# The role of butterflies towards creating ecological balance and biodiversity conservation in southern part of Western Ghats (Palani Hills)

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Received May17, 2019 and Accepted July 30, 2019

**ABSTRACT :** In Southern Part of Western Ghats (Tamilnadu), four tropical habitats with different disturbance levels were monitored for diversity and seasonal patterns in the community of butterfly species. Species richness occurred highest in late monsoon and early in winter. Majority of the butterfly species also showed abundance peaks in these seasons. Pollution and Climatic factors played a vital role in determining species composition in the afflicted areas and affected flight periods of some species but did not affect species richness. Loss of Biodiversity had a major impact on species composition and it favored only those *Lycaenids* and *Nymphalids* whose caterpillars feed on herbs. In case of one of the sites where phenophases of the larval food plant and population trend of a small *Lycaenid* was documented, the population showed rapid increase at the time when the plants were in suitable phenophase for growth of the caterpillars. A possible evolutionary interaction between herb-feeding and non-herb-feeding *Lycaenids* is proposed.

Key Words : Butterfly communities, population dynamics, species richness, climatic factors, pollution.

Butterflies and moths (order Lepidoptera) has given very good opportunities for the studies on population and community ecology (Pollard 1991). Many species of butterflies are strictly seasonal, preferring only a particular set of habitats. In spite of this, butterflies has been generally neglected by community ecologists and there may be very few studies available on their community structures, population dynamics and the Eco climatic factors which affect the species. Being good indicators of climatic conditions as well as seasonal and ecological changes, the Butterflies can serve in formulating strategies for conservation. However, they have been largely ignored by the conservation biologists and policy-makers as well. It is hence encouraging that butterflies are included in biodiversity studies and biodiversity conservation prioritization programmes (Gadgil, 1996). The present study has started with a view to examine the dynamics of butterfly population across seasons and habitats. With quantitative data on butterfly populations gathered from a variety of habitats, the questions became more apparent (Arun, 2002). The present analysis is intended to reveal the seasonal patterns in butterfly populations, and interactions among the species, the plants on which they depend, and their Eco climate. Despite its limitations, this study did attempt, perhaps for the first time, short-term butterfly monitoring in Southern Part of Western Ghats (Palani Hills).

## **Materials and Methods**

The Palani Hills are a mountain range in the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu in South India. The Palani Hills are an eastward extension of the Western Ghats ranges, which run parallel to the west coast of India. The Palani Hills adjoin the high Anamalai range (Kerala) on the west, and extend east into the plains of Tamil Nadu, covering an area of 2,068 square kilometres (798 sq mi). The highest part of the range is in the southwest, and reaches 1,800-2,500 metres (5,906-8,202 feet) elevation; the eastern extension of the range is made up of hills 1,000-1,500 m (3,281-4,921 ft) high.

Monitoring butterfly populations is an important means of measuring change in the environment as well as the state of habitats for biodiversity. Butterfly monitoring make it possible to assess the trends of butterfly populations. The transects are a way of monitoring the number and variety of butterflies present at a study areas. Butterflies are counted along fixed routes, known as transects, which are divided into smaller sections, throughout the butterfly season under good weather condition that meet minimum criteria. Counts should ideally be made once every week. Present Diversity survey recorded from December 2018 to March 2019. All species transects are labor intensive and require a commitment to carry out weekly recording, throughout the main period in Palani hills area (Poombarai, Kavunji,

### Adukkam, Silver Falls)

**Sampling Techniques (Transect Walk Method) :** Transects methods took about 45-60 minutes to walk and are about 1-2 km in length. A route (transect walk) that provides a fair representation of the habitats and other features present in our study area. Some thoughts have been given to show how the site might change over time, and the route were designed to include areas that are likely to become more suitable for butterflies in future (e.g. through site management).

All butterflies seen along the transect line were counted and listed. Recording were taken place once a Week from December 1<sup>st</sup> week to the end of March. Week 1 runs from 2018, December 2-6, week 2 runs from 8-12 December, and so on, regardless of the day of week and used a separate weekly recording from each of these 16 regarding weeks. Transect counts were ideally made between 10:30 and 14:45 hours. Between 10:00 and 17:00 hours are usually allowable, though butterfly activity may drop off rapidly during the late afternoon so later times were avoided. Transect walks were carried out in warm (13°C or more) and at least bright weather. The minimum criteria are 13-17°C with at least 60% sunshine, or over 17°C and not raining.

Photographing Specimens : Like any nature photography, chasing butterflies with a camera is an absorbing pursuit. The best part of butterfly photography is that butterflies are most easily approachable unlike birds or other animals. With patients and the art of stalking it is easier to photograph butterflies. The best time for butterfly photographing is soon after sunrise when butterflies come out for basking behavior to regulate or increase their body temperature. Most butterflies spread their wings flat and align themselves for maximum exposure to sunlight. Butterflies are easily approachable at that time. The photographing was done throughout the month on every morning after sunrise. When the temperature is slightly cooler they are easily approachable Specimens were photographed with Canon: DSLR (EDS 1100D) camera. As the flight period is less during immediate sun rays, photographing butterflies is easier at those times. "As clear the photo so exact the identification".

**Data Collection :** Field survey was made regularly for a period of four months from December 2018 to March 2019. The total number of each species observed was entered in the data sheet kept in the laboratory. The raw data were fed to a computer for further analysis. For population studies, the total number of butterflies censused was recorded and then released. The data collected were statistically analyzed using the following diversity indices and population measures. The statistical calculation have been performed by using "PAST" Data Software, the 3.23 version. The software is used to identify the Species Richness, Species Diversity and Species Evenness.

Shannon diversity index (H'): It measures how rare or common the species are, in a community. Shannon's diversity index (1963). It takes into account the number of species and the evenness of species and is calculated as

 $H' = \Sigma i p i \ln (p i)$ 

Where;

pi is the proportion of the individuals in the total sample belonging to the species i and ln is the natural logarithm.

H = the Shannon diversity index

 $P_i$  = fraction of the entire population made-up of species i

S = numbers of species encountered

 $\Sigma =$ sum from species 1 to species S

Note: The power to which the base e (e = 2.718281828.....) must be raised to obtain a number is called the **natural logarithm** (ln) of the number.

**Species Evenness :** Pielou's evenness index (J'): It expresses how evenly the individuals are distributed among the different species. Pielou's evenness index (1966). It is calculated as

 $J' = H'/\ln S$ ,

Where

 $\ln S = H' \max$ 

H' max (the maximum value of Shannon diversity) is what H' would be if all the species in the community had an equal number of individuals; S is the number of species.

**Identification :** Identification of Photographed specimens was done by comparison with identification books such as "The Book of Indian Butterflies" and "Fauna of British India".

Indian Butterflies version 6.0 developed by NA-TURE WEB (android mobile app)I Butterflies Version 1.1 developed by Ladybird environmental consulting (android mobile app).

#### **Results and Discussion**

**Species composition and abundance of butterflies:** The present study demonstrated that 55 different species of butterflies (Fig. 1-5) belonging to 6 families are present in the Palani Hills. A total number of 824 butterflies were recorded during the study period



Fig.-1: Photographs of butterflies in the Palani Hills (Family: Nymphalidae)

[A) Angled Castor (Ariadne ariadne), B) Dark-Branded Bush Brown (Mycalesis mineus), C) Lemon Pansy (Junonia lemonias), D) Tawny Coster (Acraea terpsicore), E) Peacock Pansy (Junonia almana), F) Yellow Pansy (Junonia hierta), G) Dark Evening Brown (Melanitis leda), H) Danaid Eggfly (Hypolimnas misippus), I) Shortbanded Sailer (Phaedyma columella), J) Mottled Argus (Loxerebia narasingha), K) Blue Pansy (Junonia orithya), L) Great Eggfly (Hypolimnas bolina), M) Common Leopard (Phalanta phalantha) and N) Chocolate Pansy (Junonia iphita)]



Fig.-2: Photographs of butterflies in the Palani Hills (Family: Nymphalidae)

[A) Rustic (*Cupha erymanthis*), B) Common Indian Crow (*Euploea core*), C) Common Four-Ring (*Ypthima huebneri*), D) Striped Tiger (*Danaus genutia*), E) Common Sailor (*Neptis hylas*), F) Dark Blue Tiger (*Tirumala septentrionis*), G) Joker (*Byblia ilithyia*) and H) Blue Tiger (*Tirumala limniace*)]



Fig.-3: Photographs of butterflies in the Palani Hills (Family: Lycaenidae)

[A) Common Cerulean (*Jamidas boeticus*), B) Gram Blue (*Euchrysop cnejns*), C) Pea Blue (*Lampides boeticus*), D) Pale Grass Blue (*Pseudozizeeria maha*), E) Silver Forget-Me-Not (*Catochrysops panormus*), F) Plum Beous Silver Line (*Spindasis schistacea*), G) Siva Sunbeam (*Curetis siva evans*), H) Zebra Blue (*Leptotes plinius*), I) Dark Grass Blue (*Zizeeria karsandra*), J) Common Pierrot (*Castalius rosimon*), K) Slate Flash (*Rapala manea*) and L) True Forget-Me-Not (*Catochrysops Strabo Strabo*)]



Fig.-4: Photographs of butterflies in the Palani Hills (Family: Pieridae)

[A) Crimson Tip (*Colotis danae*), B) Mottled Emigrant (*Catopsilia pyranthe*), C) Yellow Orange Tip (*Ixias pyrene*), D) Common Albatross (*Appias albina*), E) Striped Albatross (*Appias libythea*), F) Large Salmon Arab (*Colotis fausta fausta*), G) Common Grass Yellow (*Eurema hecabe*), H) Pioneer (*Belenois aurota*), I) Common Gull (*Cepora nerissa*) and J) One-Spot Grass Yellow (*Eurema andersoni*)].



**Fig.-5:** Photographs of butterflies in the Palani Hills (Family: Hesperidae (A-E), Family: Papilionidae (F-I), Family: Riodinidae (J))

[A) Common Small Flat (*Sarangasa dasahara*), B) Black Angle (*Tapena thwaitesi*), C) Indian Grizzled Skipper (*Spialia galba*), D) Golden Angle (*Caprona ransonnettii*), E) Common Snow Flat (*Tagiades japetas*), F) Crimson Rose (*Pachliopta hector*), G) Common Rose (*Pachliopta aristolochiae*), H) Common Lime Butterfly (*Papilio demoleus*), I) Common Mormon (*Papilio polytes*), J) Straight Plum Judy (*Abisara echerius*)]

Scientific name	December	January	February	March	Total
		Family: Nyi	nphalidae		
Ariadne ariadne	5	3	4	7	19
My calesis mineus	1	-	3	5	9
Junonia lemonias	5	8	7	4	24
Acraea terpsicore	7	2	6	5	20
Dananus cherysippus	10	15	10	18	53
Junonia almanac	7	9	12	5	30
Junonia hierta	6	3	8	5	30
Melanitis leda	0	4	3	2	9
Hypolimnas misippus	5	4	8	7	24
Phaedyma columella	4	3	-	6	13
Loxerebia narasingha	-	1	4	2	7
Junonia orithya	6	5	7	5	23
Hypolimnas bolina	3	1	5	2	11
Phalanta phalantha	2	4	1	3	10
Junonia iphita	3	5	6	1	15
Cupha erymanthis	2	2	1	3	8
Euploea core	10	13	9	10	42
Ypthima huebneri	3	2	5	2	12
Danaus genutia	10	12	8	6	36
Neptis hylas	-	2	4	1	7
Tirumala septentrionis	8	6	5	4	23
Bybilia ilithyia	0	3	2	3	8
Tirumala limniace	10	14	9	12	45
		Family: Lyc	aenidae		
Jamidas celeno	2	5	7	8	22
Euchrysop cnejns	5	3	-	4	12
Lampides boeticus	4	-	6	2	12
Pseudozizeria maha	3	1	4	2	10
Catochrysops panormus	4	4	2	3	13
Spindasis schistacea	-	1	1	-	2
Curetis siva evans	2	1	1	1	5
Leptotes plinius	3	2	1	1	7
Zizeeria karsandra	1	3	1	1	6
Castalius rosimon	-	3	1	2	6
Rapala manea	1	1	2	1	5
Catochrysops strabostrabo	3	1	2	1	7
Family: Pieridae					
Colitis danae	2	3	1	1	7
Catopsilia pyranthe	5	4	6	8	23

# Table-1: List of butterflies recorded in Palani hills (Western Ghats) during the study.

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Ixias pyrene	1	2	2	3	8	
Appias albino	4	3	1	4	12	
Appias libythea	3	3	1	2	9	
Colitis fausta fausta	7	8	5	4	10	
Eurema hecabe	6	5	6	4	21	
Eurema hecabe	2	3	4	1	24	
Belenois aurota	3	1	2	1	10	
Cepora nerissa	6	5	6	4	7	
		Family:	Hesperidae			
Sarangasa dasahara	-	1	1	-	2	
Tapena thwaitesi	1	1	1	1	4	
Spialia galba	2	2	-	1	5	
Caprona ransonnetti	3	4	3	2	12	
Tagiades japetas	4	2	1	3	10	
		Family:	Papilionidae			
Pachiopta hector	3	6	7	6	22	
Pachioptaaristolochiae	8	5	4	5	22	
Papilio demoleus	3	2	4	2	11	
Papilio polytes	6	5	3	4	18	
		Family:	Riodinidae			
Abisara echerius	-	1	1	-	2	
Total No. of individuals	824					

**Table-2:** Monthly distribution of butterfly families in the Palani hills.

Family Name	December	January	February	March	Total	
Nymphalidae	107	121	127	123	478	
Papilionidae	20	18	18	17	73	
Lycaenidae	28	25	28	26	107	
Pieridae	38	34	29	30	131	
Riodinidae	0	1	1	0	2	
Hesperidae	10	10	6	7	33	
Total	203	209	209	203	824	

Table-3: Diversity indices of butterflies in the Palani hills.

Diversity Index	December	January	February	March	
Species Richness	47	53	52	52	
Individuals	203	209	209	203	
Dominance_D	0.02866	0.0323	0.02887	0.03322	
Simpson_1-D	0.9713	0.9677	0.9711	0.9668	
Shannon_H	3.682	3.682	3.701	3.658	
Evenness_e^H/S	0.8449	0.7498	0.7786	0.746	



Fig.-6: Percentage distribution of different families of butterflies in the Palani Hills.

(Table-1), in which the family Nymphalidae dominanted with 22 species, followed by Lycaenidae (12), Pieridae (10), Hesperidia (5), Papilionoidae (4) and Riodinidae (1). From the results, it is also evident that Danaus cherysippus was the most dominant species (11%) and Loxerebia narasingha was the lowest species (1%) among the Nymphalidae family and they constituted of 53 and 7 butterflies respectively. Similarly, Eurema hecabe was the highly dominant species of Pieridae family which constituted of 18% of total individuals (n=24) and Colotis danae was the most lowest species (5%) that comprised of 7 butterflies. Jamidas celeno was the dominant species of Lycaenidae family, which constituted of 21% of total individuals (n=22) and Spindasis schistacea (n=2) was the lowest species constituted of 2%. Among the collected butterflies of Papilionidae family, Pachlipta aristolochiae was the dominant species (22), which constituted of 30% of total individuals and the Papilio demoleus was the lowest recorded species (n=11) consist of 15% of total individuals of the family. It is clear that the species Caprona ransonnettii was the dominant one (37%) and the species Sarangasa dasahara was the lowest one (6%) in and that constituted of 12 and 2 butterflies respectively. Only a single species (Abisara echerius) was observed in the family Riodinidae.

Table-2 shows the monthly distribution of different butterfly families in the study area, which revealed the presence of total 203 butterflies belonging to 47 species in December 2018; where as 209 butterflies were recorded in January 2019 that comprised of 53 species. Similar butterfly population was observed in February 2019 and they were belonging to 52 species. However in the month of March 2019, 203 butterflies belonging to 52 species were recorded.

Fig.-6 depicted the percentage distribution of different families of butterflies collected from study area and it revealed that the butterflies belonging to the family *Nymphalidae* dominanted (58%) and it constituted of 478 butterflies. This was followed by the families Pieridae (16%), Lycaenidae (13%), *Papilionidae* (9%) and Hesperidae (4%), which were constitutes of 131, 107, 73 and 33 butterflies respectively.

Species diversity, richness and evenness of butterflies : Table-3 shows the species richness, diversity and evenness calculated during the study period. Across the study period, Shannon-wiener diversity Index (H') was recorded for the butterfly communities. Moreover, maximum species diversity was recorded in February month (3.701) and the minimum in March (3.658). Similarly the maximum species richness was observed in January (53), followed by February (52) and March (52), whereas the minimum species diversity was observed in December (47). Pielou's Evenness index (J') revealed that the species were evenly distributed. Moreover, maximum species diversity was recorded in December (0.8449), followed by February (0.7786), January (0.7498) and the minimum was in March (0.746). Simpson 1-D index also revealed that the species were evenly distributed and maximum species diversity was recorded in March (0.9668) and January (0.9677), followed by February (0.9711) and the minimum range was observed in December (0.9713).

Butterflies perform an important role and often play crucial functions in the environment. They act as pollinators for many species of plants, and they help, to some extent, in the propagation of wild vegetation communities. The importance and abundance of butterflies in any system mean that they are particularly studied for their use as indicators of biodiversity, ecosystem health and landscape degradation (Ambrose, 2005). The butterfly distribution is expected to cover with the distribution of the host plants even at small scales and types of vegetation may reflect difference in the composition of butterfly communities among habitats at the generic and family level (Beccaloni, 1997).

The butterflies of Palani hills are found to be habitat-specific to some extent. In habitats like this, the potential role of plant varieties has been given more importance for rich diversity and population density of butterflies. This study reveals the relationship between habitats and butterfly species richness and Shannon diversity index, Shannon evenness. The present study on butterflies emphasizes the role of variety of habitats, associated with various environmental factors such as temperature, humidity, and rainfall and wind velocity on species richness of butterflies.

In the present study, it is observed that the butterfly species diversity is higher in both the habitats than the other habitats studied during the months of favorable environmental factors as well as during unfavorable seasons. The different varieties of plants in the Palani hills habitats provide a wide range of nutrient-rich nectar, pollen, and palatable food plants to foliage-feeding butterflies. Fruiting trees, flowering plants and other leaves of the Palani hills serve to attract many butterflies. Moreover, their availability throughout the year was another advantage to the butterflies. The results indicated that the characteristic features of habitats along with climate influence the distribution and the diversity of butterflies and other insects in the Palani hills.

The Palani hills climatic conditions that were observed in the study area were one of the major and suitable factors. Moreover, in this system, the presence of some species of butterflies throughout the study period suggested that they are either susceptible to the minor environmental changes, or the environment is effectively non-seasonal, although, rainfall was considered as an important factor for encouraging plant growth and flowering richness. Saxena (1996) supported this by explaining the relationship of water and moist air for butterfly diversity and stressed the importance of a water body to increase immediate survival value. In addition to the pond, a number of permanent trees, herbs and shrubs found in this habitat also provided the roosting places for many adult butterflies. Jamidas celeno, Pachlipta hector, Pachliopta aristolochiae, Eurema anderson, Catopsilia pyranthe, Eurema hecabe, Danaus chrysippus, Junonia almana, Hypolimnas msippus, Euploea core, Dnaus genutia, Tirumala limniace and few others were observed as predominant

species of this ecosystem. Although they exhibited seasonal or periodical peaks, they occurred almost in all the four months.

Seasonal distribution of many butterfly species was found related to temperature fluctuations. Temperature is probably the single most important environmental factor influencing insect behavior, distribution, population size, development, survival and reproduction (Petzoldt and Seaman, 1992; Ward, 1992). Muralirangan et al. (1993) observed that high humidity stimulates fungal attack, and high temperature causes a decrease in insect population. However, butterflies are highly sensible to predict cyclic seasonal changes and the quality of air. The ability to recognize the slightest difference in humidity enables them to move to favorable areas (Saxena, 1996). In the present study, almost all observed members of butterflies belonging to different families were very limited during high temperature and humidity months such as April, May and June (Thanasingh, 2003), while it was available in plenty during the favorable season between October to January during which season the plant foliage and nectar are available in plenty (Didham and Springate, 2003).

In the Palani hills all the butterflies belonging to the six families studied were at the maximum numbers during the post January month. Fluctuations in their number in most of the families largely coincided with the February and December months only. Low population density was exhibited by most of the families during March month during which the environmental conditions prevailed was not favorable for them. Several studies have shown that Palani hills provide additional opportunities for different species to live together. Since a steady and continuous supply of food being the most important characteristic of two habitats, insects enjoy this habitat. The abiotic environment includes the principal factors such as extremes of temperature, relative humidity, and rainfall and wind velocity. They may exert their effects on butterflies either directly or indirectly. In a managed ecosystem, such as in Palani hills, the pesticide applications may also have some indirect effects on distribution of lepidopteran species though normally it causes only temporary changes in the relative abundance of them. Widespread use of organic pesticides has been considered as a major factor responsible for loss of butterfly population, but it has rarely resulted in the extinction of the species.

The present study reveals that the study area provides favorable ecological conditions and habitat for butterflies. The highest number of species was recorded in January 2019. Maximum butterflies were recorded during the show season. It might be due to the presence of sufficient host plants and favorable climatic conditions for the development and growth of butterflies. The least number of butterflies were collected during the month December 2018, when the adequacy of host plants and unfavorable climatic conditions were observed. Although, study area supports a good number of butterfly species but much has still to be explored. In addition, it is necessary to identify the rare butterfly species and conserve them by establishing a Butterfly conservatory to conserve and protect the species and creating awareness to the local tribe group and the visitors towards conserving the Biodiversity of Western Ghats of Palani Hills.

### Acknowledgment

Authors were thankful to Dr. A.K. Khaja Nazeemudeen Sahib, Secretary and Correspondent, Dr. S. Ismail Mohideen, Principal and Dr. I. Joseph Antony Jerald, Head, P.G. and Research Department of Zoology, Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli for Institutional support. We profoundly thank Principal Chief Conservator of Forests & Chief Wildlife Warden, Chennai for permitting to carry out the research work. We are also thankful to Distrcit Forest Officer & Wildlife Warden, Kodaikanal Wildlife Sanctuary and District Forest Officer, Dindigul Forest Division for their timely helps.

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