

The butterflies are back, and for the Gulf Coast they signify hope, resilience, and new beginnings.



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Left to right: Fairhope's Butterfly Sanctuary plays host to a variety of butterflies, from the monarch caterpillar to the adult Gulf Coast fritillary. But these beautiful insects are certainly not limited to Fairhope—explore the coast from Louisiana to Florida and see them all!

Everybody loves butterflies. In fact, butterfly watching is fast becoming the new bird watching, and communities all along the Gulf Coast give visitors plenty of opportunities to interact with everyone's favorite flying insect.

In Fairhope, Alabama, the town's butterfly sanctuary on the shores of Mobile Bay offers a pesticide-and-mower-free haven designed to cater to a butterfly's basic needs. Public Works Director Jennifer Fidler says that the city's do-not-mow policy has resulted in a bounty of plants that butterflies love. Milkweed and lantana grow wild and the city also plants asclepias—butterfly weed—and other plants. The sanctuary benefits from the expertise of volunteers including Carol Griffin, whose 4,500-square-foot home garden is butterfly central for most of the year. Carol says that providing host plants to feed the caterpillars is key to attracting butterflies. In the spring, her garden plays host to the Giant Swallowtail, whose caterpillars love citrus and make their home in her satsuma and lemon trees.

The Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, located between Gulf Shores and Fort Morgan on Highway 180, sees butterflies year round. Spring is noted for the big Swallowtails in yellow or black, feeding on lantana, but Refuge Biologist Jereme Phillips says "I've seen them in December and January. We have plants blooming all year, but the most intriguing butterflies, the Monarchs, come in fall."

the butterfly
effect





LEFT IMAGE BY HENRY CANCIENNE



dome, sweet dome

A colorful symbol of new beginnings beloved by brides and graduates everywhere, butterflies are especially important these days on Grand Isle, a Louisiana barrier island, where the 1,500 year-round population swells during summer fishing rodeos to ten times that many and where there are more resident boats than cars.

A few years back, Grand Isle Butterfly Conservancy's Wayne Keller, amateur entomologist and plant enthusiast, spearheaded the construction of a butterfly dome on property donated by the local port commission on LA Highway 1 with funding from ExxonMobile and smaller donors. It was a huge hit, visited by thousands fascinated by butterflies progressing from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis, emerging as Monarchs or Giant Swallowtails, Queens or Great Southern Whites, Black Swallowtails or Little Yellows, Buckeyes, Checkered Whites, or Red Admirals.

And then came 2005. Tropical Storm Cindy, later classified a hurricane, wiped out the dome, and then the devastating winds and saltwater storm surges from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita finished off the plants. There was nothing left of the Butterfly Dome. But these folks down along the coast are used to hurricanes, so it wasn't long before the sounds of chainsaws and hammers rang out.

Wayne and his volunteer crew viewed the demolition as an opportunity to build better and stronger. The new heavy-duty geodesic dome is constructed of one-inch steel conduit, covered in greenhouse shade cloth. With hatches all year long in this mild climate, the butterflies are back, and for all of Grand Isle, indeed for all of coastal Louisiana, they signify hope and resilience and new beginnings. —Anne Butler

Grand Isle Butterfly Dome is open daily free of charge (donations welcome). Call Wayne Keller at 504-415-0102 or the Port Commission at 985-787-2229 for more information.

The Monarch migration each October draws crowds to butterfly walks led by volunteers. Hurricanes Ivan and Katrina destroyed many of the plants which lure butterflies, so the migrations have been less spectacular in recent years, but the Refuge is still home to more than 100 butterfly varieties.

One of the best spots along the Alabama coast to observe the complete butterfly life cycle from egg to adult is the Biophilia Nature Center, on Baldwin County Road 95 near Elberta.


This nature preserve, which is open to the public by appointment, began as a project to restore the native plant habitat. Spring here brings the Swallowtails—Giant, Pipevine, Black, and Tiger.

Farther east, visitors to Navarre, Florida can visit the Panhandle Butterfly House, where gardens inside and out bloom with native plants. The sanctuary is open from early May through Labor Day, Tuesday through Sunday. Visitors can expect to see 300 to 500 butterflies gliding among the flowers. Director Sandra Sherman

says the most popular butterflies are the Eastern Swallowtail, the Monarch, and the Gulf Fritillary. The Swallowtail, a summer favorite, comes to penta, lantana, zinnias and marigolds, while its caterpillars chew their way through dill, parsley, and Queen Anne's Lace.

A nonprofit organization, the Panhandle Butterfly House is maintained and operated by the Master Gardeners of Santa Rosa, Escambia, and Okaloosa counties, assisted by more than 100 volunteers. Those inspired to create their own butterfly habitats get help from a brochure which lists plants that attract butterflies and provide food for caterpillars.

East of Destin, the Florida coast is home to a number of butterfly attractions ranging from all-natural to carefully cultivated. Topsail Hill State Preserve, 1,600 acres on Highway 98, is a year-round haven for butterflies. Hal Rhodes, head of the community support organization Friends of Topsail Hill, says that spring butterflies in



FLUTTERING ABOVE THE DUNES, PERCHING ON WILDFLOWERS, OR POSING IDLY FOR YOUR CAMERA, THEY ARE A BEAUTIFUL, CHEERFUL PART OF LIFE ON THE BEACH.

The Grand Isle Butterfly Dome (opposite, top) is back and better than ever. Pick any spot on the Gulf Coast and you're sure to see Monarchs (opposite, bottom), various Swallowtails (above), Little Yellows and Buckeyes, among many others.

the area include the blue Spring Azures and the yellow Cloudless Sulphurs along with Orange Sulphurs and Monarchs.

Other butterfly gardens in the area include Eden State Gardens at Port Washington, off Highway 98. The park, on the edge of Choctawhatchee Bay, centers around the elegant mansion built by lumber baron William Henry Wesley in the late 1800s. Today the house sits under spreading live oak trees and is surrounded by huge azaleas, camellias, and the native-plant butterfly garden.

Florida's Scenic Highway 30-A, which loops off Highway 98, is known for its planned towns, art galleries, and charming shops. Butterflies are fast becoming a featured attraction here, too. WaterColor Inn and Resort, the elegant vacation community, maintains a large butterfly garden in its Cerulean Park area. Plantings include native plants like goldenrod and milkweed (a favorite with Monarchs) as well as penta, lantana, and vinca.

In 2002, the town of Rosemary Beach, on the eastern end of 30A, added its own Butterfly Park. A team comprising garden designer Stephen Poulakos, horticulturist Randy Harelson, and butterfly specialist Akers Pence first identified the pretty orange Gulf Fritillary as the type of butterfly visitors would be most likely to see. The team then outlined the life cycle of the butterfly and put in plantings specifically designed to appeal to it.

Butterflies can be a part of your Gulf Coast trip nearly year-round. Fluttering above the dunes, perching on wildflowers, or posing idly for your camera, they are a beautiful, cheerful part of life on the beach. ●

Interested in making butterflies a part of your Gulf Coast visit? Pick a sunny day—butterflies are more active when it's warm—and do a little research. The Internet is a good source for background information.

The city of Fairhope has information on its site: www.cofairhope.com/butterflysanctuary1.html and visitors can find additional information at the Panhandle Butterfly House site: www.thebutterflyhouse.com. Find information on watching butterflies and other natural attractions along Florida's Scenic Highway 30-A, visit the Web site at www.beachesofsouthwalton.com.

Bring a camera and plenty of film. And prepare to be patient. Butterflies, after all, would rather flutter than pose.