

IN PRAISE OF BUTTERFLIES

The butterfly park in Pune is alive with butterflies, small and big and some amazing plants

By Sujatha Padmanabhan

A small one-acre "Butterfly Park" started by the Pune Municipal Corporation stands sandwiched between a smelly nala and some residential houses. It is located on a typical city road, plagued by chaotic traffic and potholes. The surroundings belie its existence. The area has many small commercial establishments and appears unplanned and haphazard. You could almost miss it with its unpretentious sign-board partly hidden by foliage.

Another world

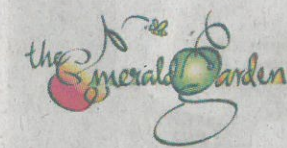
A friend and I decide to visit the park one morning and, armed with a butterfly guide, we leave office a little past ten in the morning. I don't know what to expect, never having been to a "butterfly" park. But I am excited as "butterfly-



Tawny Coster. PHOTOS: AUTHOR.

watching" has been my recent interest. We take a few steps in and are immediately in another world. A cemented path arches around the garden, enclosing on one side a tiny well-laid-out lawn and adjacent to it a patch that had grown pretty wild. On the other side are tall shrubs as well as an entrance to a small covered enclosure.

Within minutes of us stepping in, a large butterfly flits by...red, black and white. We recognise it instantly as a female Common Mormon, which belongs to the family of swallowtails, large butterflies



with most of them having tails. We watch it at close quarters as it feasts on the nectar stored deep down a mauve-coloured tubular flower.

I am suddenly aware of a lot of activity. The place is alive with butterflies, some small and others big, some basking in the sun with their wings

open and others moving about restlessly. I know instantly that I am up for a lovely morning.

On their trail

We settle down to a couple of hours of following these lovely winged insects, photographing them and identifying them. We follow the beautiful Tawny Coster and wait for it to settle down on a plant before we can recognise it by the white spots it has on the black border on its hind wings. A Chocolate Pansy poses for us on the path, displaying proudly its various shades of brown. And further

ahead is the tiny Red Pierrot whose colours on the under wing are spectacular.

As I watch a Plain Tiger, I get distracted by the flower that it is sipping nectar from, a lovely orange-yellow and bright red flower. This is a shrub, locally called "Halad Kunku" after the colours of its flowers. Also named Scarlet Milkweed, it is not indigenous to India and is originally from South America.

Variety of plants

By the end of our walk we have seen 12 different kinds of butterflies. We spend some time with the gardener of the park who shares some interesting tidbits about the place. The park has so far attracted about 50 different species of butterflies, including the Blue Mormon which visits for a few days every year. There are a number of different plants that have been carefully chosen for the park, some to serve as host plants for the butterflies to lay their eggs in and for caterpillars to feed on, and some whose flowers would be receptacles of nectar to feed the butterflies. Butterflies are particular about where they lay their eggs since the caterpillars that would emerge are fussy about what they eat, usually only the leaves of a certain species of plant!

We walk around a second time to be introduced to the

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plants that the butterflies are dependent on. Some are instantly recognisable: the lime tree, the curry leaf tree (kadipatha), Ixora, lantana, ashoka and the castor. Some others are new to us like the milkweed and a kind of jatropa. On the way, the gardener turns over the leaves of a climber, the Gaping Dutchman's Pipe locally called Badak Vel. He shows us the caterpillars and pupa of the Common Rose Butterfly and



A Caterpillar inside a Kalanchoe leaf.



The Butterfly Park in Pune.

tells us that this climber is the favourite of the Crimson Rose and the Common Mormon as well. Further on he stops at a Kalanchoe plant, a type of flowering succulent and a favourite of the Red Pierrot. We see its caterpillar, ensconced within the leaf, eating away at the leaf's tissue from inside!

We end at an enclosure which houses some pupae in large glass jars. These are used specifically for educational purposes he tells us. Many school-children and adults who live in

cities have not seen a pupa, he mentions.

We leave with thoughts buzzing through our heads...what if every garden (including those in schools) in our cities devotes some space to "butterfly plants"; what if our water-guzzling lawns are replaced by "butterfly gardens".....would our tiny winged friends get a better deal in our urban spaces?

(THE WRITER IS A MEMBER OF KALPAVRIKSH WHICH IS COORDINATING THE SERIES.)