



0. Facts about Butterflies - Story Preface

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This image depicts a butterfly which is sometimes known as an Old World Swallowtail (or a Common Swallowtail). Its scientific name is *Papilio machaon*. It lives in various places throughout the world, including Europe and America. Photo by Fesoj; online via Wikimedia Commons. [License: SS By-2.0](#).

Let's explore some interesting facts and questions about butterflies. For starters ... **what is the largest butterfly in the world?**

The largest butterfly in the world is the Queen Alexandra's Birdwing (*Ornithoptera alexandrae*) found in the rain forests of New Guinea. It can have a wingspan of up to 1 foot (30 cm).

What is the smallest butterfly in the world?

The smallest butterfly in the world is the Western Pygmy-Blue (*Brephidium exilis*). The tiny Western Pygmy Blue measures only 3/8 - 3/4 inch (10- 19 mm). It can be found in East Oregon, the Southwestern United States, east to Nebraska and parts of Mexico and South America.

What do butterflies see?

Most butterflies can see ultraviolet colors that are invisible to human eyes. Many flowers, host plants and butterfly wings have this ultraviolet color so butterflies can easily distinguish them.

What is a group of butterflies called?

A group of butterflies is called a "Flutter."

Can butterflies hear or smell?

Butterflies cannot hear, but they can feel vibration—and—they have an excellent sense of smell. Butterflies can smell or "taste" with the tiny receptors they have on their feet, antennae and, in some cases, even on their abdomens.

How do butterflies eat?

Butterflies have a built-in mouth part called a proboscis. It's a soda-straw-like tube, allowing butterflies to slurp nectar from deep inside a flower. When it's not in use, butterflies coil this "tube," or proboscis, up close to their head.

Where do butterflies spend the night?

At night, or during inclement weather, most butterflies perch on the underside of a leaf, crawl deep between blades of grass or into a crevice in rocks—or—they might find some other shelter so they can sleep.

Can butterflies fly in cold weather?

Butterflies are cold-blooded, which means that their body temperatures are not regulated on their own. A butterfly's body temperature is, instead, affected by the temperature of its surroundings.

If it is too cold, butterflies must warm-up their bodies in order fly. If it is too warm, they must cool-down their bodies in order to fly.

The optimum body temperature, for a butterfly to fly, is between 82 °-102° F. Butterflies can fly in air temperatures as cool as 55° F, but they must regulate their body temperature and keep it warm by practicing behavioral tactics such as shivering their wings or basking in the sun.

If the ambient temperature is over 108° F, a butterfly's body temperature may become too warm to fly. It may have to cool-down its body temperature.

How do butterflies fly?

Butterflies have strong muscles in their thorax, which force their wings up and down on a fulcrum-basis. They actually go in a slanted figure-8 motion, which propels them forward through the air (applying the same principle as an airplane uses).

How do butterflies communicate?

Butterflies can communicate with each other (either the same or different species) by color, chemicals, sound and physical actions:

- Color patterns in their wings are used to signal their sex or species to each other.
- Chemical pheromones are used by both sexes, of some butterflies, to attract the opposite sex or to signal species-identity in courtship.
- A few butterflies make clicking sounds to protect their space.
- Some chrysalides make clicking sounds to attract ants that, in turn, protect them.
- Physical actions—such as aggressive flight or postures—are used in courtship or to protect resources such as an important flower.
- Caterpillars, of some species, produce sugary substances for ants which, in turn, protect the caterpillars.

How long have butterflies been around?

Some butterflies have inhabited our planet for at least 130 million years. They showed-up about the same time flowering plants did. We know this because of fossil records that butterflies have left behind.

Some butterflies have changed very little, since the dawn of time, while others have changed greatly—and—some have become extinct.

Why are butterflies important?

Butterflies are very important in our world, and this fact often gets overlooked. There are about 12,000 different species of butterflies in the world. Butterflies play a part in pollinating the Earth's plant population, and they are also an important part of the food chain.

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