



Butterflies of North America

Introduction

The **Butterflies of North America** Web site is a “work in progress,” consisting primarily of the following information:

Distribution maps showing the counties in which occurrence of a particular species has been verified

Photos of the adult and caterpillar (when available)

Species accounts containing information on size, identifying characteristics, life history, flight, caterpillar hosts, adult food, habitat, species range, conservation status, and management needs

Species checklists for each county in the U. S. and state in northern Mexico

In addition to the above information, users looking to identify an unknown butterfly can browse our collection of thumbnail photos and jump to a particular species account and distribution map (Please **do not send species identification inquiries** to the authors of this Web site or Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center. See our *Frequently Asked Question* [Identification of Moths and Butterflies](#) instead).

Because it is a “work in progress,” the **Butterflies of North America** Web site is constantly being updated. Additional families, photos, and species accounts are being added as funds and time permit, and distribution maps of species that are already covered are being updated as new county records are established. Distribution maps are currently limited to states of the conterminous United States and northern Mexico. Data for Canadian provinces will be added in the future.

County records, unless for an immediately recognizable species, are based on museum specimens, authoritative monographs or other publications, or records from recognized experts. Visitors to the site will find that species occurrence information is more complete for some counties than others, owing to the fact that survey effort and reporting (current and past) vary among counties.

Visitors to the site can make a valuable contribution by helping to establish new county records for species that are presently included in the site. If you find a species or record of a species in a county beyond its confirmed range, as shown in the species distribution map, there is a good chance that you can advance our knowledge by reporting your discovery. **However, new county records can only be established after**

your identification has been confirmed by an expert. This is a necessary step in the process because many species of butterflies are easily confused with one another. Verification requires either a clear photograph that shows the scientifically-accepted diagnostic features of the species or an actual specimen.

If you believe that you have observed a butterfly species outside of its confirmed range, please follow instructions in the *Frequently Asked Question* [How Can I Report a New County Record for a Moth or Butterfly?](#)

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Common Questions

Can You Identify My Butterfly (or Moth)?

Can we identify your butterfly, moth, or caterpillar? *Probably not.* Because we serve both [Moths of North America](#) and [Butterflies of North America](#), we receive many requests to identify adult and larval butterflies and moths. Unfortunately, Northern Prairie does not have anyone on staff who specializes in the lepidoptera, and we have few library resources on the subject. Thus, except for the commonest or showiest species, our ability to identify your insect is very limited. In fact, all of them that we can identify are pictured in the resources mentioned above.

The easiest way to browse through these two resources is to use the [Photo Thumbnails](#) feature on the first page to quickly scan pictures of all of the species that are covered. You can bring up a larger picture, plus the species account and distribution map, of any species shown there by clicking on the name below the picture. If you do not find your butterfly or moth in these references, check out the links to other publications and other Web sites listed in the two resources.

A couple of Web sites that may be able to help are [The Butterfly Website](#) and [TheButterflySite.com](#). In particular, the first Web site has a chat room where you may be able to get your specimen identified. (Note: Northern Prairie does not endorse these Web sites or the products they offer for sale; we offer the links solely as a service to our visitors.)

Another web site of value for moth identification is John Snyder's effort to make pictures of a tremendous number of American moths available on the Web. The site may be visited at <http://www.furman.edu/~snyder/leplist/>. This site is somewhat difficult for the amateur to use, because of the hundreds of species covered. However, if you can narrow your moth down to probable family by using **Moths of North America**, you can then go to Snyder's site, browse through all of the species within that family, and possibly identify your moth.

If you are trying to identify a noctuid moth in or around California, and if you have some expertise in moth anatomy, you may find the California Department of Food & Agriculture Plant Pest Diagnostics Center website <http://plant.cdffa.ca.gov/noctuid/> of value.

Another good bet is a library or bookstore. Butterfly and moth collecting are popular hobbies, and most libraries have, or can easily obtain, a couple of field guides to the lepidoptera. Some that you may find especially useful are:

Covell, C. V., Jr. 1984. A field guide to the moths of eastern North America.

Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.

Opler, P.A. 1994. Peterson first guide to butterflies and moths: a simplified guide to the common butterflies and moths of North America. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.

Opler, P.A. and V. Malilul. 1998. A field guide to eastern butterflies. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.

Wright, A.B. 1993. Peterson first guide to caterpillars of North America. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.

If you are trying to identify a caterpillar, please see [What Kind of a Caterpillar is This?](#).

As a last resort, Dr. Ron Royer, a specialist in Lepidoptera at Minot State University, in Minot, ND, may be able to help. His e-mail address is royer@warp6.cs.misu.nodak.edu. Another gentleman who has offered to help is Mr. Jim Mason, a naturalist at the Great Plains Nature Center, in Wichita, KS. Mr. Mason is a founding member of his local chapter of the North American Butterfly Association. His e-mail is jim@gpnc.org.

If you want help from either of these gentlemen, send him a **detailed description** of your insect, including size, color pattern, "fuzziness," and any other peculiarities that might help identify it. Include information on the shape of the butterfly or moth when the wings are at rest, and tell him your **geographical location** (e.g., state and county). It would really help if you can compare it with pictures in the resources that we serve so that you can tell him that "it looks similar to _____ except that _____." If you are seeking to identify a caterpillar, it is **essential** to determine the **species of plant** that it was eating and include that information with your inquiry. Include a photo if you have the equipment. Failure to include 1) a **detailed description**, 2) your **geographic location**, and 3) the **species of host plant** (for caterpillars) will make it nearly impossible for these gentleman to help you.

After you have done all that, don't be disappointed if Dr. Royer or Mr. Mason cannot help you, especially if the question concerns a moth. Dr. Royer cautions that: "...most moths are tough to identify with confidence even 'in the flesh,' let alone from a verbal description. I can't guarantee any ability to identify from an e-mail description." Mr. Mason echoed this sentiment even more succinctly: "If it ain't 'pretty' in some way, but just another brown fuzzy one, I wouldn't have a clue!"

