

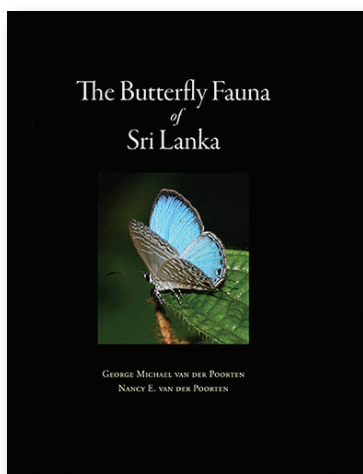
The butterfly fauna of Sri Lanka

by George and Nancy Van der Poorten

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This is a substantial book in every sense. Chapter One is a lively introduction to the island of Sri Lanka and its 247 butterfly species (including 31 endemic). Early focus on the islands' fauna was on collecting and identification, but in the last decade and a half, a revival of interest has encompassed rearing the early stages in Sri Lanka (many previous accounts of early stages referred only to India) and maintaining systematic records. As a direct result, this book contains a wealth of new data. There are fascinating accounts of the origin of the fauna, regional studies of butterflies, threats to the fauna, topography and climate, all brought up to date. Maps chronicle a varied topography, vegetation and climatic zones, all illustrated lavishly – if by rather small photographs.

In Chapter two – life of the butterfly – centres of diversity and composition of the fauna are tabulated, and well-illustrated sections on early stages, their structures, predators and behaviour must surely rank among the most informative and easily readable accounts of any recent butterfly book. They have a fresh feel, rather than the “same old same old” we have perhaps become accustomed to. Chapter three deals with conservation: past frustrations and future aspirations.

A short introduction to the species' accounts comprises Chapter four, and the bulk of the book – Chapters five to ten – occupy the next 300 pages. Each species is treated similarly: description; similar species; status, distribution (in Sri Lanka) and habitat; adult behaviour; and immature stages. Where required, there are additional sections on conservation issues (sometimes lengthy: e.g. p. 245, a pragmatic treatment of *Symphhaedra nais*), and practical keys where appropriate, adapted to requirements for particular groups: for example, a series of couplets relates to three potentially difficult *Mycalasis* species, with illustrations for comparison (p. 281, Fig. 7-86), whereas separation of five species of *Eurema* (p. 315, Figs 9-12) and five species of *Jamides* (p. 123, Fig. 6-26) is clearly achieved by arrows highlighting diagnostic features. Having said that, the *Jamides* diagnoses may have been slightly better accomplished using set specimens, which would show the whole of each forewing underside. A whole page is devoted to a key to four species of *Euploea* (p. 228, Fig. 7-28) and a double page spread (pp. 134-5) provides an illustrated key to species of *Nacaduba*, *Prosotas*, *Petrelaea* and *Ionolyce*. The overall impression is of a professional approach by authors who are intimately familiar with their subject and know what users of books really need and want to know. They have succeeded admirably.

Books that show only photographs of butterflies in their “natural” setting may be inadequate for identification purposes in comparison to set specimens but, with few exceptions, the authors overcome this beautifully by including as many “natural” pictures as are necessary to show the upper and under surfaces of both sexes of each species (e.g. p. 55, Fig. 5-13: *Gangara lebadea*), in addition to some unusual – sometimes spectacular – pictures of the species in flight (e.g. p. 46, Fig. 5-5[a]: a male *Bibasis sena* taking flight; p. 288, Fig. 8-4[a]: *Graphium antiphates*). There is even a “roadkill” opportunity to illustrate the upper surface of *Jamides bochus* (p. 125, Fig. 6-28[a])!

Towards the end of the book, several appendices complete this book in some style. Appendix A comprises an annotated species list with the full scientific name, common name, status (i.e. endemic or not), and zone where the species is most likely to be encountered. Appendix B is an annotated list of publications on Sri Lankan butterflies; Appendix C lists larval host-plants (by plant, in alphabetical sequence); Appendix D lists reported nectar sources for adult butterflies, and Appendix E provides historical accounts of dispersal and migration. And just when you think you've seen it all, Appendix F provides a magnificent kaleidoscope of photographs of eggs, larvae and pupae of butterflies (as available, sorted by family) over 30 pages. These really are rather spectacular, each presented in a similar scale and situation to facilitate comparison and provide a fair opportunity to identify an “unknown” larva or pupa found in the field. Many pages accommodate 50+ pictures each. The book concludes with a glossary, references, photographic credits and index.

Photographs throughout the book are outstanding, and occasionally take the reader by surprise. For example, a photograph of *Tajuria cippus* (p. 29, Fig. 2-40[f]) taken from directly above, provide a view of hindwing tails and anal lobes as seen by a potential predator, quite different to the more usual side view placed next to it. The content is well written and scholarly; text is succinct and relevant. The book is a significant improvement on any of the few books dealing specifically with butterfly fauna of the island in recent years.

Distribution outside Sri Lanka may be regarded as a minor omission by some, but this is readily available elsewhere. Sri Lanka and southern India are at the western end of the distribution of many familiar species that extend eastwards throughout much of the Oriental Region as far as Australia and the Pacific Islands. This solid, yet delightful book deserves a place on the shelf of every lepidopterist, and of anyone with a general interest in natural history.

John Tennent