

Nature's Kaleidoscope

Posted on



Grass Jewel (*Freyeria putli*), the smallest butterfly in Sri Lanka

Dr Michael and Nancy van der Poorten have trekked across the lush wetlands, harsh arid zones and steep heights of Sri Lanka for nearly a decade to document the 247 butterfly species of Sri Lanka for their hardback masterpiece, *The Butterfly Fauna of Sri Lanka*.

Words Keshini de Silva



The Butterfly Fauna of Sri Lanka explores the Island's 247 butterfly species

They swarm the summit of Adam's Peak, colour the expansive wetlands and delight us with visits to our gardens. Butterflies are considered by many to be nature's most delicate creation and, with its varying topography and climate, Sri Lanka is a breeding ground for a

kaleidoscope of these endemic and migrant beauties.

Dr Michael and Nancy van der Poorten have taken on the task of updating the Island's butterfly inventory and creating awareness of the need to conserve these precious lives with their upcoming book, *The Butterfly Fauna of Sri Lanka*. The challenge was arduous but one which they enjoyed immensely.

"The book is a comprehensive story of each butterfly species. Their life cycle, likes and dislikes, survival techniques and conservation," says Michael, a plant physiologist turned butterfly specialist. Known as 'the butterfly man' his appreciation for the Lepidoptera, the taxonomic order of insects including moths and butterflies, stems from a close association with nature from childhood.

"It was hard work, but we understood that the records needed to be updated," chips in Nancy, an authority on dragonflies. To ensure they gathered the correct evidence the couple spent hours scrutinising the records at the National Museum of Colombo and National History Museum in London. And the authors certainly reaped the benefits of their hard work, having discovered two new species of butterfly and confirmed the existence of another in the process of their research. They've published several journal articles on their finds and explore them in the book too.

The Orange Migrant butterfly (*Catopsilia scylla*), discovered by the van der Poortens in 2008, has a particularly interesting story, its larvae believed to have been brought across the Indian Ocean on plants shipped in by President Ranasinghe Premadasa. It is a widely dispersing butterfly that is yet to reach India, a surprise to the lepidopterist community. The Yellow Palm Dart (*Cephrenes trichopepla*), meanwhile, a migrant from Australia, has more mysterious origins - there is a suggestion that it could have entered the Island on palm trees, but no one really knows.

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Another major achievement for the couple was the confirmation of the existence of the endemic and rare Green's Silverline (*Spindasis greeni*). In 1896, the entomologist Edward Ernest Green found one example of this species and sent it to the British Museum. However, explains Nancy, it was not accepted as a new species as no other examples were found in Sri Lanka. In 2008, on a tip, the van der Poortens trudged to World's End in the Horton

Plains, hoping to catch a glimpse of the butterfly, only to be drenched in a torrential downpour. It was not until three years later that they found enough evidence to confirm the existence of this butterfly, microendemic to only the highest of elevations. Much is still to be learnt about these butterflies, whose larvae live inside dead tree trunks – research into their behaviour is ongoing, including the possibility that the larvae are fed by ants.



Dr Michael and Nancy
van der Poorten in Arippu

Michael's aim for the book is to enthrall readers with fascinating facts about Sri Lankan butterflies and their impact on our eco-system, as well as simply providing information. He recalls the mealybug menace of 2008, when Colombo's plants, especially frangipani trees, were eaten away by this white pest. Their nemesis, a delicate brown butterfly called the Apefly (*Spalgisepeus*) was introduced to contain the outbreak. The apefly stealthily deposits its eggs in the midst of a colony of mealybugs; once hatched the army of caterpillars camouflages themselves with an armour of the powdery mealybug wax, before gorging on the unsuspecting insects.

Capturing the unique metamorphosis of butterflies has by no means been an easy task, but the authors have done it – they took almost all of the photographs featured in the book themselves.

"Michael spends at least two to three hours trying to capture each moment of the butterfly, both with its wings closed and spread out. It's tedious as most butterflies either have their wings always closed or some always open," explains Nancy.

"Usually after a cold night butterflies would spread their wings at sunrise to warm up to an appropriate temperature to allow flight. This gives us a window of five seconds to five minutes to take the shot," Michael cheerily adds.

Having been instrumental in setting up butterfly gardens in parks, hospitals and hotels across Sri Lanka, the couple can offer plenty of tips on how the home gardener can attract butterflies to their little space of greenery.

"Butterflies are really picky," says Michael. "They prefer the nectar of a certain flower and only deviate to another flower if they have no other means. They are also very sensitive to their surroundings."

With descriptions of the butterflies, their habitats and behaviour, plus copious beautiful

photographs, the van der Poortens' new book is a great guide for home gardeners and conservationists, while its accuracy and in-depth primary research makes *The Butterfly Fauna of Sri Lanka* a great source of reference for academia and enthusiasts.

The Butterfly Fauna of Sri Lanka will be launched in May 2016.

lepodonbooks.com

lepodonbooks@gmail.com

