

Rock-Barren Butterflies of The Land Between

The unique exposed, granite barrens of The Land Between Ecotone are home to an impressive diversity of butterflies. The otherwise thin, sandy soils support many specialist plant species that can sometimes survive nowhere else, and they, in turn, are host to some beautiful and unique species of butterflies.

Butterfly watching in granite barrens and alvars, such as those found at the famous **Carden Alvar Provincial Park** and the **Torrance Barrens Dark Sky Preserve**, can be especially productive in early spring. Favourite species like the Monarch (*Danus plexipuss*) begin to arrive in May, but by then many fantastic, lesser-known butterflies are already starting to become active:



Photo provided by The Canadian Biodiversity Information Facility

1. **Chryxus arctic (*Oeneis chryxus*) May-June**

A true northern species, the chryxus arctic can be found from north and central Ontario west to Alaska, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Caterpillars feed on grasses such as poverty grass (*Danthonia spicata*), and overwinter by nearly freezing solid! The caterpillars resume feeding in the spring for another summer, then freeze for a second time and pupate in their second spring, taking 2 years to complete development. By the beginning of May into mid-June the orange-brown adults emerge. They have cryptic and complex patterning on the undersides of their wings to help blend in with gravel and lichen. Arctics hold their wings over their bodies and bend towards shadows to obscure their silhouette,

making these locally common butterflies a trick to find. Look for them in grassy alvars and sandy pine barrens, as well as open woodlands.

2. **Olympia marble (*Euchloe olympia*) end of April-June**

The olympia marble is a relatively recent addition to Ontario's butterfly fauna, first being recorded in the 1970's in the Ottawa area. This butterfly is a typical western species, but has since become locally common throughout central and southern Ontario. The reason for the apparently natural eastward range expansion is still not known. Caterpillars feed on the flowers and buds of rockcresses such as spreading-pod rockcress (*Boechea divicarpa*) and lyre-leaved rockcress (*Arabidopsis lyrata*). This species overwinters as a chrysalis, and adults can be found in sandy meadows, alvars, and open woods from late April to June. Look for this medium sized, white butterfly fluttering around open, sunny areas. It can be distinguished from the more common mustard white (*Pieris oleracea*) by the extensive and bold olive green marbling on the underside of the wings.



Olympia Marble
Photo provided by insectimages.org

3. **Pink-edged sulphur (*Colias interior*) June-July**

This species closely resembles the much more abundant clouded sulphur (*Colias philodice*), but can be distinguished by a single black spot on the underside of the hind wing and the absence of a black band. This beautiful yellow butterfly occurs throughout The Land Between anywhere that blueberries (*Vaccinium sp.*) occur, their larval food plant. Populations of pink-edged sulphur can sometimes reach massive numbers if conditions are right. Look for them in early summer in shield heathlands, rocky barrens and reindeer-lichen encrusted alvars.



Pink-edged sulphur
Photo provided by The Canadian Biodiversity Information Facility

4. Eastern pine elfin (*Callophrys niphon*) mid-April-early July

Like its common name would suggest, the eastern pine elfin is a butterfly of pine stands, particularly areas with jack pine and eastern white pine, its caterpillar food plants. Eastern pine elfins are common throughout northern, central, and southern Ontario coinciding with jack pine barrens and sandy pine-oak woodlands. Like many species in the gossamer-wing family of butterflies (Lycaenidae), eastern pine elfins rarely expose the upper surface of their wings. The underside of the wings is a complex pattern of beautiful dark browns and mahogany. A similar species is the western pine elfin (), a much more north-west ranging species with more golden wings. Look for both species from mid-April until, in some cases, early July. A great spot for seeing both pine elfins is the Old Airfield Bike-trail in Algonquin Provincial Park.



Eastern pine elfin
Photo provided by The Canadian Biodiversity
Information Facility



Columbine duskywing
Photo provided by The Canadian Biodiversity
Information Facility

5. Columbine duskywing (*Erynnis lucilius*) May-July, second brood late July-September

Columbine duskywings are small, brown, moth-like butterflies that tend to visit flowers more often than other duskywings (genus *Erynnis*). In Ontario, this species is truly a butterfly of The Land Between; the highest densities in the province occur here thanks to our rocky outcrops and sunny, granite barrens with plentiful red columbine and other wildflowers. It is most often confused with the very similar but more southwestern ranging Wild Indigo Duskywing (*Erynnis baptisiae*). Columbine duskywings are found in open, rocky, areas from May to September wherever their caterpillar host plant, wild red columbine (*Aquilegia*

canadensis) occurs. This species has two broods a year instead of one.

Photographing butterflies is a great activity for people of any age! In addition to pollination services, butterflies are great entertainment. Pay attention to what your butterflies are doing! Behaviours you observe may contribute to science. Photos and observations of butterflies can be submitted to the Ontario Butterfly Atlas and iNaturalist.org. And as always, rare species can be submitted to The Land Between.