

HISTORY OF MALTESE BUTTERFLY COLLECTING

BY PAUL M. SAMMUT

The oldest existing list on Maltese butterflies is a manuscript one drawn up by Dr. F.X. Schembri, Rector of the University between 1854-1880. In this list are enumerated the insect species contained in the collection of Father Ignazio Libassi, which by 1889 was already "an empty box." Father Libassi was in Malta between 1865 and 1873. The following 12 species are listed: *Papilio machaon* L., *Aporia crataegi* L., *Pieris brassicae* L., *Arctogeia napi* L., *Colias hyale* L., *Gonepteryx rhamni* L., *Vanessa cardui* L., *Fabriciana adippe* D. & S., *Maniola jurtina* L., *Pyronia bathseba* F., and *Lasiommata megera* L.

(Note: the local race of *M. jurtina* is now called ssp.

hyperhispulla Thomas).

Alfred Caruana-Gatto when referring to this list in 1891 writes that the collection of Libassi contained "several other examples which are foreign to the Island", and is of the opinion that *A. napi*, *A. crataegi*, *C. hyale*, *F. adippe* and *Pyronia bathseba* were not taken in Malta.

ADDITIONS

However, George F. Angas in *A Ramble in Malta and Sicily in the Autumn of 1841*, published in 1842 had already made brief reference to *Vanessids*, probably *V. atalanta* and *V. cardui*, to P.

machaon and to a new species *Iphiclides podalirius* L., and consequently one can say that he was the first person who wrote on the butterflies seen on the wing in Malta.

George Waring in 'Letters of a Naturalist from Malta and Sicily', published in 1843 makes reference to *Colias crocea* Geoffroy in Fourcroy, *P. machaon* and *Pieris brassicae*. *C. crocea* is here recorded for Malta for the first time.

W. Tallack in his book 'Malta under the Phoenicians, Knights and English', published in 1861 adds for the first time *Pontia daplidice* L., *Colias hyale* L., and *Aricia agestis* A.&S. *C. hyale* could have been the var. *helice* Hb., of *C. crocea*.

Profs. Gavino Gulia in his 'Croso Elementare di Entomologia Maltese', published in 1858 enumerates 12 species of which the following figure for the first time in local butterfly lists.

Pieris brassicae crucivora Bsd., *Gonepteryx cleopatra* L., *Colias lesbia* F., *Lycaena phlaeas* L., and *Plebejus argus* L.

RARE WORK

In the now very rare work 'Repertorio di Storia Naturale', published in 1889, Profs. Gulia deleted from the above list the following species: *A. napi*, *C. lesbia* and *P. argus* and recorded instead and for the first time *Coenonympha pamphilus* L. (Note: in Seitz, *Macrolepidoptera of the World* Vol. 1 the *f. crucivora* is attributed to *A. napi* and not to *P. brassicae*.)

Mr. Fraser in a short note in 'Nature' of January 2, 1890, records *Aglais urticae* L., and *Nymphalis polychloros* L., as flying about in the garden of his hotel in Sliema. He must have mistaken these two *Nymphalids* for worn examples of the common *V. cardui* or *V. atalanta*.

Alfred Caruana-Gatto in 'Notes on the Lepidoptera of Malta', published in the *Daily Malta Chronicle* of November 9, 1891 p. 85-88, lists 11 species of which *Pararge aegeria* L., *Lampides boeticus* L., and *Polyommatus icarus* Rott., are all recorded for the first time. Of *G. rhamni* which is today extinct from Malta, if it ever was with us and not the female of *cleopatra*, Caruana-Gatto says that it was then already very rare and that he had seen only one example in the collection of Mr. R. Briffa taken in Spring from Hastings gardens in Valetta.

During the time that he was a prisoner of war at Verdala Palace, Buskett, from June 1915 to February 1916, Adolf von Andres

collected, besides other insects, 13 species of butterflies all of which already figure in previous lists.

In 'Di alcune specie di farfalle erratiche catturate o osservate in Malta', published in *Archivum Melitense* Vol. 6 no. 4, 1925, A Caruana-Gatto enumerates eight species of butterflies of which *Pieris mesentina* Cr., (now *Anaphaeis aurota* F.) *Hipparchia semele* L., *Lasiommata maera* L., a species of *Melitaea*, *Syntarucus pirthous* L., and *Danaus Chrysippus* var. *alcippus* Cr., all figure for the first time for Malta.

LAST ADDITION

The first on the above list, *L. maera*, was noted by G.F. Mathew on January 3, 1897, "in a ravine beyond Zejtun." This species has not been recorded again by others and could have been *L. megera*. *H. semele* was taken once at St. Julian's on August 10, 1910 by Col. H. Harford. It is to be noted that on the day before, there was a strong NNW wind and that this specimen could have been blown here from Sicily. Except for this one specimen, *H. semele* has not been recorded again.

The same Col. H. Harford took one example of the widely distributed *A. aurota* from San Anton Gardens on July 19, 1910. This example, as Caruana-Gatto points out, could not but have originated as a caterpillar or pupa on some imported exotic plant.

Harford again, during the same period, recorded from Sliema another species new to our list, namely *Melitaea*, probably *M. didyma* Esp. ssp. *meridionalis* Stgr. This specimen was only noted in flight and could have easily been mistaken for some other local common butterfly, possibly a small specimen of *L. megera*.

In the same list of Caruana-

Gatto, *S. pirthous* L., which has now become fairly well established with us, was collected for the first time by Harford from St. Julian's on October 29, 1910. The fact that it does not appear in the list of P. Borg of 1932 indicates that it remained a rare butterfly for many years after. In fact it was not recorded again before 1944 by Anthony Valletta.

The last addition in this work is the large Danaid, *Danaus chrysippus* L., var. *alcippus* Cr. The first example was collected by H. Harford on June 4, 1923 from Hastings gardens in Valetta during a strong SE wind. Two other examples of this African butterfly were taken by Mr. Anthony Valletta on April 10, 1952, from Wied is-Sewda, Attard: while two others were seen close to Villa Gomerino in the limits of Rabat by Comdr. Terence Butler on April 6.

In 'The Lepidoptera of the Maltese Islands', published in 1932, Paul Borg enumerates 28 species of butterflies of which *Leptidea sinapis* L., *Clossiana dia* L., *Melitaea cinxia* L., *Polygonia c-album* L., *Pryonia tithonus* L., and *Lysandra bellargus* Rott., all figure for Malta for the first time. This list is not held by local lepidopterists as a reliable reference, in fact none of the above species were ever met with again.

Profs. John Borg, brother of Paul, in his 'Our Insect Visitors', published in 1939 in *Archivum Melitense* Vol. X no. 4, records that he took a specimen of *Callophrys rubi* L., from Wied Encita (no date is given). He adds "More or less battered specimens of *I. podalirius*". *Anthocaris euphenoides* and *Aglais urticae* have also been blown here by the wind. The range of *Anthocaris euphenoides*, which today is known as *Anthocaris belia euphenoides* Stgr., includes Spain, Portugal, N. Africa in the

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