

# Flutter buy

*India is home to many species of butterflies. This book is a timely introduction as well as a field guide to these delicate insects*

**C**ornelian, Grass Jewel, Chapman's Cupid, Forest Quaker, Blue Mormon, Red Pierrot, Punchinello, Harlequin, Jezebel — few other groups of living creatures have as imaginative names as butterflies. Surely the imaginative nomenclature is sufficient evidence of the inordinate fascination that many amateurs and professionals have with these charismatic insects. Naturalists have been captivated by the diversity of form and colour with over 18,000 described species of butterflies in the world, and 1,500 species in India alone. Biologists have also been fascinated by their evolutionary adaptations such as mimicry and migration.

Given the recent growth of ecology, evolution and conservation science as disciplines in the country, the need for comprehensive field guides is felt in almost every taxon. And given public enchantment with butterflies, it is surprising that they have not been the centre of even more attention in ecological and biological studies in India, though they have certainly received more than most invertebrate groups. Thus *The Book of Indian Butterflies* is timely and should encourage young ecologists to pursue research on this group.

Kehimkar's book is published by the Bombay Natural History Society, one of the oldest wildlife organisations in the country. The BNHS has a history of publishing wildlife books. *The Book of Indian Animals* was the best compendium on Indian mammals for over two decades and continues to be a source of valuable information. Similarly, *The Book of Indian Birds* was the first stop for an amateur birdwatcher, while *The Book of Indian Reptiles* served a similar role for aspiring herpetologists. In recent years, field guides on birds, snakes and mammals have joined or even supplanted BNHS publications.

However, no such equivalent exists for butterflies. BNHS published the first major volume on butterflies by W H Evans in 1927. Wynter-Blyth's *Butterflies of the Indian Region*, published in 1957 by the society, is the last comprehensive account for the subcontinent. A recent field guide on butterflies by K Kunte is an excellent contribution, but deals only with those found in the Western Ghats.

Kehimkar's book is nicely organised. After an introductory section that covers basic butterfly biology, there are short pieces on behaviour, adaptations and migration, and a substantial one on biogeography. This is followed by a key to common butterflies, which is most useful for amateurs and budding butterfly watchers. The main body of the book includes descriptions and illustrations of over 700 butterflies found in the Indian subcontinent. Upper and under surfaces of the wing are illustrated where different, as also males and females. This section is divided by families including Skippers, Swallowtails, Whites and Yellows, Brush-footed butterflies and Blues. A useful practical detail is the use of a distinct colour for each family at the top left corner of each page, which makes each section particularly easy to locate.

The entry on each species includes its wingspan, status, distribution, habit and habitat. Eventually, it would be useful to have maps for the distribution, as found in current bird and mammal guides. Given that all the illustrations and photographs are reproduced in colour, the price is not unreasonable. However, it is probably too expensive for many avid students of natural history, although this should not detract from an excellent compendium.

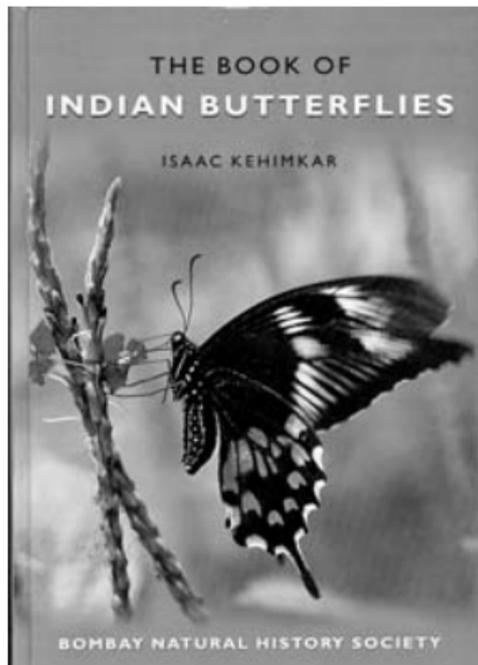
Butterflies are an excellent flagship for conservation in urban landscapes. Butterfly parks can serve as educational centres, and gardens can be easily modified to attract butterflies, with flowering plants to provide nectar to adults and food plants for them to lay eggs on. Kehimkar provides brief accounts of gardening for butterflies and butterfly conservation at the end of the book.

Like many other taxa, butterflies are affected by several anthropogenic threats. For groups such as birds and butterflies, monitoring by civil society groups has contributed considerably to the knowledge of trends and threats, which is critical for conservation. This is where Kehimkar's book becomes really useful, as the motivated layperson can begin to contribute to a network of butterfly watchers.

Tamil Treebrown. Chinese Labyrinth. Mandarin Blue. Eastern Comma. French Duke. Painted Courtesan. As exotic as these names are, they only provide a glimpse into the world of these fascinating creatures. Like sirens, they lure us into the depths of the natural world, till we are sucked into the beauty and elegance of its patterns and processes.

— **Karthik Shanker**

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## THE BOOK OF INDIAN BUTTERFLIES

**AUTHOR:** Isaac Kehimkar

**PUBLISHER:** OUP

**PRICE:** Rs 1,500

**PAGES:** 520