

Butterflies of Nauradehi

Nauradehi encompasses diverse habitats but it is mainly famous for its sprawling grasslands. The first Butterfly Survey was held at Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary on 19 and 20 November 2021. At the time of the survey, the view of the grasslands was in different hues of gold and copper, having transited from the lush green of the monsoons. Some low lying grass lands like Barpani were still green and moist, attracting myriad butterflies. The two main perennial rivers Bamner and Viarma, meandering through the 1200 square kilometres of the Sanctuary, along with their network of tributaries were still alive with gurgling water. Smaller streams having isolated pools provided ample moisture and cool habitats for butterflies. The dug up water reservoirs and small stop dams added to the water repository and their seepage keeping the bed of the jungle streams and surroundings moist in which butterflies in large numbers were seen mud-puddling.



Mud puddling Lime butterflies at Nauradehi

Unlike birding, for watching butterflies during winters, one can take the liberty to extend early morning sleep. At dawn they are found on bushes in an inert state waiting for the sunshine to warm their bodies for flight and sometimes are found all covered with dew whenever the night temperature dips. They stay motionless and one can get close to get good pictures. As the day warms up, the Pansies are seen on the tracts fiercely guarding their territories. A bizarre mixture of species can be witnessed on a damp patch left by mammals. The bigger Swallowtails, Pierids and Nymphalids first struggle with their flights in the cold winter air but subsequently after having soaked the energy from the sun fly so fast that it becomes impossible to catch up with them.

The trek along the forest streams and around the water bodies was particularly rewarding in butterfly spotting. The pockets of sunlight filtering through the tall Koha (*Terminalia arjuna*) trees light up the banks and the undergrowth in which the butterflies love to soak in the warmth of the morning sun. After having absorbed the warmth, they too get energised and fly off far and wide to explore the vast areas of Nauradehi in search of nectar, mates and host plants to lay the eggs. In their ephemeral lives one might think that they are in a hurry to finish their tasks, but in fact if we observe closely, they seem to be at leisure and enjoy every moment of their existence.

Inside the reeds and the tall grass around the water bodies are hidden the Rings butterflies, so cryptic and concealed that could be seen only when flushed out while walking along the periphery. Their ring markings on their wings are obliterated in the dry season and this proves difficult to establish their identity. Around most of the water bodies of Nauradehi, Marsh Barbel or Bhankari (*Hygrophilla auriculata*) with their purple flowers grows gregariously and this being their Larval Host Plant (LHP), attract Grey and the Peacock Pansies. A little away, over the dry grass can be seen many small Pierrots, Zebra, Pea and Grass Blues of Lycaenidae or the Blues family, flitting lazily from one perch to another.



Marsh Barbel, Bhankari (*Hygrophilla auriculata*)



Yellow Hedge Barleria, Jinti, (*Barleria prionitis*)

The bigger brush-footed Nymphalids fly solitarily in haste over vast meadows of Nauradehi, as if in a hurry to catch up on something. All wait for them to alight, in anticipation to take a picture proves futile. The milkweed types among them, the Tigers and the Crows huddle around the Khunkhunja or the Common Rattle Pod (*Crotolaria retusa*) shrub with bright yellow flowers, feeding on the alkaloids, which are essential for their reproduction. On way to the Nauradehi camp from Mohli, on the slope before the broad forest stream, the Satdhara, was found lined with a vigorous growth and flowering of Jinti or Yellow Hedge Barleria (*Barleria prionitis*) an important LHP of Pansy group of butterflies.

More than seventy wild tree species found in Nauradehi WLS are the LHP's of the butterflies, dominant among them are Saaj (*Terminalia elliptica*), Bhirra (*Chloroxylon swietenia*), Palash (*Butea monosperma*), Babool (*Acacia nilotica*), Goolar (*Ficus racemosa*), Tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) etc. Many herbs, shrubs, climbers and grasses are also LHP's. A parasitic plant which grows on big *Terminalia* sp. trees, Loranthus (*Dendrophoe falcata*) is the LHP of Common Jezebel, Gaudy Baron and Peacock Royal butterflies found in Central India.

Evening twilight approaches early during winters and as the sun goes down over the horizon, the grass lands of Nauradehi are bathed in a golden hue once again. This is also the time for the shy Evening Browns and Bushbrowns emerge from the bushes where they had been hiding during the day, an indicator to wrap a rewarding day full of watching beautiful butterflies and head back to the warmth of the forest camp.



One of the many forest streams, a typical butterfly survey site at Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary.



The forests and golden grasslands of Nauradehi in winters.