

## The butterflies of the Maltese Islands and their dwindling habitats

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With the departure of the British Forces from the Islands and the subsequent diversification of the economy, which for so many years has depended on their presence, Malta suddenly finds herself changing her rôle from that of island fortress to tourist centre. At the same time she is expanding existing industries and seeking to open the way for new ones. Inevitably this development encroaches upon the countryside which, in such a small island, makes a very noticeable impression upon its flora and fauna. Large areas of cultivated and uncultivated land have been taken over for the construction of hotels, villas, blocks of flats, for the extension of the airport, the opening of new roads and the widening of old ones. Furthermore, the construction of the docks and expansion of industrial estates, as well as the opening of new quarrying sites to provide the necessary building materials for these projects, have all taken their toll of hitherto unspoiled areas of the countryside. Moreover, with the improvement in the standard of living and the consequent demand for more spacious accommodation, new residential areas have sprung up and housing estates form satellites to the many existing towns and villages. All this has considerably reduced the habitat and food supply of many species of insects.

Naturally, an alarming decrease in the number of individuals of certain butterflies is noticeable, as complete colonies have disappeared from what are now built-up areas. Fortunately, all species of butterflies are still to be found here. Species, such as *Pararge aegeria* (Linnaeus), *Celastrina argiolus* (Linnaeus), *Vanessa atalanta* (Linnaeus) besides breeding in the wild, are also to be found in the safety of public and private gardens, and in protected areas such as Buskett and cemeteries. *Pieris brassicae* (Linnaeus), *Artogeia rapae* (Linnaeus), *Colias crocea* Fourcroy, *Cynthia cardui* (Linnaeus), *Pontia daplidice* (Linnaeus), *Lampides boeticus* (Linnaeus), besides breeding regularly on the island, mostly in the wild, are frequently reinforced by the arrival of immigrants. *Papilio machaon* Linnaeus has two different foodplants: the rue, *Ruta bracteosa*, and fennel, *Foeniculum vulgare*, which afford it alternative food supplies if one or other becomes

scarce. Rue grows in exposed, rocky places, so far considered as "Green areas", and even in some gardens as a medicinal plant, and fennel is widespread and not easily eradicated. Thus the future for *Papilio machaon* looks quite secure. Perhaps the most endangered species are *Polyommatus icarus* (Rottemburg), *Lycaena phlaeas* (Linnaeus), *Aricia agestis* (Schiffermüller), *Coenonympha pamphilus* (Linnaeus), *Maniola jurtina hispulla* (Esper), and *Gegenes pumilio* (Hoffmannsegg) as they breed in the beds and slopes of the "widien" (old river valleys) in which the afforestation programme has caused belts of ornamental trees to be planted; this led to alteration of the ecology, with a damaging effect upon the dependent fauna.

Factors beyond human control, such as the climate, also play their part in determining the availability of essential foodplants. Consecutive winters with a low rainfall seriously deplete the growth of annuals on which these species of butterflies live. This is particularly noticeable in the case of *Lycaena phlaeas* when dock, *Rumex pulcher*, is getting scarce owing to the lack of water.

I have been studying the local lepidoptera for the last 48 years and what I recorded 48 years ago and the species evident today still correspond in type though not in number. Sadly the colourful abundance of these insects that was such a common sight of my early days as a collector and observer is now a thing of the past. Many rich localities have disappeared altogether or shrunk to such an extent as to support only a fraction of the former population. Where once was a paradise of wild flowers there is now a quarry or block of flats. However, to compensate in part for this I have the satisfaction of seeing three species of butterflies viz. *Syntarucus pirithous*, *Gegenes pumilio* and *Celastrina argiolus* settling down and breeding regularly on the island since 1944, 1948 and 1961 respectively, giving at least two broods each every year. Whilst lamenting the change that increased prosperity of the human population brings to the animal and plant world, one must take a realistic and practical look at what can be done to minimize the harmful effects upon the flora and fauna whilst still allowing for progress in the economy. Many of the natural habitats will continue to dwindle or disappear but it is to be hoped that those who are in a position to do so will encourage the preservation of all the existing species by ensuring that the necessary foodplants are not entirely eradicated from the countryside and in some cases are even deliberately propagated. There is also a place for the breeding of certain species in captivity and their subsequent release into the wild when the numbers become dangerously low. We have seen this policy work in the case of endangered wild animals in other parts of the world, why not, then in this small island turn our attention to the protection of those tiny beings whose presence so enriches our own existence.

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