George M. van der Poorten and Nancy E. van der Poorten (2016). THE BUTTERFLY FAUNA OF SRI LANKA. Lepodon Books, Toronto, Canada. vi + 418 pp, 416 figs. (see note in text), 3 tables

The small island of Sri Lanka lies only 30 km from the southeastern coast of India, yet out of its 247 species of butterflies, 31 are endemic and 84 are represented by endemic subspecies. With a dense human population that has lived there for thousands of years, the conservation of this fauna is a challenge. Thus, despite the existence of several books on the island’s butterfly fauna (e.g., Woodhouse, 1949; D’Abrera, 2000), the authors decided that an additional book, with a particular focus on the biology and conservation of the fauna, was warranted. The result is a richly illustrated book that draws upon the authors’ many years of field research, during which time they documented at least some information for every species on the island, compiled a distribution database of 30,000 records, and compiled immature stage information for 219 species.

The book begins with a series of introductory chapters before tackling the six families of butterflies present in Sri Lanka. Chapter 1 briefly reviews the age of butterflies and the possible origins of Sri Lanka’s fauna, followed by the history of study of Sri Lankan butterflies. The authors note that butterflies have likely been declining in the region for many years, and describe several eye-witness reports from early last century of vast swarms of migrating butterflies that would be ‘unimaginable today’. They describe the island’s topography and climate, and habitats where butterflies occur. Chapter 2 briefly touches on the origins of common and scientific names of butterflies, and concludes with a much longer, thorough, absorbing and splendidly illustrated discussion of the butterfly life cycle and biology.

Chapter 3 focuses on conservation, describing the threats butterflies face and the recent assessments of Sri Lankan butterfly threat status using IUCN categories. Evidently the most recent assessment was conducted by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Environment, resulting in a total of 108 species being listed as threatened. This assessment was apparently based just on the status of the species in Sri Lanka – many widely distributed species that happen to be local or rare in Sri Lanka are considered threatened, whereas I assume that only a small fraction of those, which are endemic to the island, are globally threatened. The chapter concludes with an encouraging section on butterfly gardening.

Chapter 4 introduces the species accounts which occupy the remaining 90% of the book. Each family receives an introduction of several pages summarizing the distinguishing characters, biology, taxonomic diversity and conservation issues of the group. Subsequently, each species is treated on a full page, based just on the status of the species in Sri Lanka – many widely distributed species that happen to be local or rare in Sri Lanka are considered threatened, whereas I assume that only a small fraction of those, which are endemic to the island, are globally threatened. The chapter concludes with an encouraging section on butterfly gardening.

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WILLMOTT: Book Review

Pale Palmdart (Telicota colon kala)

Fig. 5-49. Pale Palmdart (Telicota colon kala). a) male, upperside; b) male feeding on nectar of Chromolaena odorata, underside; c) female, upperside; d) – e) female, upperside; f) egg; g) larva, lateral view (1·5×); h) larva, dorsal view (1·5×); i) pupa.

Description (Figs. 5-49, 5-50c, d): It is very similar in appearance to the Dark Palmdart. In the male, the sex brand on the underside is a triangular spot within which the yellow streaks do not extend to the termen along the veins in the territory. In the female, these yellow streaks do not extend to the territory along the veins, but the markings in the cells below veins H3 have their lower edges produced slightly; the markings on the opposite are much smaller, enhancing the black ground color and making the butterfly appear darker.

Similar species: Dark Palmdart—see under that species. All other Darts are smaller.

Status, Distribution and Habitat: The species is rare (5), but appears to fly year-round. It is confined to the hills of the Uva, Sabaragamuwa provinces and the drier parts of the Central province. A few are occasionally encountered at lower elevations. It is very similar in wing pattern and sex brand.

Immature Stages: Its immature stages are similar to those of the Dark Palmdart, except that it inhabits grasslands and large open meadows.

Adult Behavior: Its behavior is similar to that of the Tropic Dart except that it inhabits grasslands and large open meadows.

Each ‘figure’ actually contains multiple photographs, such that the 416 figures in the book contain many thousands of different images. My guess is that most or all of the immature stage images represent newly documented life histories, in which case this book contains a treasure trove of new data, especially for the Hesperiidae and Lycaenidae. The accounts include concise, informative sections on identification, status, distribution and habitat, with a number indicating the approximate number of individuals that might be seen in one day, an intriguing and potentially very useful quantitative measure of abundance. Further sections describe adult behavior, immature stages, and conservation issues. An extremely welcome and valuable feature is the frequent presentation of plates comparing similar species in complex groups such as the skipppers and blues, with arrows indicating diagnostic characters.

Following the species accounts are ca. 70 pages of Appendices. An annotated list indicates the habitats and endemic status of each species, followed by a notes section which explains the taxonomy adopted wherever potentially controversial. There follow lists of works on Sri Lankan butterflies, larval hostplants and the species that feed on them, nectar sources, and fascinating historical accounts of large numbers of Sri Lankan butterflies. Then, tucked away almost at the end of the book, is Appendix F, consisting of 30 plates with probably more than a thousand images of eggs, larvae and pupae. This gorgeous compilation of flawless images is just astounding, breath-taking. Standardized views allow easy comparison among species, either for identification or potentially for coding characters for a phylogenetic study. Finally, the book concludes with glossary, reference list and index.

In summary, this is a beautifully crafted, fabulously illustrated work on the biology, conservation and identification of Sri Lankan butterflies, with an absolute wealth of information. For those with broader interests in the immature stages and the natural history of Asian butterflies, it will prove invaluable.

LITERATURE CITED


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