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A Trip Report to Koh Samui, Thailand

Peter Eeles

It's not usual for a family holiday to result in a butterfly trip report, but this was no typical destination, this being my first holiday to anywhere remotely "tropical". And so it was that I ended up travelling to the island of Koh Samui in Thailand. When it comes to choosing a holiday destination, there's always a balance to be struck between a suitable location for relaxing (i.e. beach, pool, sun!) and being butterfly-rich. Having come across the excellent [Samui Butterflies](#) website, run by Les Day (who, as it turns out, is an ex-pat) the holiday was booked for the first half of September 2013. Since this wasn't a day-by-day butterfly trip, I thought it best to organise it around the various butterfly families, in line with Les' website.



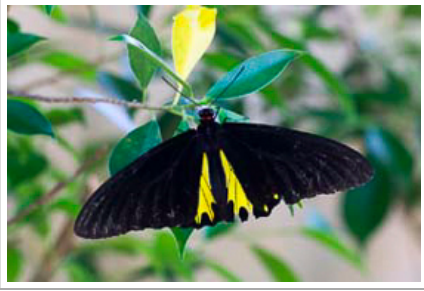
Koh Samui, Thailand (shown marked with a pin)

Papilionidae

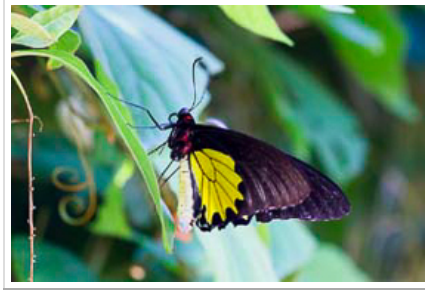
Ever since I was a small boy poring over my butterfly books, I've always wanted to see a birdwing butterfly, one of which (Queen Alexandra's Birdwing, *Ornithoptera alexandrae*) is the largest butterfly in the world. Although I've seen a birdwing in captivity, seeing one in the wild would be fulfilling a childhood ambition. A trip on an "Island Safari" (an affair where you get strapped into a jeep while a maniac who's never had a driving lesson in his life drives as fast as possible, especially around blind bends) gave me my first tantalising glimpse of the Common Birdwing (*Troides helena cerberus*). This is an unmistakable black-and-yellow affair and I saw my first towards the end of the day at one of the highest points on the island, as it floated majestically across the forest canopy and out of sight. I was absolutely uplifted, but also downheartened that I hadn't managed to get the close encounter I was hoping for.

Having been in touch with Les prior to my trip, he assured me that these were a relatively-common butterfly, and were often found nectaring on *Ixora* bushes that are often found in resort grounds. As it happened, the resort did have a few *Ixora* bushes but, despite frequent searches, I never found my target. A few days had passed since my first birdwing encounter when, out of the blue, a birdwing flew right past me as I was sipping the mandatory mid-morning banana milkshake by the pool. Having inadvertently gulped more of the milkshake than I should have, and coughing uncontrollably as a result, I set off to see where it might have landed, but it was long gone. Was I never going to see this beautiful creature close up?

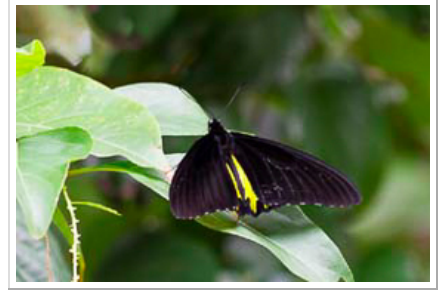
The following morning, having showered and dressed, we set off for breakfast. Just as we opened the door from our villa, which opened onto a resort walkway, not one, but two birdwings flew right past us chasing after one another and, again, out of sight. I think I grumbled most of my way through breakfast that morning. Returning to the villa I couldn't believe it. There, resting on a bush right outside the room, was a Common Birdwing. At last! I rushed inside the villa to get my camera and managed to get the shots I was after, and the holiday could now start without a grumpy butterfly nut in tow! As it happened, the bush that overhung the door into our villa was a favourite for birdwings and every few mornings we'd wake up to find a birdwing resting or feeding on this very bush. Anyone wanting to relive the experience should book themselves into the superb [Saree Samui resort](#) and make sure they get villa 316!



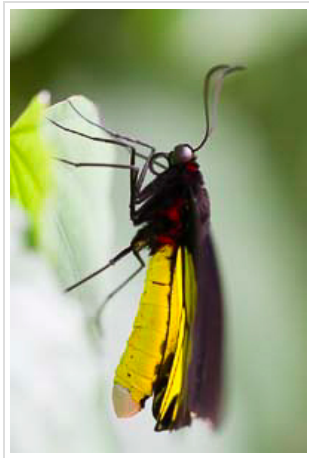
Common Birdwing (Troides helena cerberus)



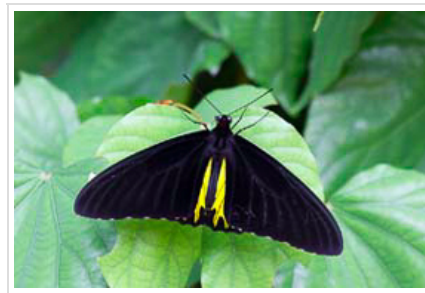
Common Birdwing (Troides helena cerberus)



Common Birdwing (Troides helena cerberus)



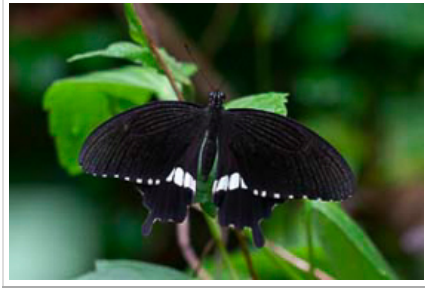
Common Birdwing (Troides helena cerberus)



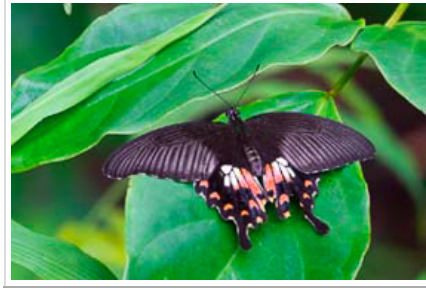
Common Birdwing (Troides helena cerberus)

Common Birdwing (Troides helena cerberus)

One of the common *Papilios* encountered was the Common Mormon (*Papilio polytes romulus*). The male is quite distinctive, but the female comes in one of two forms. The female below is of the form *polytes* and is a mimic of the Common Rose (*Pachliopta aristolochiae*) but lacks its red body. The much rarer form, *cyrus* is like the male. Like many other swallowtails, this species is pretty difficult to get a good photo of unless settled, since it's constantly on the move when feeding, as the video footage below shows.



Common Mormon (*Papilio polytes romulus*) - male



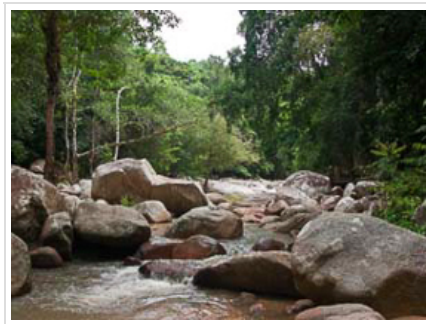
Common Mormon (*Papilio polytes romulus*) - female f. polytes

Common Mormon (*Papilio polytes romulus*)

When it comes to uncooperative butterflies, however, the prize certainly went to the Great Mormon (*Papilio memnon agenor*), which I never saw settled once, despite seeing quite a few at Han Lad Waterfall. Here I had the pleasure of spending time with Les Day - the island's only Lepidopterist and the first person to ever study the island's butterflies and their distribution in any detail (and Les gets several mentions in the definitive [Butterflies of Thailand](#)). The Great Mormon is a huge butterfly, larger than the birdwings I'd seen, and larger than some birds! All of the "in flight" shots I took were appalling, but we did manage to find some of these butterflies nectaring at the start of the path to the waterfall. I must admit, given the white wall I had to shoot against, I thought the photos would look pretty awful, with the white balance completely thrown out. However, some "recovery work" on the computer seems to have paid off, with the two photos below looking more like an artistic plate than a photo. Once again, things turned out alright in the end!



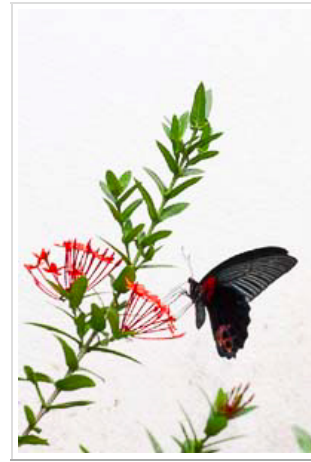
The man himself - Mr. Les Day



Heading up towards Hin Lad Waterfall



Great Mormon (*Papilio memnon agenor*)



Great Mormon (*Papilio memnon agenor*)

Pieridae

One of the *Pierids* looked quite familiar at first glance, since the Psyche (*Leptosia nina malayana*) is closely-related to our Wood White (*Leptidea sinapis*) and has very similar habits, especially its dainty flight as it flits from flower to flower. The Anderson's grass-Yellow (*Eurema andersoni andersoni*), one of many yellows found on the island, is more-closely related to the Clouded Yellows that we have in Europe.

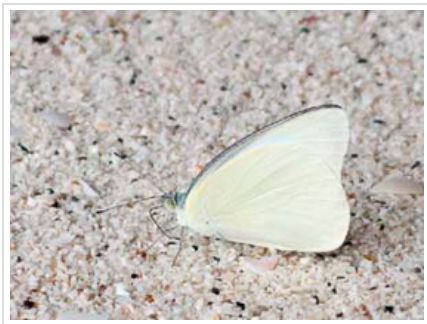


Psyche (*Leptosia nina malayana*)

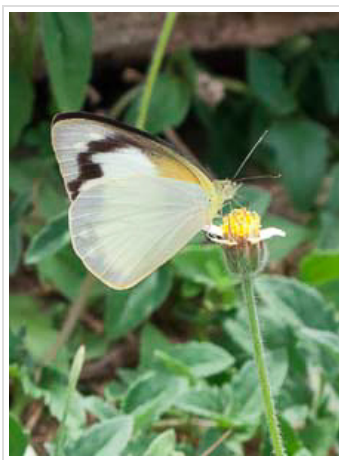


Anderson's grass-Yellow (*Eurema andersoni andersoni*)

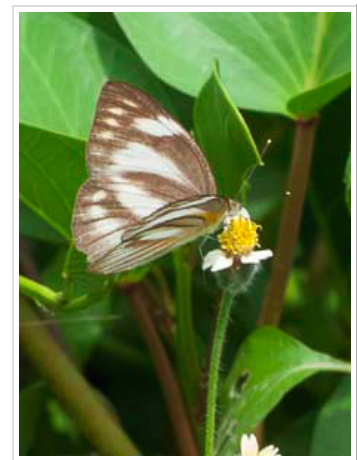
A trip to Anghthong National Marine Park, a group of islands off the west coast of Koh Samui, started with the spectacular sight of Common Albatross (*Appias albina darada*) and Striped Albatross (*Appias olferna olferna*) flying out at sea and over the boat, congregating in their hundreds as we got closer and closer to land. These butterflies are clearly well-named as they obviously wander far and wide. The Common Albatross is one of only a handful of butterflies that I've ever seen taking up minerals from a sandy beach, just above the shoreline.



Common Albatross (*Appias albina darada*) - male



Common Albatross (*Appias albina darada*) - female



Striped Albatross (*Appias olferna olferna*)

Nymphalidae - Danainae

Whenever I go on holiday, I always try and find an interesting area close to where we're staying so that I can check out any local Lepidoptera and other wildlife. Such areas are often patches of waste ground that have been left to "go wild" and are, normally, unspectacular in terms of any wildlife found there. This time, like so many others things, was completely different. Here, the local patch was a lightly-forested area with palm trees growing up among other vegetation and led up to a more heavily-forested area on a hill.

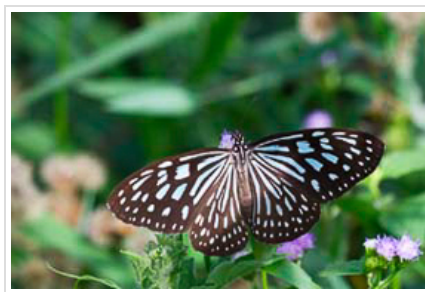


Mae Nam

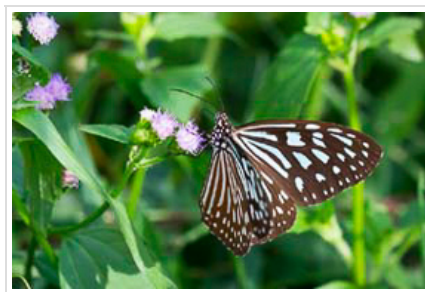


Mae Nam

The butterfly fauna seemed to change throughout the day, but late afternoon was particularly spectacular, the sight of many Blue Glassy Tiger (*Ideopsis similis persimilis*) giving a truly tropical feel. Several Common Indian Crow (*Euploea core graminifera*) were also seen. I was quite enjoying my first visit to this site until a lorry came along and dumped what I can only assume, given the smell, was the content from several septic tanks! Still - I was then hopeful of species that had a taste for such things, and vowed to return at a less odorous moment!

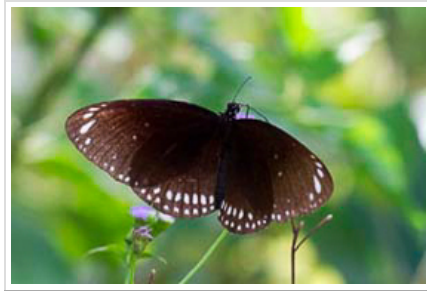


Blue Glassy Tiger (*Ideopsis similis persimilis*)

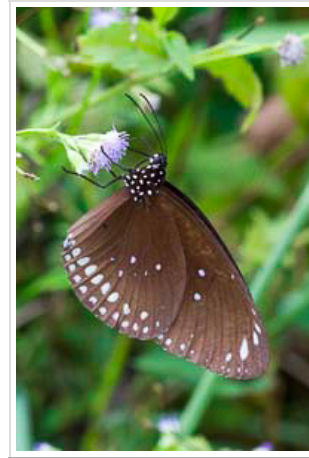


Blue Glassy Tiger (*Ideopsis similis persimilis*)

Blue Glassy Tiger (*Ideopsis similis persimilis*)



Common Indian Crow (*Euploea core graminifera*)



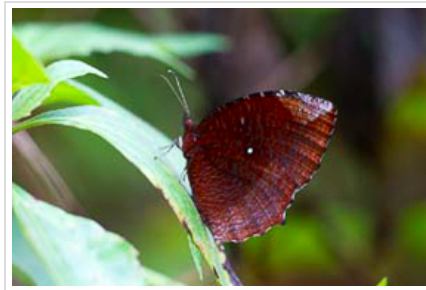
Common Indian Crow (*Euploea core graminifera*)

Nymphalidae - Satyrinae

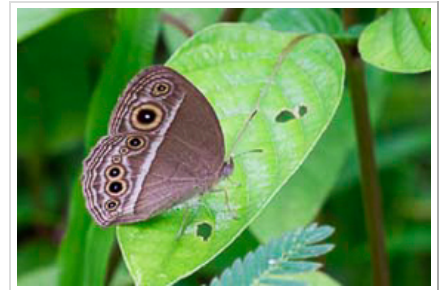
The island has a good share of *Satyrids* and Les' website is indispensable in helping distinguish the different species. All of the species shown below were taken at a waterfall to the north-east of Nathon, the island's capital on the west of the island, with the exception of the Pan (*Xanthotaenia busiris busiris*) which was seen in the more heavily-forested areas at Hin Lad Waterfall.



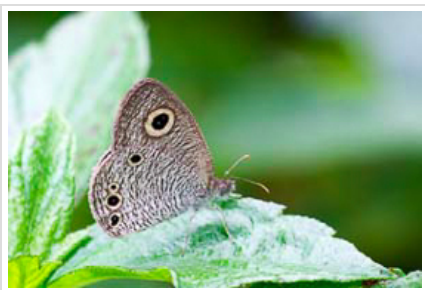
Track up to a waterfall near Nathon



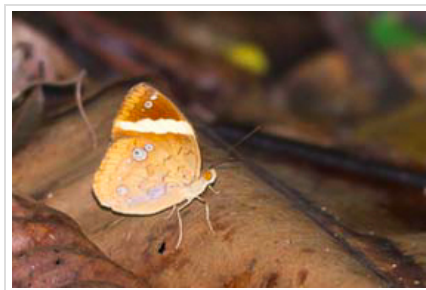
Common Palmfly (*Elymnias hypemnestra tinctoria*)



Intermediate Bushbrown (*Mycalesis intermedia*)



Common Fourring (*Ypthima huebneri*)



Pan (*Xanthotaenia busiris busiris*)



Yours truly, melting at Hin Lad Waterfall

Nymphalidae - Morphinae

I usually associate the *Morphinae* subfamily with morphos and owl butterflies, but this subfamily also includes many other taxa, including those known as "Fauns" and the Common Faun (*Faunis canens arcesilas*), with distinctive blue eyes, was found in good numbers at Hin Lad Waterfall.



Common Faun (*Faunis canens arcesilas*)

Nymphalidae - Charaxinae

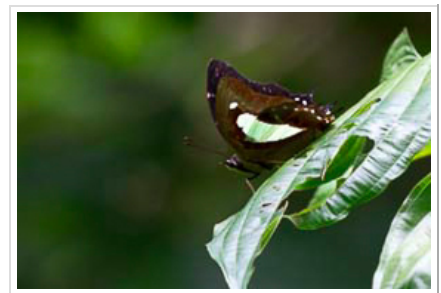
Two species of *Charaxinae* were found at Hin Lad Waterfall - the Tawny Rajah (*Charaxes bernadus crepax*) and the Common Nawab (*Polyura athamas athamas*). The tails on the latter species reminding me of the Two-tailed Pasha (*Charaxes jasius*) found in Europe, and it spent a good amount of time in a particular clearing that was particularly productive with several Great Mormon seen flying in the area together with many other species.



Tawny Rajah (*Charaxes bernadus crepax*)



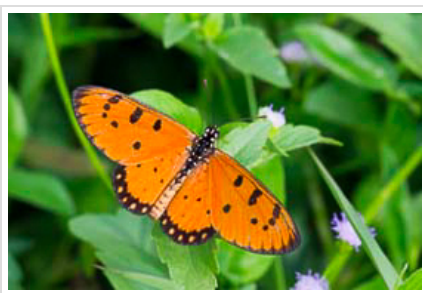
Common Nawab (*Polyura athamas athamas*)



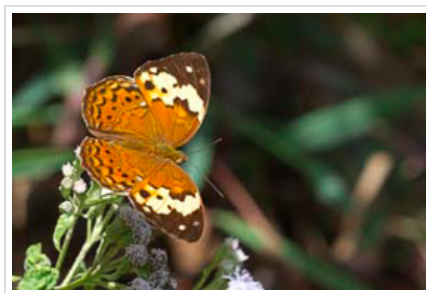
Common Nawab (*Polyura athamas athamas*)

Nymphalidae - Heliconiinae

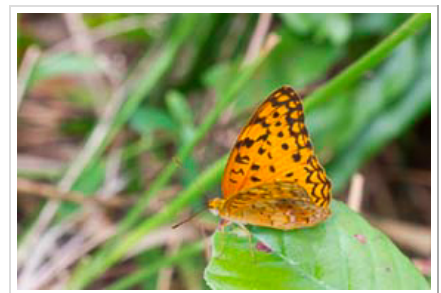
Heliconiids were found at every site visited and those species seen demonstrated the variability to be found within this subfamily. The Tawny Coaster (*Acraea violae*) was particularly common at Mae Nam, and the Common Yeoman (*Cirrochroa tyche rotundata*) was seen at every site visited.



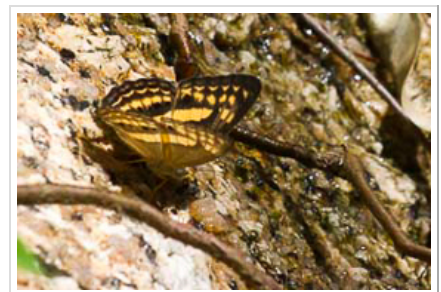
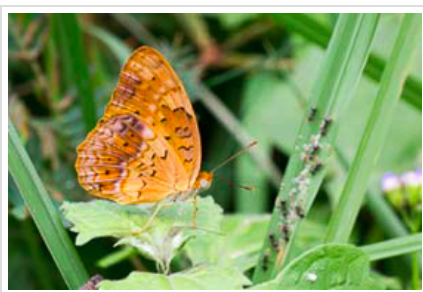
Tawny Coaster (*Acraea violae*)



Rustic (*Cupha erymanthis erymanthis*)



Common Leopard (*Phalanta phalantha phalantha*)



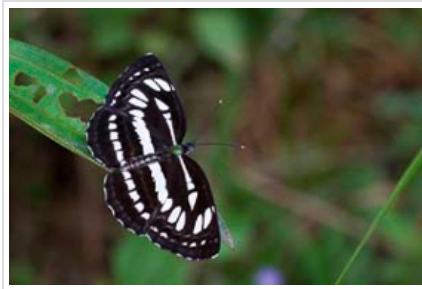
Common Leopard (*Phalanta phalantha phalantha*)

Common Yeoman (*Cirrochroa tyche rotundata*)

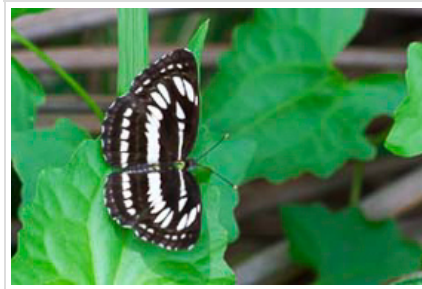
Little Banded Yeoman (*Paduca fasciata fasciata*)

Nymphalidae - Limenitidinae

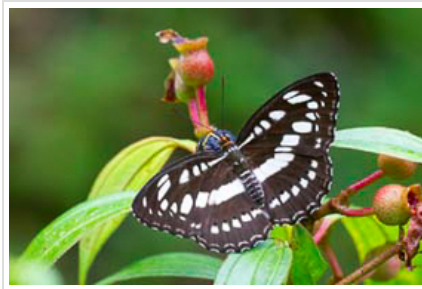
The *Limenitidinae* subfamily includes the White Admiral (*Ladoga camilla*) found in the British Isles, and the various "gliders" found in Europe. It wasn't surprising, therefore, to come across a few species that looked very similar to these species.



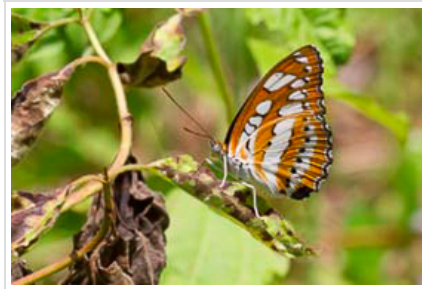
Common Sailor (*Neptis hylas papaja*)



Common Sailor (*Neptis hylas papaja*)



Common Sargeant (*Athyma perius perius*)

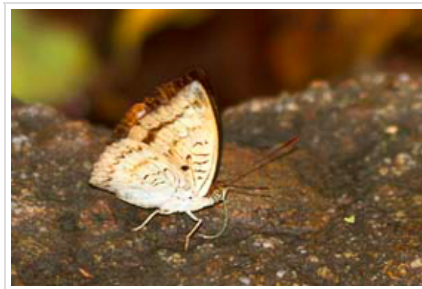


Common Sargeant (*Athyma perius perius*)

Less-familiar species included the Malay Baron (*Euthalia monina monina*), Mango Baron (*Euthalia aconthea gurda*), Lavender Count (*Cynitia cocytus cocytus*) and Great Marquis (*Euthalia dunya dunya*).

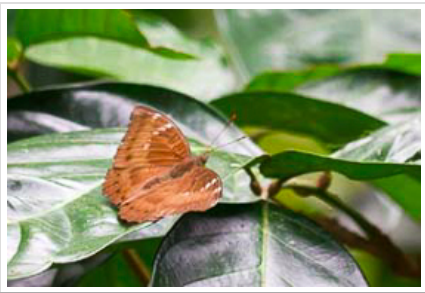


Malay Baron (*Euthalia monina monina*)

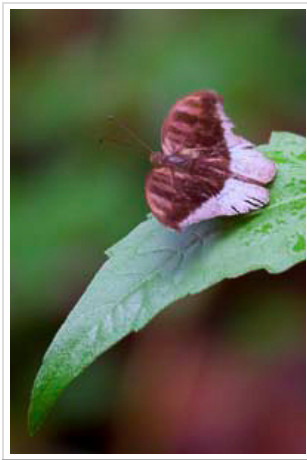


Malay Baron (*Euthalia monina monina*)

Malay Baron (*Euthalia monina monina*)



Mango Baron (*Euthalia aconthea gurda*)



Lavender Count (*Cynitia cocytus cocytus*)



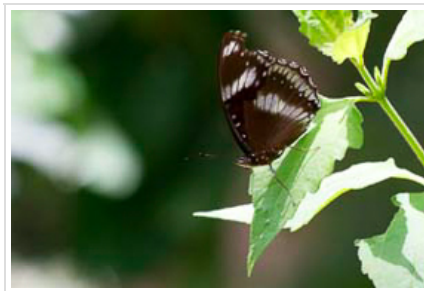
Great Marquis (*Euthalia dunya dunya*)

Nymphalidae - Nymphalinae

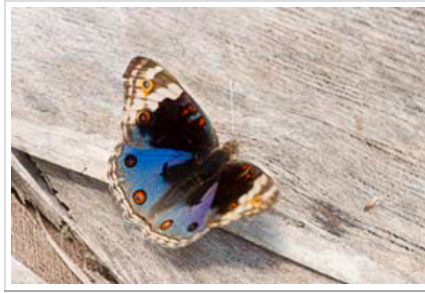
Of course, there were also several species more reminiscent of the *Nymphalids* back home, the "pansies" in particular. The most delightful creature, though, was the Little Map (*Cyrestis themire themire*), which almost always settled on the *underside* of a leaf, making it very difficult to get any kind of sensible shot with it constantly playing peek-a-boo!



Little Map (*Cyrestis themire themire*)



Great Eggfly (*Hypolimnus bolina jacintha*)



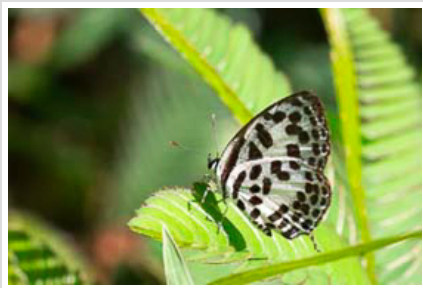
Blue Pansy (*Junonia orithya wallacei*)



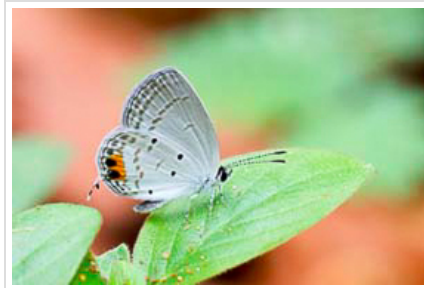
Peacock Pansy (*Junonia almana almana*)

Lycaenidae

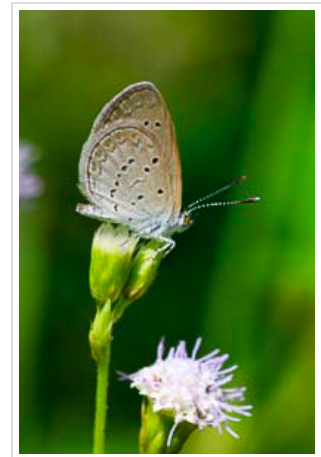
Koh Samui has a wonderful array of *Lycaenids*, and I mentioned to Les that the Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*), which is also found in Koh Samui, must be one of the most widespread species on the planet. Les let me know that the vernacular name for this species in Asia is the Pea Blue, since the concept of "Long-tailed" takes on a whole new meaning when it comes to tropical species. In fact, adjectives such as "Small", "Large", "Long-tailed", "Short-tailed" and so on, used for European species, are pretty much redundant! I remember coming across a Tiny Grass Blue (*Zizula hylax pygmaea*), one of the smallest butterflies in the world, that is about half the size of our Small Blue (*Cupido minimus*) with a 11-15mm wingspan, making the latter look positively huge in comparison!



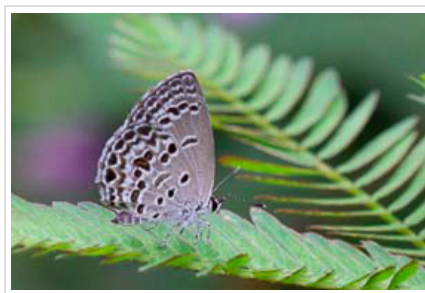
Common Pierrot (*Castalius rosimon rosimon*)



Indian Cupid (*Everes lacturnus lacturnus*)



Lesser Grass Blue (*Zizina otis lampa*)



Lime Blue (*Chilades lajus tavoyanus*)



Plain Cupid (*Chilades pandava pandava*)

Some of the more exotic *Lycaenids* included those with extremely long tails. Again, seeing one of these creatures has been high on my wish list from a very young age and, again, Les came up trumps with several sightings of the Fluffy Tit (*Zeltus amasa maximinianus*), although my photos don't do it justice (the last image below is highly cropped, having been taken from about six feet away from the subject). Seeing Gray Tinsel (*Catapaecilma major emas*) and Yamfly (*Loxura atymnus atymnus*) was also quite special.



Common Caerulean (*Jamides celeno celeno*)



Metallic Caerulean (*Jamides alecto ageladas*)



Gray Tinsel (*Catapaecilma major emas*)



Yamfly (*Loxura atymnus atymnus*)



Common Tit (*Hypolycaena erylus teatus*)



Fluffy Tit (*Zeltus amasa maximianus*)

Hesperiidae

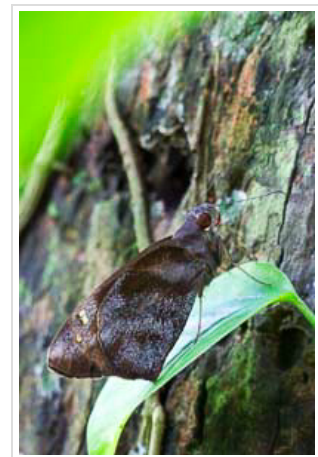
I must admit, I have a soft spot for the skippers, one of my favourite butterfly families. I'm constantly surprised by the variety of skippers that exist, well-demonstrated by those I saw on Koh Samui, a selection of which are shown below. Some of these skippers are very large in comparison to our own skippers, the Coconut Skipper (*Hidari irava*), for example, having a 5cm wingspan.



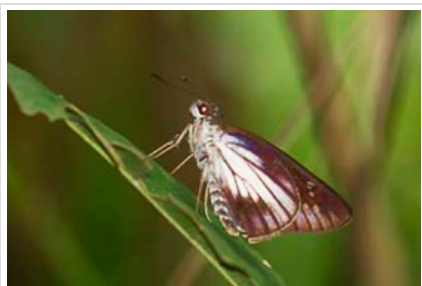
Common Banded Demon (*Notocrypta paralyos varians*)



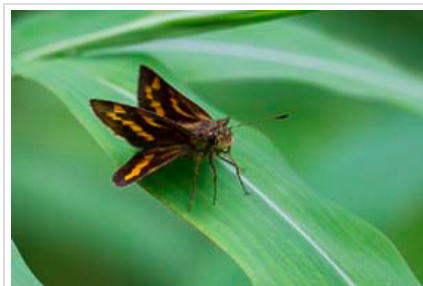
Indian Palm Bob (*Suastus gremius gremius*)



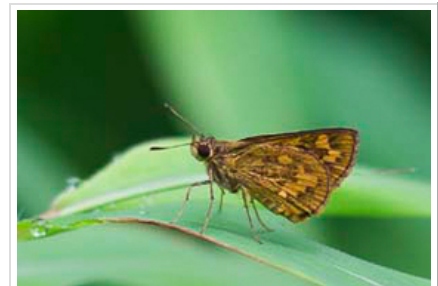
Giant Red-eye (*Gangara thyrsis thyrsis*)



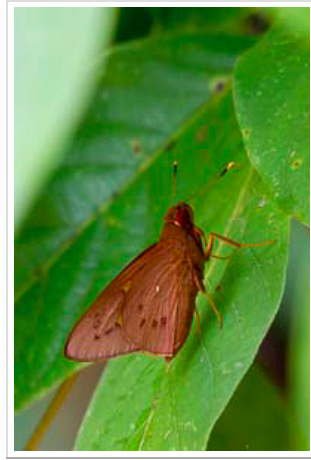
Hoary Palmer (*Unkara ambasa batara*)



Ganda Dart (*Potanthus ganda ganda*)



Ganda Dart (*Potanthus ganda ganda*)



Coconut Skipper (*Hidari irava*)

Other Species

This report wouldn't be complete without some mention of the other fascinating creatures encountered. As well as spectacular dragonflies and damselflies (in extremely good numbers wherever I went), there were multi-coloured beetles, spiders and other creatures just everywhere. I must admit, I had to force myself to concentrate on butterflies, otherwise I'd have become so absorbed looking at ants, millipedes and other critters and missed out on the very creatures I was hoping to find!

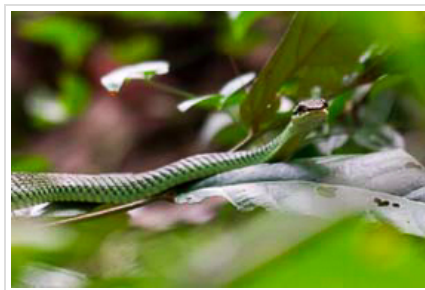
Even the reptiles put on a good show, and we managed to find a Golden Tree Snake (*Chrysopelea ornata*), one of the famous flying snakes, perfectly camouflaged on a branch. But the highlight, for me, was seeing a baby (so Les tells me) Monitor Lizard which, once it saw us, scampered away at high speed into its forest habitat.



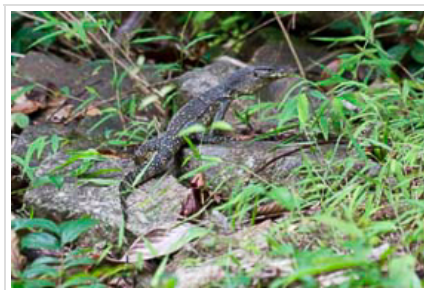
Fulvous Forest Skimmer (*Neurothemis fulvia*)



Golden Silk Orb-Weaver (*Nephila pilipes*)



Golden Tree Snake (*Chrysopelea ornata*)



Monitor Lizard

Of course, I saw many more butterfly species than those I managed to get photos of and describe here. If you want to learn more about Koh Samui's butterflies, then I refer you back to Les Day's excellent [Samui Butterflies](#) website. On that note, I want to thank Les for the pleasure of his company and his sound advice in helping me track down my targets. Les also tells me that he's more than happy to show

others around who might be visiting Koh Samui and Les can be contacted through his website.