

## Photographing Butterflies

-by Yuwaraj Gurjar



Close up of the eye of Blue Oakleaf

Butterflies have been a source of fascination for people from all walks of life- from naturalists, and nature lovers to poets and writers. With their delicate beauty, they also form a fantastic subject for photography. But as they are active, swift creatures, they tend to fly off at the slightest approach. Hence, many people find them difficult to photograph. However, I believe that with a combination of the right technique, equipment and patience, it possible to capture great images of butterflies.

Butterflies can be found everywhere - in crowded cities, gardens and society/school campuses. Those of us living in Mumbai are fortunate to be in the proximity of forested areas like Yeoor & Nagla blocks in Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP), Karnala Sanctuary, Tungreshwar Sanctuary and Phansad Sanctuary, which abound in butterflies in all seasons.

The best time of the day to photograph butterflies is early in the morning, before the sun becomes too harsh. Butterflies are cold-blooded insects, which bask in the sun to warm up their body and



Black Rajah being photographed at it's eye-level

flight muscles. Therefore, they tend to be more sluggish at first light and are easier to track, focus on and photograph. Another reason why the morning hours are most suitable is that the light is soft and hence, there won't be any harsh shadows or overly bright highlights in your image. When you're taking your photograph, try to keep the sun behind you, so that the butterfly is properly and evenly lit. Having said that, back

lighting also lends an interesting dimension to butterfly pictures- with the right position you can get some beautiful rim lighting around your subject's wings. There is also less likely to be wind during this period. Always remember to approach butterflies very quietly with slow movements, lest they fly off. Make sure you wear khaki, camouflaged/ dull-coloured clothes in the field as this makes you less conspicuous to your subject.

It is very important to know your subject well, especially for macro photography in the wild. If you intend to capture images of butterflies, then you must ensure that you have adequate knowledge about the seasons, the butterflies' host plant(s) and feeding habits.

Learning about the intricacies of

their behavior will help you apply the photographic technique that is best suited to your subject as per the prevailing conditions. For example, when basking, butterflies position their wings at a right angle to the incoming light. This is the best time to photograph their upper wings. Many adult butterflies can be found



A spider predating on Dark Cerulean

drinking fluids from wet sand or mud, especially along stream courses and the edges of dirt roads or trails. They love to congregate at puddles. This allows you to shoot butterflies of various species at one single point.

Many types of cameras can be used to shoot butterflies. Nowadays, Digital Single-Lens Reflex (or DSLR) digital cameras are most commonly used. Among DSLRs, there are many options to choose from, depending on the budget and requirement. But a simple point-and-shoot camera can also do the job very well, provided you handle it correctly. Macro lenses are ideal for butterfly photography as they render very sharp, accurately focused photos. If affordability is not an issue and you're well versed in handling macro lenses, then the 180 mm macro lens will be best buy for the job. But the 90 mm (Tamron) / 100 mm (Canon) / 105 mm (Nikon) which are more, affordable and easily available lenses, also do a great job in taking photographs of butterflies. Extension tubes and tele-converters may also be used in combination with various lenses to achieve certain effects.



Frontal shot of an Apefly

Focusing is most crucial in any kind of photography-especially in macro photography. Sharply focused photos are always desirable. To shoot butterflies, you can use either manual or auto focus modes depending on your convenience. The main point of focus should always be the butterfly's eyes; of course, you can always experiment with composition for interesting results. Mounting your camera on a tripod provides the stability required for sharp images. In case your camera is not tripod-mounted, don't fret. Most cameras/lenses are equipped with an in-built stabilizing mechanism (Image Stabilizer in Canon and Vibration

Reduction in Nikon), which are advantageous for sharper shots. In macro photography especially, camera shake can adversely affect the image formed on the sensor and the viewfinder. This is especially relevant to hand-held shooting at higher magnifications, since the inability to properly compose and focus due to a shaky image in the viewfinder makes it extremely difficult to record sharp images. The technology in image stabilizers calculates the direction and the amount of shake at the image plane and tries to stabilize it, thus rendering sharper pictures in



hand-held situations.

Depth of field plays a crucial role in macro photography. Butterflies have a lot of depth to them, from antennae to abdomen and wingtip-to-wingtip. So you need to bear in mind that even at very small apertures, you might not get enough depth of field to capture sharp details all across butterfly's frame. Try shooting the butterfly so its wing is parallel to your lens—keeping all that fine detail on the same plane will guarantee that it is tack-sharp in the final image. Keep the aperture small - use a larger f-number say 8 or 11, whenever the butterfly is positioned at an angle to your lens. If you're close enough, you're still going to get background blur but you'll also get the greatest possible depth



Monkey Puzzle mating

of field across the subject. Using flash or not is always a BIG question in macro photography. But if you play well with your flash, you can create wonderful images. Please note that using or not using a flash will dramatically affect the outcome of the photo. In our Indian forests, the undergrowth is always dimly lit so shooting of butterflies becomes difficult. Therefore, I recommend the use of flash for butterfly photography. Moreover, flash can greatly boost the natural, diffused light illuminating macro subjects. For butterfly photography, a ring flash is quite useful. A ring or twin flash is a convenient way to light close-up subjects outdoors or in the field.

## Here are some tips for butterfly photography

**Control your depth of field:** You can control the depth of field and put



Tiny Grass Blue

the background out of focus, thus making your subject 'stand out'. Using a wider aperture, you can control the in-focus area and thus concentrate the viewer's gaze on the subject's eyes. If you use a higher aperture value while firing the flash, you can create a black background against which the subject stands out.

**Eye to eye:** Try to photograph your butterflies at their level. By

moving down to the level of your subject, you increase the apparent size and importance of the object.

**Lighting:** The light falling on your subject is extremely important, so pay proper attention to it. The butterflies should be properly lit and there should be no overexposed highlights or underexposed shadows.

**Look for abstract compositions:** Try to be innovative. It is not necessary to record the full form of the butterfly all the time. You can, for example, just frame some part of it and achieve a composition that is unusual, offbeat and artistic; frame only the head and highlight the compound eyes or take a close-up of the textured wings.



Silhouette shot of a Common Silverline (?)

***Be careful not to cast a shadow on the butterfly:*** When you are shooting butterflies, especially those that are basking or mud-puddling, do not cast a shadow on them. They will immediately close down their wings or fly away.



Butterflies mud-puddling

Butterflies are among the most beautiful subjects to photograph. With the right equipment and effort, you can get extraordinary photos of these extraordinary creatures. So enjoy your butterfly photography!!!

#### **About the author:**

*Yuwaraj works with Raymond Limited in Mumbai, which is a renowned Textile Manufacturing Company. His love towards nature attracts him to go places in the wild. His photographs have won many national / international awards and have been exhibited across the world. Some of his photographs have been included in field guidebooks, educational websites, magazines etc. He aims not only at observing and photographing nature & wildlife, but he also loves to spread awareness & knowledge about them. To know more about him, please visit [www.yuwarajgurjar.com](http://www.yuwarajgurjar.com)*