



Butterflies of the Andaman and Nicobar islands: History of collection and checklist

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Abstract

The history of butterfly collecting on the islands is detailed, highlighting the contributions of both amateur and professional entomologists. In the light of the recent revival of interest in butterflies in India in general and islands in particular, we present a checklist of the butterflies of these islands. For the first time in many years we take a critical look at the butterflies recorded as occurring on the Andaman and Nicobar islands. We distinguish between species that are known to occur definitely on these islands versus those which are stragglers and those which have been reported on the basis of erroneous identification. We also indicate which species/subspecies are endemics and present an overview of the knowledge of the life histories, larval food plants and natural history that is known of these butterflies. A bibliography of the butterflies of the Andaman and Nicobar islands is included.

Key words: Endemics, Indian Wildlife Act

Introduction

Geography, climate and vegetation. The Andaman and Nicobar islands consist of 349 islands of which only 38 are inhabited by humans. The 325 islands that constitute the Andaman group are separated from the group of 24 islands constituting the Nicobars by the Ten Degree Channel—an effective barrier that has maintained the biotic distinctness of the island groups. With a total land area of 6408 Km² the Andamans is about 3.5 times as large as the Nicobars (1841 Km²).

The islands are situated in the Bay of Bengal in the northern Indian Ocean between 6^o to 14^o North latitudes and 92^o to 94^o East longitudes. Though the official figures put the forest cover at 87 per cent of the land area, the actual figures are lower. While the northern tip of the Andamans is about 190 Km from Myanmar the southern tip of the Nicobars is only 150 Km off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. This proximity of the two island groups to different subregions of the Oriental region has given rise to biota with Indo-Burmese and Indo-Malayan affinities in the Andamans and Nicobars, respectively. The islands experience a warm, humid climate with temperatures varying from 23.5 °C to 31.2 °C and a mean humidity of about 80 per cent. Over 3000 mm of rainfall is received during the eight months of rain when the islands are visited by both the Southwest and the Northeast monsoons (Anonymous 2008a).

The major crops being grown on the islands are rice, coconut, arecanut, tropical vegetables and fruits. The forests fall largely under the tropical, moist category with mangroves, fringing the coastlines of the bigger and many of the smaller islands. During the marked dry season between February and mid-May the deciduous forests become conspicuous as a consequence of leaf shedding.

Tectonics. The Andaman and Nicobar islands are true oceanic islands formed by the uplifting of sedimentary material at the collision zone of the Indian-Australian plate and the Southeast Asian plate at the northern extremity of the Sunda Arc (Curry 1989). They attained their current elevation (along two arcs) in late Eocene or early Oligocene times (Curry *et al.* 1979). While the outer arc formed the main islands of this archipelago the inner volcanic arc is represented above sea level by the Barren and Narcondam islands (Prashanth Mohanraj & Veenakumari 1996c).