

Photographing butterflies: How to get started

For a nature photographer the day often starts with the question: where do I begin? There are so many photographic opportunities and it is not always easy to choose the right subject at the right moment. But among all of nature's amazing diversity, there is one species you just can't take bad pictures of, namely butterflies. With the right preparation you'll easily get one final colourful image, due to the brightness of these creatures and the colourful flowers they feed on. While they seem an ideal subject for nature photography, many starting photographers find photographing butterflies quite challenging. These little winged creatures can be very active and in that way don't keep still long enough to take the right shots. But with the following list of tips and tricks and the right amount of patience, you'll see that photographing butterflies really is a rewarding photographic activity.

Where and when

From April till late August, butterflies can be found almost everywhere. The most common species have adapted to live in urban areas, so you can find them by simply walking around in your own garden. You could even attract different species by planting flowers and bushes such as Buddleias that attract these little insects. Certain butterflies could also be attracted by putting out rotting fruit or saucers with damp soil or sand.

In the past decades butterflies have declined dramatically due to the loss of their habitats and the plants that a species of butterfly may be reliant on. To find rare and endangered butterflies you might have to drive to specific locations, where only a small population is left. Keep in mind that these populations are very vulnerable, so always try to take your photographs with the greatest respect for nature and environment.

Because butterflies depend on the warmth of the sun, I usually go out, photographing them, in the "golden" light of the early mornings and evenings, as they are less active then. It might then be harder to find them, so look carefully for butterflies resting on flowers or grasses.

Don't hesitate to go out on cloudy days as well; butterflies are less energetic then and the light is softer, which allows you to photograph in "good" light the whole day.

When you're out photographing butterflies I would advise you to wear dark clothing because it doesn't scare butterflies off as easily as light coloured clothing does. Once you have found an obliging individual, approach it very carefully without disturbing it and take all the shots you can.

Equipment to use

One could actually write a whole article about the equipment and accessories necessary for photographing butterflies, but if you're just a starting photographer of butterflies, I would recommend you the following material in particular. The best choice would probably be a (digital) SLR combined with a macro lens but if you don't have that at hand, you could also use a telephoto lens or maybe even a standard lens with a macro stand, allowing close focus. My first butterfly shots were taken with a Nikon Coolpix 995, so even a digital compact camera can get you started.

Furthermore, I would recommend a macro lens of 100mm or more, because they allow greater working distance. Moreover a longer focal length gives a nice out-of-focus background. I currently use a Canon Eos 40D together with a Sigma 150mm macro and this combination gives me very satisfying results when taking shots of butterflies and other macro subjects.

Most of the times I use a tripod with ballhead as well; you will be working with rather small apertures in order to get the butterfly completely into focus, therefore resulting in slow shutter speeds. If you go out early

in the morning or on a cloudy day, the available light might be poor so in most cases a good tripod really is necessary. When considering a tripod, pay attention to the minimum height and use it without the center column, allowing you to work from a low position.

On a cloudy day, a flash unit with a diffuser attached, can be used as a fill-flash to add extra punch to your image or as an extra source of light. When photographing in full sun, use a fill-flash to soften the harsh shadows.

For really small objects, extension tubes allow an even closer focusing distance. An extender will allow a greater working distance and a remote cord can avoid blurry images due to camera shake, when photographing at very low shutter speeds.

Things to keep in mind

When photographing in close-up, the depth of field is very small. So in order to have your butterfly completely in focus, you need a small aperture. For butterflies that have their wings closed an aperture of F5.6 will do, but for butterflies that have their wings spread open, you might need an aperture of F10 and even higher. If your camera has a depth of field preview button, use it to see how much of your subject is in focus.

Avoid cluttered backgrounds by paying close attention to the entire image when looking through the viewfinder. By simply changing the position of your tripod a little, you might avoid distracting objects in the background. Images that have a soft out of focus background, isolating the subject, hold the attention of the viewer.

I suggest you use manual focus when doing close-up photography. The narrow depth of field requires an extremely precise focus and having your camera focusing on the wrong part of your subject can completely ruin your shot.

Always look for a good composition, generally avoid placing your subject in the middle but use the rule of thirds. Try to photograph from different angles and perspectives and give your subject space to look into. By following these few basic rules of composition your images will improve greatly and have far more impact on its viewers. If your camera has a live preview function you could also use this to have a quick look at the final composition.

Finally take a few shots and don't forget to check your histogram for correct exposure.

I find that butterflies lean themselves very well for experimenting. Step away from the standard image and take that same shot using backlighting or make use of wide-angle lenses to incorporate some of its surroundings and give a sense of place. Try these different techniques out, you might be surprised about the results.

Good luck

As you can see there are a few things to keep in mind. It is often very frustrating when seeing a nice butterfly posing nicely on a colourful flower, you approach it very carefully, put your tripod and camera in position and just, when you are about to take the first shot, it flies off. But if you get a hold on these techniques and you have enough patience and determination, I can assure you that some rewarding images can be taken. Think outside the box and try to add a little more drama to your shots, by trying out different techniques. Don't hesitate to photograph from different angles, in different light and you'll soon notice that experimenting with all these elements will improve your pictures. I hope these basic tips can get you started, but don't forget to be creative yourself.

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