



Photographing

Butterflies

Golden Helicon
(*Heliconius hecale*)

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Butterflies and moths fall in the largest and most diverse group of insects. They can be found on all continents except for Antarctica. According to some estimates, there are more than 180,000 species of these arthropods ranging in size from a few millimeters to a foot in wingspan. As a matter of fact, more than a century ago, one of the most beautiful tropical species of butterflies was mistaken for a bird and shot with a gun by a naturalist exploring the Amazon jungle. Almost all butterflies are day flying, while the majority of moths prefer night.

Shooting macro does not take much preparation. A subject is easy to find, equipment is relatively simple, and light conditions adjustable. All you need is some free time. Butterflies and moths are excellent macro subjects.

Where can you find butterflies? Well, you have several options: you could look for wild flowers, make your own butterfly garden, raise butterflies at home, or you could simply go to a butterfly garden.

Late spring and summer are the perfect

blooming seasons for wild flowers in the temperate regions. Try to locate meadows and open grasslands. Be patient, even if you do not see anything at first glance, after a few moments insects can take off and fly in front of you. Morning is the most suitable time for insect photography, since these creatures need the warmth of the sun before they can take off and fly. Morning mist droplets can add a special “diamond-like” look on the insects’ wings.

Making a butterfly garden is not difficult. Visit a local nursery and purchase seeds or whole plants. Especially well suited for butterflies are butterfly bushes, zinnias, asters and daisies. Plant them early in the spring to take the most advantage of the “butterfly season.”

Caterpillars are not only great objects to take pictures of, especially in “at home settings,” but also can be raised in captivity till they turn into butterflies or moths. Some online sites even offer butterfly eggs for sale. Please, keep in mind that there are two major obstacles in this case. First, you may find it difficult



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to locate the right food plant. And second, many of the species sold may be foreign to the region you live in, therefore causing a potential environmental threat if released in the wild.

Last but not the least, visit a butterfly garden near you. Many zoos have their own butterfly gardens, which are seasonal, i.e. open only during the warm time of the year. Better choices are the freestanding butterfly gardens that operate year-round.

What equipment do you need? Believe it or not, the long and expensive telephoto lenses are of little help in taking pictures of butterflies. Macro lenses are the most appropriate “eyes” your camera needs. You could do equally well with a basic lens (focal length anywhere between 20 and 60mm) since most butterflies are large enough to be photographed without the need to approach them too closely. On the same line of thought, the camera body can be very basic as well. You will do equally well with a fully manual film camera as well as with a complicated digital SLR. Quick focus is key during the day, although you might have the chance to set up a tripod in the early morning hours when the insects are almost motionless. ISO of 100 works well during the day, but can be increased when shooting quick moving subjects. Recommended shutter speed is above 1/125 when a handheld camera is used. A polarizing filter is highly recommended to take away the glitter of the leaves and focus all the attention on the object. Do you remember how in school you were taught that three points define a plane? Well, this simple rule is very handy in photographing butterflies. Use the butterfly eye



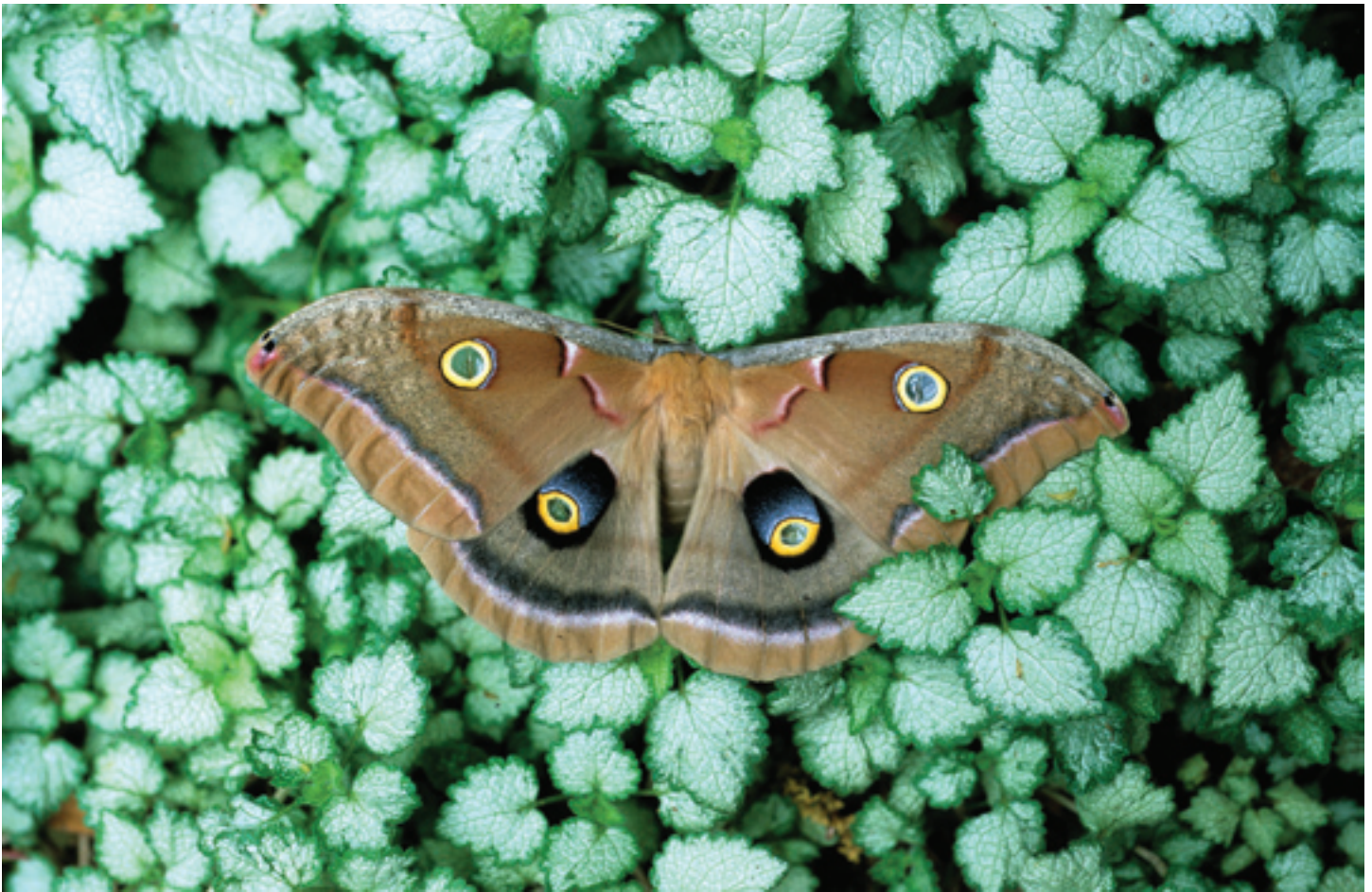
Madagascar Moon Moth (*Argema mittrei*) female



Tailed Jay (*Graphium agamemnon*)



Clearwing (*Greta morgana otto*)



Polyphemus Moth
(*Antheraea polyphemus*)

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Glanville Fritillary
(*Melitaea cinxia*)



as one of the three points. Then if the wings are closed, mark the tip of the upper wing and the back of the lower one as the other two points. If the wings are open, define the tips of the two wings as the second and third point respectively. This way the whole insect will be in focus. As a background, it is always more natural to have the green color in the back. To achieve this effect, set the aperture to f4.5-5.6 if the objects in the background are close to the butterfly, or higher if they are further.

The goal is to create balance between a blurred background and a sharp object. In some special occasions, you might want to invest in a macro flash. There are two major types of macro-flash photography. One of them utilizes a ring-like light, which goes around the objective. The downside is



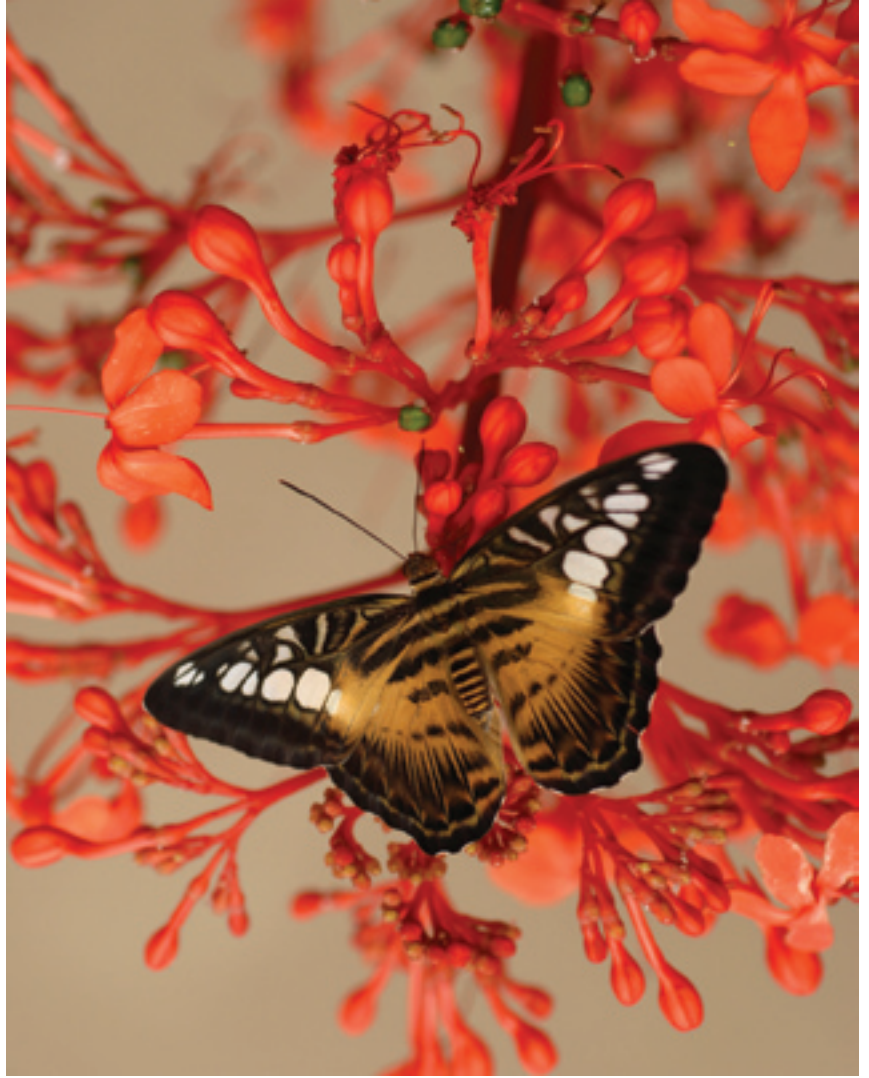
Banded Orange (*Dryadula phaetusa*)



American Painted Lady (*Vanessa viriniensis*)

that it creates flat objects, which might be OK for butterflies, but not a good idea for other insects. The second type of flash macro photography uses two flash units for more diverse results. In this case, the same rules apply as in portrait flash photography—place the flashes in a way that is used when shooting human faces. In my opinion, it is best to keep on experimenting with the two units till you achieve a desired effect.

In conclusion, butterflies are probably one of the best groups of creatures to take pictures of. They are a colorful, diverse and relatively easy object to photograph. ■



Clipper (*Parthenos sylvia*)



Hummingbird moth (*Macroglossum stellatarum*)