

Ten Common Butterflies of Brazos County

Family Hesperidae: Skippers

Skippers are small to medium-sized butterflies with hooked clubs on their antennae. Most are colored in browns, black, grays, or oranges. There are many species of skipper, some of which are maddeningly confusing to identify. Three subfamilies of skippers occur in the Brazos Valley: spread-wing skippers, grass skippers, and giant skippers.

1. Common/White Checkered-Skipper (*Pyrgus communis*/*Pyrgus albescens*)

Although the two species cannot be definitively identified without examining the private parts of the males, the species pair is quite recognizable. A small butterfly, it flies low to the ground and generally perches with wings spread. The upperside of the male is blue-gray; the female is black. A row of white spots forms a median band on the wings. The body is greenish. The similar Tropical Checkered-Skipper (*P. oileus*) also occurs in our area, but can be distinguished by the black (not checkered) borders of the forewings.

Family Papilionidae: Swallowtails

Swallowtails are medium to large butterflies. Families of butterflies are based on the veins in the wings and details of anatomy that are not useful in the field. Not all swallowtails have “swallow tails.”

2. Pipevine Swallowtail (*Battus philenor*)

The Pipevine Swallowtail is a medium to large swallowtail with a relatively short, broad tail. The upperside is dark blue-black on the forewings and iridescent blue on the hindwings, with a row of small white dots on the hindwing, or blackish, with a row of white spots on both wings. The underside is blackish with a row of large orange spots near the margin of the hindwing. Pipevine caterpillars feed on pipevines (genus *Aristolochia*), from which they accumulate toxins, making the adults poisonous.

Three other swallowtails are common in the Brazos Valley. The Eastern Tiger Swallowtail (*Papilio glaucus*) is large and primarily yellow with black “tiger” stripes. The Giant Swallowtail (*P. cresphontes*) is mostly brown with a band of yellow spots from wingtip to wingtip and another band of yellow spots along the margins of the wings. The Black Swallowtail (*P. polyxenes*) is black with a broad diagonal yellow stripe on the upperwing. The Red-spotted Purple (*Limenitis arthemis astyanax*, family Nymphalidae) is very similar to the Pipevine Swallowtail, but lacks tails and has orange spots near the base of the wings that the swallowtail lacks.

Family Pieridae: Whites, Orangetips, Yellows, and Sulphurs

The pierids are small to medium butterflies, generally with white, yellow, or orange wings. They generally perch with the wings held together above the body. Some species have distinct seasonal forms that vary in appearance.

3. Little Yellow (*Pyrisita lisa*)

Little Yellow is small, about the size of a penny to a nickel, when sitting with the wings folded. The upperside is yellow with a broad black tip (male) or margin (female) to the forewing. Uncommonly, females are whitish above, instead of yellow. The underside is yellow with variable brown spotting, often with a larger red-brown spot near the apex of the hindwing.

There are a number of common species of sulphurs and yellows in the Brazos Valley. The Dainty Sulphur (*Nathalis iole*) is even smaller than the Little Yellow (generally no larger than a dime) and has the underwings clouded in grays, rather than spotted in brown.

Family Lycaenidae: Coppers, Hairstreaks, and Blues

The “gossamer-winged butterflies” are a large group of small butterflies. They include the Harvester (*Feniseca tarquinius*), our only carnivorous butterfly! Instead of feeding on plants, the larvae of the Harvester prey on aphids! The family also includes the smallest butterfly in the United States, the Western Pygmy-Blue (*Brephidium exilis*). There are four subfamilies of Lycaenidae in Texas: the Harvester, the coppers, the hairstreaks, and the blues. The coppers are a temperate group that do not reach the Brazos Valley.

4. Gray Hairstreak (*Strymon melinus*)

The Gray Hairstreak is a medium-sized hairstreak. The upperside is dull grayish-brown with a large orange spot at the base of the tail. The underside is lighter gray with one or two black-centered orange spots at the base of the tail. There are broken submarginal lines of fine black dashes outlined in white on both underwings. Hairstreaks generally perch with their wings held together over their back and wiggle their “tails” to trick predators into attacking the less vulnerable part of the wings. There are many other species of hairstreaks and blues in the Brazos Valley.

Family Riodinidae: Metalmarks

In the United States, the metalmarks are small to medium-sized butterflies and are generally orange or brown, often with a metallic submarginal line (the “metal mark”) on the upperwings. The family is extremely diverse and varied in the tropics, making generalizations impossible. A few colorful tropical species reach extreme southern Texas. The only metalmark in our area is the uncommon Little Metalmark (*Calephelis virginiensis*). The family is included here for completeness of the families in Texas and the United States.

Family Nymphalidae: Brush-footed Butterflies

Species in this enormous family range from small to large. The family gets its name from the tiny front legs that are not used in walking. Several subfamilies occur regularly in the Brazos Valley: snouts, milkweed butterflies, longwings, admirals, emperors, “true” brushfoots, leafwings, and satyrs. A couple additional subfamilies stray rarely to south Texas and even more rarely to our area. There are many more species in the Brazos Valley than can be covered in a simple guide such as this.

5. Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*)

The Monarch, a member of the milkweed butterfly subfamily, is familiar to everyone. The upperwings are orange with a broad black tip to the forewing, black veins, and white spots in the black apex and margins. The underwing is similarly patterned, but lighter. The caterpillars feed on species of milkweed, from which they accumulate toxins, making the adults poisonous to predators. The similar Viceroy (*Limenitis archippus*, a member of the admiral subfamily), is best identified by a second black submarginal line on both the upper and lower sides of the hindwing. The related Queen (*D. gilippus*) is darker brown on both the upper and lower surfaces of the wing and lacks black veins on the upperwing.

6. Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*)

A member of the longwing subfamily, the Gulf Fritillary is a moderately large butterfly. The forewings are rather long and pointed. The upperside is orange with scattered black spots. The underwings are brownish with large silvery spots. Larvae feed on passionvines, and adults are easily attracted to nectar plants in butterfly gardens.

7. Common Buckeye (*Junonia coenia*)

The Common Buckeye is a medium-sized “true” brushfoot. The brown upperwings with large “eye spots” and the creamy white band across the apex of the forewing are distinctive. Look also for two orange bars near the forward margin of the upper forewing. Buckeyes aggressively maintain territories in open ground and will attempt to chase off other species, including humans.

8. Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*)

The Red Admiral is a medium-sized “true” brushfoot with dark brown to black upperwings. The forewings are crossed by a diagonal red or orange slash, and the hindwings are outlined in a similar color. The angle of the forewing has white spots. The underwings are intricately patterned in grays and browns so that the butterfly can disappear when landing on the bark of a tree.

9. Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*)

The Painted Lady is a medium-sized “true” brushfoot. The upper side is orange with a broad black apex on the forewing. Several white spots and two white bars occur in the forewing, and additional dark markings occur in the orange patches of both wings. The hindwing bears a marginal row of dark spots above. Below, the hindwing is a network of white lines on a brown and gray background. There are four small eyespots on the margin, with the first and last slightly larger than the ones in between. The very similar American Lady (*V. virginiensis*) is very similar, but has a small white dot below the dark patch on the forewing, blue centers to the dots on the upper surface of the hindwing, and only two larger spots on a darker background on the underside of the hindwing.

10. Hackberry Emperor (*Asterocampa celtis*)

The Hackberry Emperor is a medium-sized member of the emperor subfamily. The wings are olive-brown with a large white-spotted blackish apical patch on the forewing. There is a single large “eye spot” below the patch on the forewing above and a marginal row of black dots on the hindwing above. The underwing has from one to several eye spots on the forewing and a row of eye spots on the hindwing. The very similar Tawny Emperor (*A. clyton*) is similar, but lacks the eye spots on the forewing, both above and below. Both species of emperor are easily attracted to fruit and will often land on observers.

Photo credits: **Dr. G. Thomas Barnes:** Pipevine Swallowtail (under)⁴, Gray Hairstreak⁴, Gulf Fritillary⁴, Common Buckeye⁴, Red Admiral⁴. **Michael Hanselman:** Painted Lady (upper)¹. **Adrian Häusler:** Painted Lady (under)³. **Kaldari:** Pipevine Swallowtail (upper)². **Megan McCarty:** Hackberry Emperor³. **Anne Toal:** Little Yellow¹. **Unknown:** Monarch (adult)⁴. **USFWS:** Monarch (caterpillar)⁴. **Mila Zinkova:** Common Checkered-Skipper³. [¹Creative Commons License, WikiCommons; ²GNU Free Documentation License, WikiCommons; ³Public Domain, WikiCommons; ⁴Public Domain, NCTC Image Gallery]

1. Common/White Checkered-Skipper



2. Pipevine Swallowtail (upper and undersides)



3. Little Yellow



4. Gray Hairstreak



5. Monarch and caterpillar



6. Gulf Fritillary



7. Common Buckeye



8. Red Admiral



9. Painted Lady (upper and undersides)



10. Hackberry Emperor

