

Butterflies

(Order: Lepidoptera)



January 2000

Fish and Wildlife Habitat Management Leaflet

Number 15

General Information

Butterflies have been admired for centuries for their physical beauty and behavioral display. These colorful insects frequent open, sunny wildflower gardens, grassy fields and orchards, feeding on nectar from flowering plants. Butterflies belong to the order Lepidoptera, which means scale-winged. The order contains over 19,000 species of butterflies and 100,000 species of moths worldwide. Over 700 butterfly species occur in North America.



The life history of butterflies includes extremely short adult life spans in some species, a four-staged life cycle, and migration and hibernation activity in some species. The complex butterfly life cycle includes existence as an egg, larva (caterpillar), and pupa before developing into an adult butterfly. The resiliency of some butterfly species is illustrated by their ability to travel great distances. The Monarch, perhaps the most commonly known species in the United States, journeys more than 2,000 miles to winter in warmer climates. The life span of adult butterflies ranges between one week and eight months, and averages two to three weeks in length.

Land use changes and development have resulted in significant losses of native butterfly habitat across the United States. As a result, the popularity of wildflower gardens and plantings to attract butterflies and other valuable pollinating insects and birds has increased. Historically, butterfly enthusiasts collected butterflies with nets and preserved them in display cases for viewing. Fortunately, during the past few decades appreciation for butterflies has been evolving from these consumptive uses to conservation measures. An increased knowledge and understanding of the importance of butterflies and the symbiotic balance that exists between them and the plant species they pollinate and rely on for food has helped to foster this transition.

This leaflet is designed to highlight the ecological and aesthetic importance of butterfly species found within the United States, serve as an introduction to butterfly habitat requirements, and assist land managers in butterfly management planning. The success of management efforts depends on consideration of the needs of the desired species and analyzing and managing the available habitat to ensure that all required habitat elements are present. This leaflet provides a number of practical habitat management activities that can be conducted to attract butterflies and help support existing populations.

Distribution and Range

Distribution: Butterflies have nearly global distribution, present on every continent except Antarctica. The butterfly species found in North America that are covered in this leaflet belong to six families containing numerous subfamilies.

Range: Within the United States, the ranges of individual butterfly species, as well as individual butterflies within those species, vary with migration habits and geographic region. A species inhabiting a warmer region may have a small range, whereas a species inhabiting a region with a winter season may migrate to warmer climates in colder months, thus possessing a much larger range. Monarch butterflies range from the northern