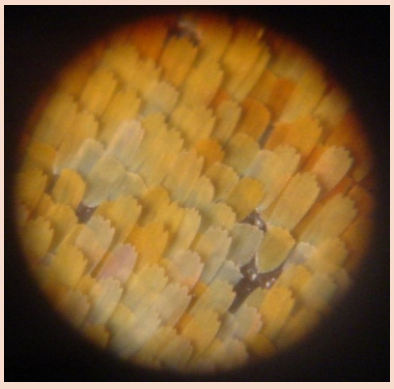
The butterflies in this box are not from Britain. The order Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths - the second largest order in the class Insecta) has more than 260,000 species and therefore it is difficult to give names to specimens without detailed information about where they were collected from. Some of the examples in this box have only been provisionally identified, so these notes will concentrate on the butterfly's most conspicuous feature - the wing.

A butterfly has four wings attached to the thorax - the middle section of the body. Strong muscles in the thorax move the wings up and down in a figure-eight pattern during flight.

When an adult butterfly emerges from its pupa, its delicate wings are crinkled, wet, and uninflated. The butterfly hangs upside-down and pumps blood into the wings to inflate them. It must then wait for the wings to dry before it can take off. When the fragile wings fray or are torn, they do not repair themselves.

Wing Structure and Scales

Butterfly wings are made of two layers supported by tubular veins. The veins also nourish and carry oxygen to the wings. Covering the wings are thousands of colourful scales, together with many hairs (setae).



These scales give the group its name - Lepidoptera, which is derived from two Greek words, λεπίδος (scale) and πτερόν (wing). The wing scales are tiny overlapping pieces of chitin, which are actually plate-like hairs. The front and back of the wings usually have different patterns.

Scent scales are modified wing scales on the forewing of female butterflies and moths that release chemicals called pheromones. These chemicals attract males of the same species.

Above: A magnified image of scales on a butterfly wing.

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Colour



Many butterflies and moths are brilliantly coloured, while others are drab. There are often ultraviolet patterns in the wings that we cannot see, but which are visible to other butterflies. Even many of the colourful species have drab-coloured outer wings (that are visible when the animal is at rest). Wing designs are generally symmetrical along the axis of the body.

Iridescence is a phenomenon in which colour changes according to the angle from which the surface is viewed. Some butterflies have iridescent colouring, which is caused by the surface of the scales having an elaborate cellular structure known as fenestration. This interferes with light wavelengths and usually results in brilliant, shimmering blues and greens. The multitude of other colours found on the scales of butterflies and moths comes from chemical pigmentation.

Above: The menelaus blue morpho (Morpho menelaus) is an iridescent tropical butterfly of Central and South America. It has a wing span of 6 inches (15 centimeters).

Why are butterfly wings so colourful?



The colouration of these insects serves many purposes, including:

- Camouflage: the colour of the animal can help it blend into the environment. Some butterflies, for example, are shaped and coloured like a leaf.
- Warning: brightly-coloured butterflies and moths are often either bad-tasting or mimic similar bad-tasting butterflies.
- Attracting and finding mates, who look for certain colours and patterns.
- Disorientating predators: Large 'eyespots' seem to flash when the butterfly takes off, startling some predators and making them hesitate.
- Soaking up heat: dark-coloured scales soak up heat very well when the butterfly suns itself. Like all insects, butterflies are cold-blooded. When they get too cold, they need to warm themselves in the sun.

Above: The crimson patch (Chlosyne janais), from central America.

The Coupling of the Wings

During flight, the forewing and hindwing are held together and function as one wing. The coupling mechanism differs in different species. In most butterflies, a lobe on the hindwing presses against the forewing. In most moths, bristles on the front edge of the hindwings (called the *frenulum*) connect with hooks on the hind edge of the forewing. In some moths, a lobe at the base of the forewings (called the *jugum*) overlaps the hindwings.

The butterfly indicated by the red arrow is probably an apollo butterfly (*Parnassius apollo)*. This is a widespread and characteristic butterfly of the high mountains of Europe. It is very noticeable from May to high summer flapping across alpine meadows well above the tree line.



It is thought that the species was widespread during glaciation periods. Following the Ice Age, as temperatures increased, populations became isolated in mountainous areas and subsequently evolved into distinct forms that vary greatly in the number and intensity of their markings. They can usually be told apart by the colour (reds and yellows) and the size of the spots on the hindwing.

The apollo species belong to the swallowtail family, even though they do not have the characteristic long tail on their wings. Swallowtails differ from all other butterflies in a number of ways. Most notably, their caterpillars possess a unique organ behind their heads, called the *osmeterium*, which sticks up when the caterpillar is threatened, and gives off a nasty smell.

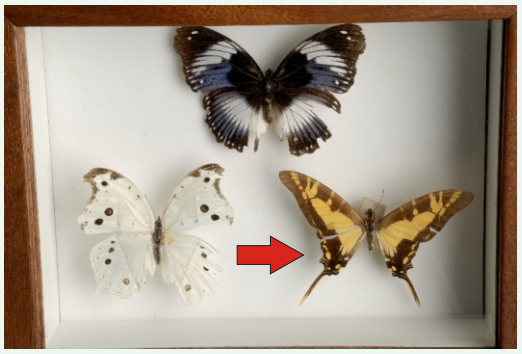


Above right: An apollo butterfly (Parnassius apollo).Below right: A small apollo butterfly (Parnassius phoebus). The various sub-species are very similar.

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The butterfly indicated by the red arrow is probably a yellow kite-swallowtail (*Eurytides c. calliste*, also referred to as *Protographium calliste)* or orange kite-swallowtail (*Eurytides thyastes occidentalis*, also referred to as *Protographium thyastes)*. These butterflies can be found from Mexico down to Brazil.



Right: Orange kite-swallowtails photographed in Brazil.



The butterfly indicated by the red arrow is probably a blue-spot commodore (*Junonia westermanni suffa)*. This butterfly is found in west Africa, from Ghana to Angola. It lives under forest cover.



Right: Blue-spot commodore butterflies photographed in Uganda.

