

A Butterfly Migration: Blue-spotted Arabs at Jebel Barakah, western Abu Dhabi

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Migrations of butterflies are a widely recognised phenomenon, yet one that is still little studied. Larsen (1984) reported that 57% of the 28 species then recorded in Eastern Arabia (i.e. the UAE and the eastern seaboard of Arabia, running along the Gulf) showed evidence of migratory behaviour. One of these species is the Blue-spotted Arab (*Colotis phisadia*), a common species in the Pieridae. The larval food plant is *Salvadora persica*, a species both native to Arabia and also very widely planted alongside roads and in plantations.

On 24th October 2006, it was noted that large numbers of Blue-spotted Arabs were flying ashore at Jebel Barakah, western Abu Dhabi. They were first noted at around 10.00, and were still streaming in at 13.00 when we departed the area. The day was cloudless with a slight onshore breeze, and an air temperature at 13.00 of 37°C. The behaviour of the butterflies was quite distinctive. They were flying in over the sea from the north-west, either singly or in twos or threes. Their flight was relatively fast and direct, and varied from a few centimetres to about one metre above the sea surface. At the time the sea was very calm, with a wave height of no more than 15 cm. When the butterflies reached the cliffs, most flew up and over without varying direction. However many did land on the scattered plants of *Salsola imbricata* in the gulleys in the cliffs. These butterflies tended to shelter in the shade and appeared to be seeking moisture with unrolled probosci.

It was estimated that the butterflies were arriving at a rate of about 5 per minute within 10 metres either side of an observer, which gives an approximate arrival rate of 15,000 butterflies per hour per kilometre of coast. How wide the migration front was is not known, though on driving towards Abu Dhabi along the highway, it was noted that Blue-spotted Arabs were exceptionally abundant for almost 100 km eastwards from Jebel Barakah. In any case the numbers of butterflies involved

was certainly massive, and possibly numbering millions. Assuming the butterflies flew in a constant direction over the sea, the closest land was the Qatar peninsula, approximately 120 km away.

An abundance of Blue-spotted Arabs, estimated in hundreds of thousands, was also noted on 18 September 2005 in the Baynounah and Ruwais area. They too appeared to be moving south and east through the Baynounah plantation and Ghiyathi (Simon Aspinall, pers. comm.).

Reference

Larsen, T. (1984) *Butterflies of Saudi Arabia and its neighbours*. Stacey International, London.

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