

South Africa - Butterflies (BC)

Naturetrek Tour Report

27 March - 5 April 2009



Paradise Skipper



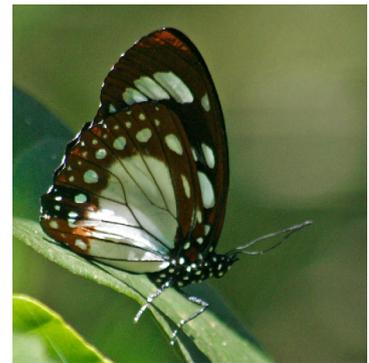
Gaudy Commodore



Common Diadem



Smoky Orange Tip



Forest Queen

Report and images compiled by Leon Marais

Butterfly List by Dr Derek Brown



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Day 1

Saturday 28th March

Wakkerstroom

The clients were picked up at 8:30 AM at their guest house in Nelspruit and we got underway, heading to Wakkerstroom in the far south of the province. We arrived in time for lunch, which we had on the terrace of the inn, and then headed out for some butterfly-chasing in the fields surrounding the wetland. Some common 'everyday' species such as Citrus Swallowtail, African Monarch, Painted Lady, Common Diadem, Common Clouded Yellow and Blue Pansy were seen, as well as few more special species such as Wandering Donkey Acrea, Eastern Sorrel Copper and Marsh Sylph. Birds seen included the magnificent Grey Crowned Crane, which is locally common in the Wakkerstroom area, as well as a few others such as White-throated Swallow, Banded Martin, African Marsh Harrier, Yellow-billed Duck, South African Shelduck, Red-knobbed Coot, African Sacred Ibis and Black-headed Heron. With evening approaching we headed back to the inn, where we had some time to freshen up, and then met for a drink and dinner in the dining area. Afterwards we made our plans for the following day and then retired for the evening.

Day 2

Sunday 29th March

Mkhuze

We left the inn at 6:00 AM for a birding drive in the surrounding countryside, which can produce some fantastic birds. This morning was no exception and we recorded no fewer than five Secretarybirds, as well as Southern Bald Ibis, Blue Crane, Denham's Bustard, Marsh Owl, Hamerkop, Black-shouldered Kite and a new mammal species for the Brown in the form of a colony of Suricates. All in all a wonderful morning and after breakfast at the inn we departed for Mkhuze Game Reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal. En-route we stopped off at Ghost Mountain Inn, under the shadow of the Lebombo Mountains for a break and some butterflying, and then headed on to Mkhuze. Our superb tented accommodation was located at the far end of the camp, giving us plenty of privacy, such that it felt like we were the only people in the camp. We headed out in the late afternoon for a stroll, recording a few small butterflies, such as Common Buff, Common Bush Brown and Common Scarlet, as well as a small group of Nyala and then headed back to the tents for a wonderful barbeque meal under a sky bursting with stars.

Day 3

Monday 30th March

Mkhuze

On our full morning in the reserve we headed out early with a picnic breakfast. We did some game-viewing, recording Suni as a new mammal species, and then headed over to the Nsumo Pan Picnic Site, where we could disembark and look for some butterflies. We found a few bushes that had quite a few butterflies in attendance, and these included Smoky and Sulphur Orange Tips, Golden Piper, Vine-leaf Vagrant, Striped Policeman and a possible Green-eyed Monster (*Nepheronia* sp). The water levels of the pan were quite high, meaning that water birds were not present in abundance, but we did manage to record Pink-backed Pelican, Yellow-billed Stork, Pied Kingfisher, African Jacana, Black-winged Stilt, Blacksmith Lapwing and others at the pan, as well as a flock of spectacular Crested Guineafowl in the forested areas.

On the way back to camp after breakfast we stopped off at Kumasinga Hide and were treated to an extraordinary wildlife festival. Impala and Nyala came down to the water's edge to drink in successive waves, and birds such as Blue and Common Waxbills, Yellow-throated Petronia, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Dark-capped Bulbul, Kurrichane Thrush, Yellow-fronted Canary, Red-billed Quelea, Green-winged Pytilia, Jameson's Firefinch, Golden-breasted Bunting, Purple-crested Turaco and even an African Paradise Flycatcher came to the water's edge in groups, with the lead birds encouraging the rest to come out into the open to drink and bathe. We spent nearly two wonderful hours in the hide and then headed back to camp for a rest.

In the afternoon we took an hour-long walk on the trail around the edge of the camp before heading back for drinks, relaxation and another dinner under the magnificent African night sky.

Day 4

Tuesday 31st March

St Lucia

Once again we headed out early on a game viewing drive in the reserve and then headed back to camp for breakfast and departure. We had no time constraints though and so decided to have a last look to see what was happening at Kumasinga Hide as the day heated up. Again it was outstanding, this time with Burchell's Zebra and Blue Wildebeest joining the antelope species (Impala and Nyala), with large groups of animals coming in turns to drink. The birds were again very active and an intended 10 – 20 minutes turned into an hour and a half. At one point the watchers turned into the watched as a couple of curious young Vervet Monkeys sat in the doorway to the hide and watched us as we in turn watched the other animals. Soon it was time to go however, but on the way out of the reserve I decided to have a quick look at one of the other hides, and here we found a White Rhino bull wallowing, as well as Zebra, Nyala, Wildebeest and Impala. Again it was wonderful viewing and a nice way to finish off our game viewing in Mkhuze.

The journey to St Lucia took about an hour and a half and we stopped for lunch in the town before continuing on to our guest house. After some rest we headed out on a walk around the town, recording species such as Mocker, Green-banded and Citrus Swallowtails, and ended up at the beach where the clients dipped their toes into the vast Indian Ocean. Later in the evening we ate dinner at Alfredo's, where we had some of the best steak we could remember.

Day 5

Wednesday 1st April

St Lucia

On our full day in the St Lucia region we had a morning trip into the iSimangaliso Wetland Park to the north of the town. We drove slowly up to Cape Vidal, seeing birds such as Yellow-throated Longclaw, Southern Banded Snake-Eagle, Crowned Eagle and others on the way. We stopped off at Catalina Bay, where we saw birds such as Woolly-necked Stork, Grey Heron and Little Egret, as well as many large Nile Crocodiles and a pod of Hippopotami. Butterflies included Common Diadem, Spotted Buff, Friar, Boisduvals' Tree Nymph, Window and Natal *Acraea*, as well as Peal Emperor as a new *Charaxes* species. We also found a gravid female Flap-necked Chameleon trying to dig a hole for her eggs in the parking lot in front of the small shop, and after getting good, close-up photographs moved her into the bush to save her from being run over. New mammals seen include Red Duiker and Red Squirrel (though the squirrel was only seen properly the next day).

We then headed back to town and the iGwala-Gwala Forest Trail for some mid-day butterflying, then headed back to town to relax for the afternoon. Later on we headed down to the estuary mouth, where we spent some time in the Sugarloaf Campsite and at the mouth watching the Hippopotami and large Nile Crocodiles.

Day 6

Thursday 2nd April

Eshowe

At the reasonable hour of seven o'clock in the morning we met and headed down to the iGwala-Gwala Forest Trail for some more butterflying. As the day warmed up they began to become more active, and we recorded such species as White-barred Emperor, Common Bush Brown, Common Diadem, Common Joker, Spotted Sailor, Brown-veined White, Yellow and Blue Pansy, the three common Swallowtails – Citrus, Mocker and Green-banded – and others. It turned out to be quite a good morning, with views of birds such as Livingstone's Turaco, White-eared Barbet and Green Twinspot, as well as the hitherto elusive Red Squirrel. We then headed back to the guest house for breakfast and departure for Eshowe, a small town in the foothills inland of the coast.

After we arrived we had some time to settle in and then took a walk into the nearby Dlinza Forest. The highlight of the forest is the aerial boardwalk with a tower which allows one to look out onto the forest canopy, and between this and the small patch of grassland on the forest edge we managed to record quite a few new species. These included Green-veined Emperor, Gaudy Commodore, Gold Spotted Sylph and Clouded Flat. With butterflies the activity levels start to decrease in the late afternoon and by four thirty it was time to head back to the guest house, only a few hundred meters away, to have a drink and relax. Then it was off The Spur, a local restaurant, where we had good food (though the steaks were not quite what we had at Alfredo's in St Lucia!).

Day 7

Friday 3rd April

Eshowe

We awoke to rather dull weather conditions, but nevertheless went into the forest for some early morning birding, recording Chorister Robin-Chat and Lemon Dove, as well as several pairs of tiny Blue Duiker, South Africa's smallest antelope species at only 30 centimetres at the shoulder. After a half-hour we made our way up to the top of the tower, taking a coffee basket with us, to see what was happening up above in the light. Trumpeter Hornbills, with their massive bills and far-carrying nasal calls (reminiscent of a baby wailing) were flying to and fro above the forest, but the lack of warming sunlight meant that butterflies were a little scarce.

We then headed back to the guest house for a seven o'clock breakfast, after which we tackled the forest once again. Species recorded included Gaudy Commodore, Blotched Leopard, Yellow-banded *Acraea*, Pied Piper, Red Tab Policeman, Brown Pansy, Friar, Long-horned Swift and others.

With little break in the clouds we decided to go and have a look to see what we could find at a nearby fort and museum complex, which boasted an arboretum that sounded promising. However, when we arrived, the arboretum turned out to be nothing more than a few large trees with some picnic tables underneath. The weather had also deteriorated, with a light rain falling, so we had a cup of coffee instead and then drove to The George Hotel for a drink before going back to the hotel to relax and wait for the sun to come out.

In the afternoon we walked up to the grassland area adjacent to the forest and had some luck with three new species, namely Polka Dot, Natal Acrea and a stunning Paradise Skipper, certainly one of the contenders for 'Butterfly of the Trip'. Later in the evening we met for some drinks and a barbeque under a rapidly clearing sky, which boded well for some fine weather on our last day.

Day 8

Saturday 4th April

Departure

We awoke to a beautiful, clear morning and promptly made our way up to the top of the forest tower with our coffee basket, watching the sun rise from above the canopy. As it began to heat up the butterflies became more active, and we spotted Blond Glider and an Emperor species we couldn't identify, among others. We then headed back for breakfast, and afterwards took a walk through the forest, the highlight of which was a pair of splendid Forest Beauties sunning themselves in a patch of sunlight next to the path.

Soon it was time to get moving in the direction of Durban and the airport. En-route, with a few hours to spare, we stopped off at Amatikulu Nature Reserve along the coast and had a few superb butterflies to end off the trip, namely Forest Queen, Veined Swordtail, White-barred Emperor and Variable Diadem. Unfortunately we didn't have too much time to explore the reserve, but these few spectacular species made the stop most worthwhile, and soon we were on the main highway heading south to Durban and the end of the trip.

Summary:

All in all it was a fantastic trip, with highlights both numerous and varied. The habitats covered were diverse, from the 2000 meter plus grasslands around Wakkerstroom to sea level on the warm Indian Ocean Coast. Obviously the warm coastal areas of the last four days produced the most butterfly species, but other venues were certainly not without merit. Wakkerstroom, although only a one-night stop, produced some of the best birding of the trip (partly because of the openness of the habitat, which makes seeing the birds relatively easy), and Mkhuze produced some truly superb game and bird viewing from the hides. Many thanks to the clients for their wonderful company, and keen interest in the butterflies...Derek Brown was extremely helpful with the butterfly identification, using his laptop and digital camera. We took so many photographs of the butterflies we encountered that there simply wasn't enough time to identify them all, and many thanks to Derek for the final butterfly list.

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Species Lists

Butterflies

	Common name	March/April							
		28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
1	African Monarch	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Friar					✓	✓	✓	
3	Twilight Brown						✓		✓
4	Common Bush Brown		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Bush Beauty								✓
6	Common Wanderer					✓	✓	✓	
7	Wandering Donkey Acraea	✓							
8	Natal Acraea				✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Window Acraea				✓	✓			
10	Dusky-veined Acraea						✓	✓	
11	Small Orange Acraea				✓			✓	
12	Yellow-banded Acraea							✓	
13	Dusky Acraea		✓			✓			
14	White-barred Acraea		✓						
15	Polka Dot							✓	
16	Blotched Leopard							✓	✓
17	African Leopard			✓					
18	Pearl Emperor					✓			✓
19	Green-veined Emperor						✓		
20	Foxy Emperor			✓					
21	White-barred Emperor					✓	✓		
22	Club-tailed Emperor			✓					
23	Satyr Emperor							✓	
24	Forest Queen								✓
25	Blonde Glider								✓
26	False Wanderer				✓				
27	Spotted Sailor						✓		
28	Streaked Sailor					✓	✓		
29	Common Sailor					✓			✓
30	Natal Tree Nymph					✓			
31	Common Joker					✓	✓		
32	Spotted Joker			✓					
33	Pied Piper					✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Golden Piper			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Common Diadem	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
36	Variable Diadem					✓			✓
37	Gaudy Commodore						✓	✓	✓
38	Soldier Pansy					✓			
39	Brown Pansy			✓	✓			✓	✓
40	Yellow Pansy			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Blue Pansy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Painted lady	✓	✓		✓	✓			
43	Spotted Buff					✓			
44	Common Buff		✓	✓					
45	Common Figtree Blue								✓
46	Common Scarlet		✓	✓					

	Common name	March/April							
		28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
47	Brown Playboy	✓							
48	Bush Bronze							✓	
49	Geranium Bronze	✓							
50	Common Blue		✓	✓		✓		✓	
51	Sooty Blue			✓		✓			
52	Eastern Sorrel Copper	✓							
53	Kersten's Hairtail				✓				
54	Zebra White			✓	✓				
55	Buquet's Vagrant			✓					
56	Vine-leaf Vagrant			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
57	Autumn-leaf Vagrant			✓			✓		
58	Scarlet-Tip			✓	✓				
59	Small Orange-Tip			✓	✓				
60	Smoky Orange-Tip			✓	✓	✓	✓		
61	Common Orange-Tip			✓					
62	Bushveld Purple Tip			✓					
63	Veined Orange		✓						
64	Banded Gold-Tip			✓					
65	Forest White								✓
66	Brown veined White	✓	✓	✓			✓		
67	African Common White		✓	✓		✓	✓		
68	African Veined White		✓		✓		✓		
69	Diverse White							✓	
70	Twin-dotted Border			✓					
71	African Wood White			✓			✓		✓
72	Common Dotted Border				✓		✓		
73	African Migrant	✓						✓	
74	African Clouded Yellow	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
75	Broad-bordered Grass Yellow				✓	✓			
76	Common Grass Yellow				✓		✓	✓	✓
77	Mocker Swallowtail				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Citrus Swallowtail	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Green-banded Swallowtail				✓		✓	✓	✓
80	Veined Swordtail								✓
81	Striped Policeman			✓			✓	✓	✓
82	Red Tab Policeman							✓	
83	Clouded Flat					✓	✓	✓	
84	Paradise Skipper							✓	✓
85	Small Elfin		✓						
86	Gold-spotted Sylph							✓	✓
87	Marsh Sylph	✓							
88	Honey Hopper							✓	
89	White-banded Swift							✓	
90	Long-horned Swift								✓
91	Dark Hottentot Skipper					✓	✓		
92	Common Hottentot Skipper				✓		✓		

Kindly compiled by tour participant Dr Derek Brown with our thanks!