

Definitive Destination

John C. Fremont was a well-known explorer who later became the first governor of Arizona and the first presidential candidate of the newly formed Republican Party. In 1845, his third western expedition, with Kit Carson as a scout, passed through an arid semi-desert region at the southern tip of the majestic Sierra Nevada Mountains of California, looking for a feasible route for a railway to the Pacific. The group spent two weeks mapping and surveying the area. As was his custom following his first two expeditions, Fremont wrote a romanticized version of the trip. His embellished account, accompanied by attractive sketches of topographical features, would be published in eastern newspapers and periodicals — tempting many settlers to move west. Thus started the first rush of pioneers to the area known today as the Kern River Valley.

Now I'd like to attract a different type of traveler — butterfly watchers! The southern Sierra region is a personal favorite since I started learning about butterflies here in the late 60's. And... there are lots and lots of butterflies! Happily, one can see a major portion of the California butterfly fauna within two hours of Lake Isabella. Some 145 species, including strays, have been recorded from the region. That's close to two-thirds of California's butterflies!

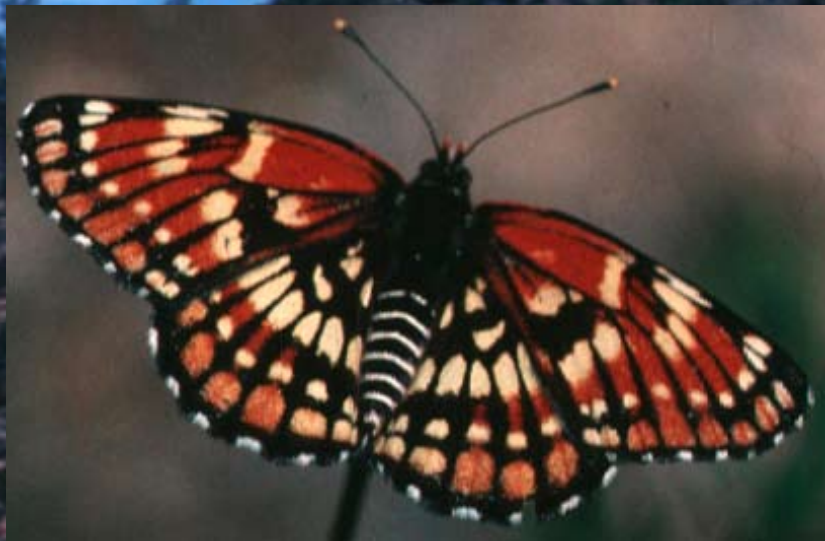
Botanically the region is a treasure. The floras of southern California and of the Sierra Nevada merge. A large part of the endemic rich flora of the Mojave Desert enters into the region from the east. This results in both unusual plant companions and butterfly

An explosion of shooting stars grabs one's attention at Big Meadow
June 16, 1974. Tulare Co. CA



Lake Isabella & the southern California Sierra

by Jim Brock



companions as well. For example, valley white oaks grow alongside Joshua trees and Desert Orangetips mingle with Lorquin's Admirals. 'Nelson's' Juniper Hairstreak is found within two miles of 'Siva' Juniper Hairstreak.

The Kern Valley (Kern was a topographer in Fremont's party) is essentially a valley created by the south fork (South Fork Valley) and north fork (Kern Canyon) of the Kern River. Located at the south end of the Sierra Nevada the valley is surrounded by mountains. To the south lie the Piute Mountains (8400 ft.) and Breckenridge Mountain. To the west are the Greenhorns, a sliver of the southern Sierra. To the north and east lie the Kern Plateau (9700 ft.) the southeastern-most block of the Sierra.

Two similar-looking but different checkerspots fly in this area.

Opposite page: Lenira Checkerspots fly over paintbrush-clothed hillsides. Background photo. May 1, 1977. 3.5 miles south of Bodfish. Foreground photo. May 5, 2000. 3.5 miles south of Bodfish.

This page: Edith's Checkerspot. March 30, 1999. North of McNally's. Tulare Co. CA



Above: California Hairstreak, a widespread and common butterfly, is common in the southern California Sierra. June 1, 2000. Sherman Pass Rd., Tulare Co. CA

Opposite Page: San Emigdio Blue is among the most local and scarce butterflies of North America. The Lake Isabella region is one of the best places to search for it. June 2, 2000. Weldon, CA

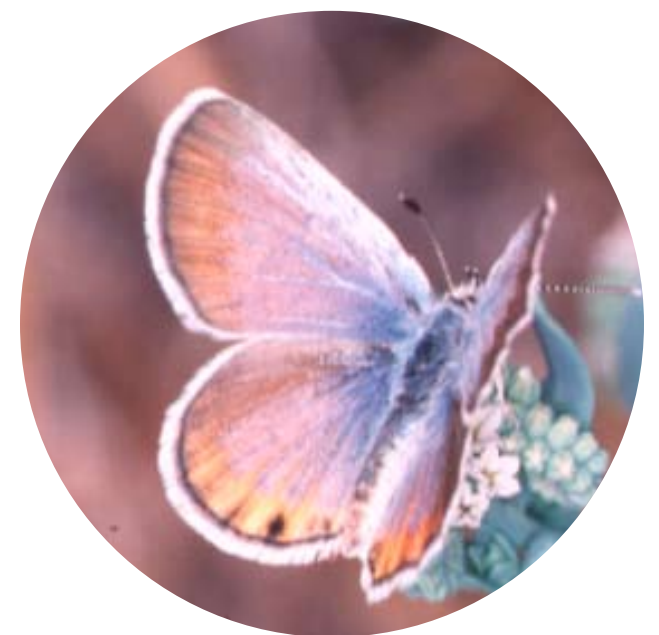
West of the mountains is the San Joaquin Valley, while eastward stretches the Mojave Desert. The small town of Lake Isabella lies at the south end of a man-made lake named Isabella Lake. At the north end of the lake is Kernville, a picturesque town seven miles north of where it originally stood. The old site is now under the lake. The Kern River cut a deep gorge both above and below the lake. Though tamed somewhat by the dam at Lake Isabella the lower part is a treacherous river — some 200 or so people have drowned in its waters since the late 60's.

The weather in the region is normally very conducive for butterfly watching. Nearly all rainfall occurs in the winter, although Spring storms in March and April can sometimes be a problem. May and June are normally dry and sunny. Occasional thunderstorms occur in the higher mountains in July, while August and September are normally fair weather months. The best butterfly action is from late February to mid-July. After July, activity drops dramatically but interesting butterflies can still be found in the fall months.

Spring begins early in the region especially at the 2600 ft. level. In March or April take the road north out of Kernville through the upper Kern Canyon. The Kern River will be on your left as you drive into Tulare County. As you move northward you will pass spots where a number of creeks and canyons empty into the river from the mountains on your right. A good place to stop is Goldledge Creek Campground. There are dirt roads and paths on the right. Here one can encounter Desert and Sara Orangetips flying together, Spring White, Silvery Blue, Bramble Hairstreak, Thicket Hairstreak and Brown Elfin. In late April there is a fabulously variable colony of Leanira Checkerspots here. Keep in mind that there are many places to try along this road. Just stop along any rocky side canyon, especially those carrying water recently melted from the snowpack in the mountains above. A couple of these canyons are located just past McNally's Resort. Here one can seek out the dazzling Sonoran Blue, enjoy a Gray Marble or maybe catch sight of an Edith's Checkerspot. Mourning Cloaks will just be coming out of hibernation. Farther up the road is Brush Creek, a gorgeous flowing stream with a very accessible colony of Sonoran Blue. Try walking up the trail on the left side in late March or early April. These same areas are also very good in May as daytime temperatures heat up, but I personally like Erskine Creek just south and east of Lake Isabella in Kern County for its mixture of mud and flowers.

Erskine Creek drains the north slope of the Piute Mountains. Along with the profusion of white flowers smothering the California buckwheats, various yellow sunflowers and the purple blooms of yerba santa, the creek crosses the road a number of times providing plenty of puddling spots for the many butterflies in the canyon. Here, in late May or early June, expect to see a plethora of gossamer-wings. This is really the land of blues with Square-spotted, Dotted,

Marine, Boisduval's, Lupine, Acmon and the unusual Veined Blue, a California endemic, all highly probable. Gorgon, Tailed and Great Coppers and many of the chaparral hairstreaks including Hedgerow, California, and Sylvan flock to flowers. Keep your eyes peeled for the swallowtails — Anise, Western Tiger and Pale Swallowtails all frequent the canyon. Brushfoots are well represented, as well. Erskine Creek harbors both California Sister and the similar Lorquin's Admiral. Both are more apt to be at mud than flowers. Mylitta Crescents should be scurrying about along with California Ringlet and Great Basin Wood-Nymph. In some years California Tortoiseshell can be common. Otherwise expect to see old standbys like Checkered White, Cabbage White, Painted Lady, Red Admiral, Common Buckeye and Orange Sulphur. Of perhaps keener interest will be Leanira, Northern and Variable 'Chalcedon' Checkerspots. The latter is usually conspicuous and present in large numbers. Skipper diversity is not especially memorable here but quality is high, with Rural, Lindsey's, Juba and Northern White-Skipper.



A short distance away and slightly higher up is the town of Bodfish. A road goes south from the town to Havilah. At three miles south of Bodfish a dirt road (Piute Mountain Rd.) takes off to the left and goes all the way to the top of the Piute Mountains. Along the first two hundred yards of this road there is a colony of *Leanira* Checkerspot that flies from late April to early May. One May, many years ago, I found Columbia Skipper here. This is also a reliable area for 'Siva' Juniper Hairstreak, Mormon Metalmark and Lupine Blue. On two different occasions I have encountered wandering Mexican Yellows here, far from their normal haunts. Also, if you were late for spring butterflies, just drive a few miles up the road and you'll encounter Spring White and Gray Marble, on the wing a good two months after their flights just 1500 ft. below!

Higher up in the Piute Mountains in June one finds Edith's Checkerspot, Pale Swallowtail, and Callippe Fritillary. In early July ascend the summit of Piute Peak to seek a rare form of Great Basin Fritillary found only here and in the Tehachepi Mountains to the south. The Piute's also have Blue Copper, a population with light blue females. It flies in July lower down the road and also on the summit of Piute Mountain — a huge block of metamorphic rock where views of the surrounding country are spectacular! This mountain top harbors a unique population of Square-spotted Blue and is a good hilltop for swallowtails, checkerspots and Callippe Fritillary.

Before heading up to the Kern Plateau or other high country areas in June or July, I recommend spending a little time in the lowlands east of Lake Isabella in the South Fork Valley or in the more arid Kelso Valley.

Late May or early June may be best for South Fork. Near the town of Weldon one finds Alkali Skipper, Sandhill Skipper, Purplish Copper, Great Copper, Field Crescent, Western Pygmy-Blue and San Emigdio Blue. *Heliotrope*, a white flowering plant of alkali soils that grows close to the ground is a favorite nectar source for all of the above. The San Emigdio Blue is a California endemic and occurs in very local colonies.

For San Emigdio Blue take Hwy 178 from Lake Isabella and go east. Just before Weldon on Hwy 178 there is a turnoff onto a loop road to Paul's Place (a small general store visible from the highway). About 200 yards north of the store one will find some large saltbush shrubs. Here is a reliable colony of San Emigdio Blue. They mainly fly in May but will often persist into June and beyond.



Greenish Blues abound in Big Meadow and are also found in many other spots in the Lake Isabella region. Female Greenish Blues aren't blue, but their orange/green sheens are very attractive.

June 15, 2001. Near Sherman Pass, Tulare Co. CA

The Piutes are a good place to find Pale Swallowtails (although not the individual shown).

April 30, 1995.
San Gabriel Mountains,
Los Angeles Co.
CA



Jeffrey Glassberg

Kelso Valley will give one a taste of the desert. Take the turnoff from Hwy 178 and go south about 10 miles. You should be close to or right at a large wash. In April one may encounter Sagebrush Checkerspot, Bramble Hairstreak and Yucca Giant-Skipper. In May go to the former site of Sageland farther south on the same road. Here a bush lupine grows in the hills and is the foodplant for the caterpillars of many blues including Silvery, Arrowhead, Melissa and Boisduval's. The nearby buckwheats provide food for both 'Mojave' Dotted and Square-spotted Blue. I once had nine species of blues in a single day! Northern Checkerspot flies here along with Common Branded Skipper. This region is one of the few places where both Sagebrush and Northern Checkerspots occur together although their flight times are a month apart.

After covering the lowlands it's time to hit the high country which gets hoppin' in late June and July. I suggest doing a loop from Kernville up over Sherman Pass and down the Kern Plateau exiting via Nine Mile Canyon. Nine Mile Canyon will take you to Hwy 395. From there you can return south to Hwy 178 then go west back to Lake Isabella via Walker Pass. It isn't possible to thoroughly do this loop in one day or even two for that matter. There are too many good spots to stop and explore.

You might start from Kernville and go north until you come to the first paved road on your right. This will be the road to Sherman Pass — be sure to take a mileage reading here. You may still see lots of butterflies on the purple yerba santa alongside the road at first but most will be worn leftovers from weeks before. The higher one ascends the fresher the but-



Arid country butterflies, including Mormon Metalmarks and Rita Blues, inhabit the Walker Pass Region. May 18, 1974.

terflies will be. Drive up the road and you'll notice the flowers will even look better. It would be worth checking for Mountain Mahogany Hairstreak on your way up. At about 3.5 miles there is a steep canyon on the left. This is a good spot to stop and look around. I once found a Small Blue here. You will be tempted to stop at all the stands of yerba santa along the way and that's fine. Just keep track of time since more delights await you higher up the road.

Eventually you will come to a turnoff. The right turn will take you to Big Meadow. This is a beautiful spot and the road is nearly paved the entire way. If you go to Big Meadow (8000 ft.) stay to the right once you get there and drive a mile or so south. The road actually circles the meadow (it really is big and takes about a half an hour to do the roundtrip!). After a mile or so you are at the southwestern end of the meadow. Here you are at the southernmost Sierran colonies for

'Sierra' Arctic Blue, Edith's Copper and Lustrous Copper. The coppers are not easy to find and will require careful searching, usually in the wooded clearings a few hundred yards to the east. In the meadow itself, Edith's Checkerspots abound along with Greenish Blues. Two-banded Checkered-Skipper and Persius Duskywing are less common. A small, darkish form of Sandhill Skipper is also here, just a few air miles from the paler form encountered in South Fork Valley. Be sure to check wet spots along the road for Pacuvius and Propertius Duskywings, Mexican Cloudywings and California Tortoiseshells.

The northwestern edge of Big Meadow can also be productive. Here Salmon Creek empties into Big Meadow and one may encounter Mormon Fritillary, Hoary Comma, Milbert's Tortoiseshell and the exquisite Western Pine Elfin. The last three species are generally found throughout these mountains above 6000 ft.

Back at the road junction one has the option of going up and over Sherman Pass. This paved road will lead one to an incredible variety of habitats and more places to stop than can be explored in one day. Start very near the junction and explore the creek for skippers and hairstreaks. 'Nelson's' Juniper Hairstreak is quite at home here amongst the incense cedar trees and you'll see many of the chaparral hairstreaks encountered earlier in the year at lower elevations.

As you drive up to within a mile or so of the pass there will be rocky outcroppings along the road. Clodius Parnassians are at their southern limits here and there will be many other types of butterflies including Large Marble, Arrowhead Blue, the common Sierran form of Great Basin Fritillary and, with any luck, Coronis Fritillary. The east slope of Sherman Pass is more arid but the wet meadows above 8000 ft. have many of the same species as Big Meadow and you should also find Sonoran Skippers. Down the road a bit is a dirt road that provides a short drive up to Bald Mountain. At over 9000 ft., Bald Mountain provides an excellent chance to observe hilltopping butterflies. Among the hilltoppers potentially encountered here are Indra Swallowtail, Northern Cloudywing and 'Alpine' Sheridan's Hairstreak.

One can continue on the road to Kennedy Meadows and southward stopping anywhere it looks "good." In Kennedy Meadows itself one may find Arachne Checkerspot — the only population in the Sierra Nevada. I once saw a wandering Pipevine Swallowtail here. Be careful of rattlesnakes in this area, as the sagebrush provides them with good hiding spots.

On the plateau it's possible you may get a little confused since some of the familiar species encountered west of Sherman Pass will look a little different up here east of the pass. 'Chalcedon' Variable Checkerspot, Northern Checkerspot and Leanira Checkerspot exem-

plify this phenomenon. Leanira Checkerspot colonies south of Kennedy Meadows are of the desert type, an orange critter that looks almost entirely different from those down in the Kern Valley! However, there is no mistaking the distinctive Behr's Hairstreak that can be found among other butterflies on flowers along the roadside.

South of Kennedy Meadows you'll eventually come to the edge of the plateau and the Inyo County line. Just before the road starts a steep descent there are some oak trees. In late June and early July these trees should be searched for Goldhunter's Hairstreak and Golden Hairstreak. The steep paved road down passes a number of good spots that are best explored earlier in the season.

A couple of other interesting side trips would be Shirley Meadows in the Greenhorn Mountains and Lloyd Meadows north of Johnsdale. The Shirley Meadows area has the southernmost colony of Hydaspe Fritillary while Lloyd Meadows is the southern limit for both Northern Blue and Zerene Fritillary.

By August things get fairly quiet except for those common species that have one or more broods. Still, towards the end of the month along the east slope of Walker Pass one may find Mormon Metalmark and Rita Blue. Casually mentioning Mormon Metalmark does not do it justice. There are probably six different forms in the region, all with different caterpillar hostplants and flight periods! Woodland Skipper is common in canyons and along riparian areas throughout the valley in late summer.

The southern Sierra, and especially the Kern Valley, should be a destination for all butterflyers. New species are still occasionally added to both Kern and Tulare County butterfly lists. A good portion of the region is public land administered by the U. S. Forest Service so accessing good butterfly spots is not a problem.

Species List

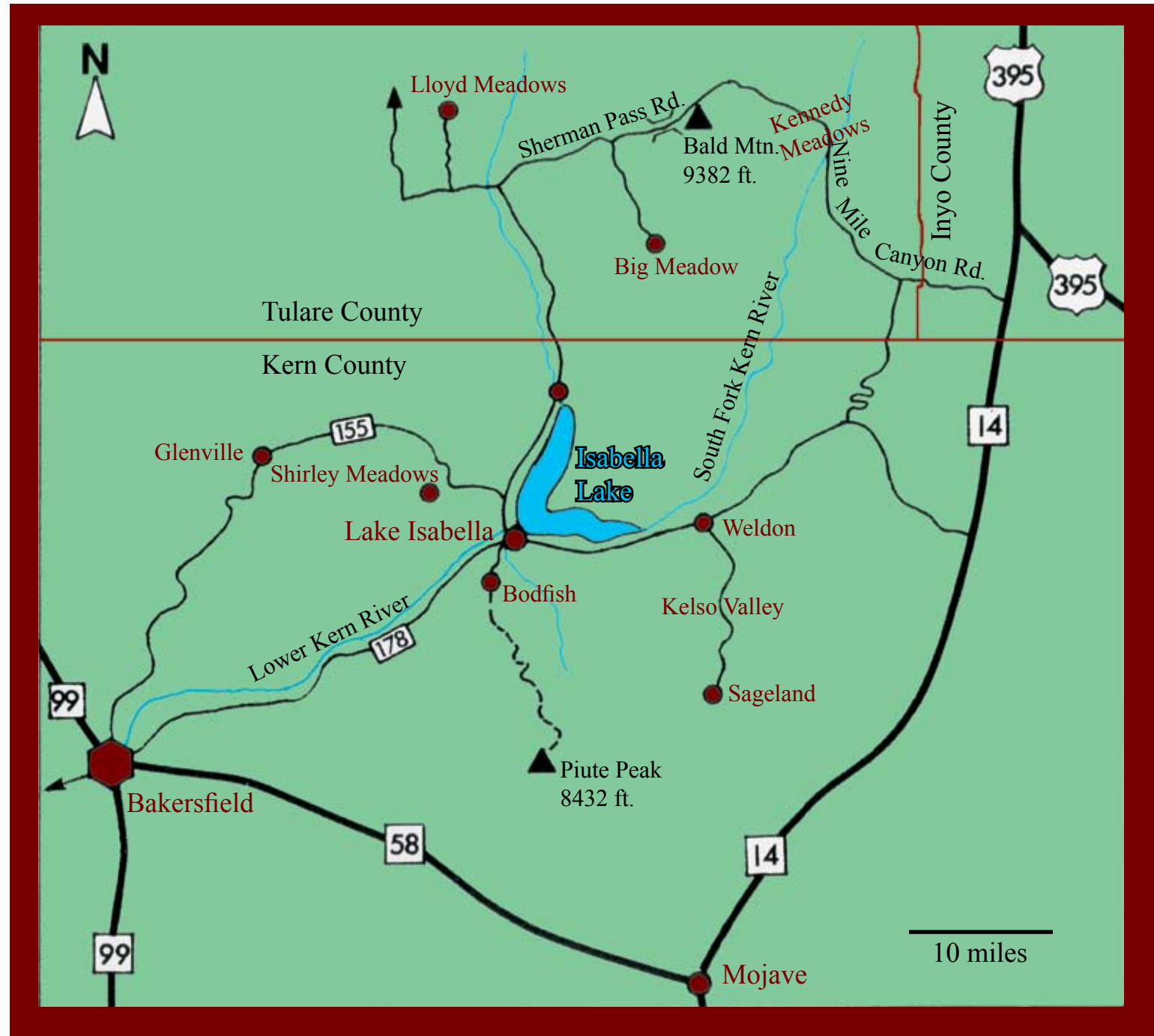
Richard Hildreth (2) Abbreviations are: **A**, abundant, likely to see more than 20 individuals per visit to the right spot at the right time; **C**, common, likely to see 4-20 individuals per visit to the right spot at the right time; **U**, uncommon, likely to see 0-3 individuals to the right spot at the right time; **R**, rare, unlikely to see any individuals per visit, even at the right spot at the right time; **S**, stray, not seen every year. Numbers refer to months of the year, where 1 = January, 2 = February, etc. and the letters E, M and L refer to early, middle and late periods within each month.



Clodius Parnassian U M6-M7; Pipevine Swallowtail S 6; 'Desert' Black Swallowtail R M3-7; Anise Swallowtail C M2-M9; Indra Swallowtail U 4-7; Western Tiger Swallowtail C M2-9; Two-tailed Swallowtail U 4-8; Pale Swallowtail C 4-8; Pine White C E7-M9; Becker's White U 2-10; Spring White C L2-M7; Checkered White C 2-11; Cabbage White C 3-11; Large Marble U 5-7; Pearly Marble C L2-E7; Desert Orangetip U L2-E4; Sara Orangetip C L2-E6; Gray Marble U L2-M6; Orange Sulphur C 2-10; 'Harford's' Sulphur S 6; Southern Dogface S 4-11; Cloudless Sulphur R 3-10; Mexican Yellow S 5-6; Sleepy Orange R 3-10; Dainty Sulphur R 4-7; Tailed Copper C L5-E9; Lustrous Copper U E6-E8; Great Copper C L4-8; Edith's Copper R M6-8; Gorgon Copper C M5-M7; Blue Copper U E7-L7; Purplish Copper U 4-10; Golden Hairstreak C 7-9; Great Purple Hairstreak U M3-10; Silver-banded Hairstreak S 5; Behr's Hairstreak C L5-8; California Hairstreak C M5-7; Sylvan Hairstreak C 5-9; Gold-hunter's Hairstreak U 5-L7; Mountain Mahogany Hairstreak C E6-7; Hedgerow Hairstreak C M5-8; Bramble Hairstreak C L2-5; 'Alpine' Sheridan's Hairstreak U 6; Thicket Hairstreak U 3-9; 'Nelson's' Juniper Hairstreak C L5-7; 'Siva' Juniper Hairstreak C L3-7; Brown Elfin C L2-7; Western Pine Elfin C L4-7; Gray Hairstreak C 2-10; Western Pygmy-Blue C 2-11; Marine Blue F 3-10; Ceraunus Blue R 5-9; Reakirt's Blue R 4-9; Western Tailed-Blue R 4-7; Spring Azure F 2-7; Sonoran Blue U M3-M4; Square-spotted Blue C L4-9; Dotted Blue U L3-9; Rita Blue U L8-9; Small Blue S 6; Arrowhead Blue U 4-7; Silvery Blue C E3-7; Northern Blue U M6-8; Melissa Blue C 4-9; Greenish Blue C L5-9; San Emigdio Blue U E5-9; Boisduval's Blue C M3-8; Acmon Blue C L2-10; Lupine Blue C E4-7; Veined Blue U L4-8; 'Sierra' Arctic Blue A E6-M7; Mormon

Metalmark C L3-E10; Coronis Fritillary R E6-7; Zerene Fritillary U M6-7; Callippe Fritillary C L5-E8; Great Basin Fritillary U M6-M8; Hydaspe Fritillary U M6-E8; Mormon Fritillary U L6-8; Pacific Fritillary R M6-7; Arachne Checkerspot U E6-E8; Leanira Checkerspot U M4-L6; Northern Checkerspot F L4-M7; Sagebrush Checkerspot R L3-L4; Texan Crescent S 5; Field Crescent U L4-9; Mylitta Crescent C 3-9; 'Chalcedon' Variable Checkerspot C L4-7; Edith's Checkerspot C E4-E7; Satyr Comma U 3-9; Hoary Comma C L2-9; California Tortoiseshell C L2-8; Milbert's Tortoiseshell C L2-8; Mourning Cloak F L2-9; American Lady U 4-9; Painted Lady C E2-11; West Coast Lady U 2-10; Red Admiral C 2-10; Common Buckeye C 2-11; Lorquin's Admiral C L4-9; California Sister C L4-E11; California Ringlet C 4-10; Common Wood-nymph R 7-8; Great Basin Wood-nymph C L5-9; Monarch C 2-11; Queen U 3-10; Silver-spotted Skipper U 6-7; Hammock Skipper S 9; Northern Cloudywing C 6-7; Mexican Cloudywing C E6-M7; Sleepy Duskywing U 3-E6; Propertius Duskywing C L2-8; Mournful Duskywing U L2-E10; Pacuvius Duskywing U M5-7; Funereal Duskywing U L2-9; Persius Duskywing U E6-8; Two-banded Checkered-Skipper U E6-E7; Common Checkered Skipper

C 4-10; Northern White-Skipper C L3-M10; Common Sootywing U 3-9; Mojave Sootywing U 5-9; Orange Skipperling U 4-10; Fiery Skipper U 5-10; Alkali Skipper U M5-L8; Juba Skipper C 4-10; Common Branded Skipper C L5-9; Columbia Skipper R L4-M5, E9-L9; Lindsey's Skipper U 5-6; Sandhill Skipper C 4-9; Sonoran Skipper C 5-9; Sachem U 4-10; Woodland Skipper C 7-9; Rural Skipper F 5-7.



All photographs this article by Jim Brock, except as indicated.