

Butterflies of the Steenkampsberg

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“The Steenkampsberg, particularly Verloren Valei Nature Reserve, is a biodiversity hotspot and haven for butterflies—two species of which only occur in the area”

Although relatively small at just over 6 000 hectares, Verloren Valei Nature Reserve is a conservation area of note. It is recognised as a wetland of international importance in terms of the Ramsar Convention, and is famous for the number and variety of indigenous orchids. It is a haven for birdlife and a surprising number of mammals, including many nocturnal predators.

Located in the Steenkampsberg, Verloren Valei has a delicately balanced ecosystem comprising a surprisingly large number of Lepidoptera. Two of these are only found here: the Lost Valley Cupid (*Orachrysops warreni*, formerly Warren’s Blue) and Verloren Valei Bronze-Speckled Widow (*Serradinga clarki amissivallis*, formerly Clark’s Lost Widow). However, these creatures may in fact be more widely spread—for example, there has been one report of the Verloren Valei Bronze-Speckled Widow being observed near Middelpunt Nature Reserve.

Over 100 species of butterfly are found at Verloren Valei and along the Steenkampsberg more generally. The mountain range comprises high-altitude montane grasslands, so the butterfly species found here are adapted to this type of habitat, with its extreme winter temperatures and relatively high rainfall. The Top 10 butterfly species you are likely to see include:

Scientific Name

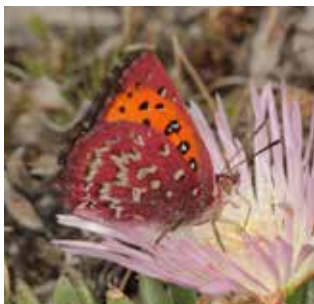
1. *Metisella aegipan aegipan*
2. *Aloeides titei*
3. *Durbania amakosa ayresi*
4. *Harpendingyreus noquasa*
5. *Orachrysops warreni*
6. *Aeropetes tulbaghia*
7. *Serradinga clarki amissivallis*
8. *Junonia hierta cebrene*
9. *Precis octavia sesamus*
10. *Pontia helice helice*

Common Name

- Mountain Sylph
- Mountain Russet
- Northern Amakoza Rocksitter
- Marsh Mountain Blue
- Lost Valley Cupid
- Table Mountain Beauty
- Verloren Valei Bronze Speckled Widow
- African Yellow Pansy
- Southern Gaudy Commodore
- African Meadow White



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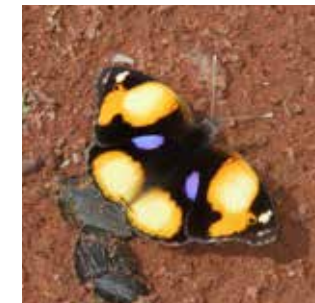
Orachrysops warreni Justin Bode



Aeropetes tulbaghia Justin Bode



Serradinga clarki amissivallis Justin Bode



Junonia hierta cebrene Justin Bode



Precis octavia sesamus Jeremy Dobson



Pontia helice helice Justin Bode

In the field, most butterflies can be approached closely if done slowly and steadily with no shadow cast over them. Most species are territorial and will return to a favourite resting spot. Around midday, some species will “hill-top”. This behaviour is usually associated with the search for mates; males will perch on a tree or other prominent feature on a hill from where they will chase away competitors from their females.

Butterflies have complex life cycles and often rely on other species, such as ants, at various stages for food and protection. They are usually specific about which plants they feed on and are typically on the wing during the summer months. One variety, the Gaudy Commodore, has two distinct forms: the wet-season orange form and the dry-season blue form. Curiosities like this make lepidoptery a fascinating and rewarding hobby.

Much about the life cycles of butterflies remains unknown, which means there is an opportunity for “citizen scientists” to contribute to our knowledge base. For example, you can find out which butterflies will metamorphose from the caterpillars you find in your garden and nature through the Caterpillar Rearing Group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/caterpillarrg/>), which may just lead to new discoveries. You can also log records on public databases used to generate species distribution maps (www.inaturalist.org; www.vmus.adu.org.za) or even join the Custodians of Rare and Endangered Lepidoptera (COREL) through LepSoc Africa.

The comprehensive guide to butterflying, *Practical Guide to the Study of Lepidoptera in Africa*, is available free of charge to all LepSoc Africa members (join at www.lepsocafrika.org).

Butterfly guided outings at Verloren Valei Nature Reserve are organised for members of Friends of Verloren Valei (www.verlorenvalei.org.za).