

The Brenton Blue Butterfly

HISTORY

The Brenton Blue butterfly, *Orachrysops niobe* (Trimen), was first discovered by Roland Trimen of the South African Museum, Cape Town, in the Knysna district in 1858. On this occasion just two male specimens were caught and these remained the only records of the species until its rediscovery at Nature's Valley by Jonathan Ball in 1974. By the early 1980's it had disappeared from Nature's Valley as a result of property developments, and was thought to be extinct. In November 1991 the present breeding colony was found at Brenton-on-Sea. This is the last known population of the butterfly.

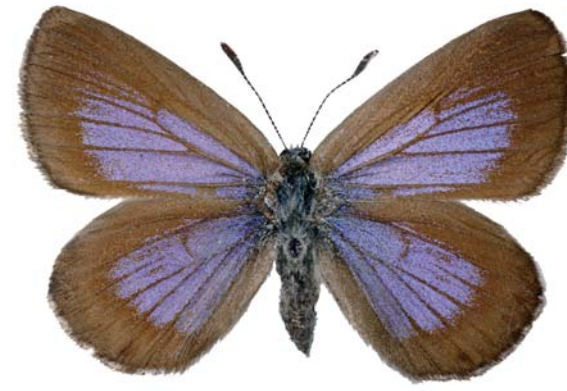


BIOLOGY

The adult butterflies are on the wing from the end of October until early December, and the females lay their pinhead size eggs on the leaves of the host plant, *Indigofera erecta*. An egg takes about 10 days to hatch, and the tiny larva feeds on the leaves of the host plant for some two weeks. It then moves down the stem of the plant and is found by ants of the species *Camponotus baynei*, which dig a hole alongside the host plant rootstock into which the larva crawls. It then starts to feed on the rootstock and remains underground, tended and protected by the ants which obtain a secretion from a gland on the larva's back. When the larva reaches full size of 18-20mm it pupates in the hole. After ten days or so the adult hatches and crawls to the surface, where its wings expand and it flies off to seek a mate. The second brood adults emerge in late January and February, and sometimes there is a third brood in April if conditions are favourable. The larvae from these broods over-winter safely underground, protected by the ants from predators and the cold, to produce the next year's adults.



Brenton Blue Adult male upperside



Brenton Blue Adult female upperside

BRENTON BLUE CAMPAIGN

The development of Brenton Extension I, where the reserve is located, was approved ten years before the butterflies were discovered at the site. A campaign was launched by the Lepidopterists' Society and Knysna conservationists to prevent the destruction of the colony. The plight of the species was publicised in the press and on television programmes such as 50/50, and the developer agreed to suspend development of the actual breeding area pending fund raising or government intervention to purchase the land. In 1996 the Endangered Wildlife Trust and the Green Trust lent their support to the campaign, and intensified negotiations with government and the developer, whilst funding further scientific research on the butterfly.

In February 1997 an interdict was granted by the Supreme Court in Cape Town preventing a private landowner



from disturbing the vegetation on one of the erven where the butterflies were breeding. This erf was subsequently purchased by Nedbank, and now forms part of the reserve.


In April 1997, the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Dr. Pallo Jordan, invoked Section 31A of the Environment Conservation Act to suspend all development on the butterfly's breeding areas. Subsequently all the critical erven were expropriated by the South African government, and comprise what is today the Brenton Blue Butterfly Special Nature Reserve, proclaimed in July 2003. This is the first time that an African government has acted to save an endangered invertebrate species, and demonstrates how committed South Africa is to the conservation of its biodiversity.

The reserve is managed by the Goukamma management team of CapeNature (Western Cape Nature Conservation Board), assisted by local conservationists and butterfly experts.




Above left: Brenton Blue female underside | Above right: Brenton Blue female


Brenton Blue butterfly mating pair




Host ants tend to the butterfly larvae




Egg of Brenton Blue butterfly on leaf of host plant




Brenton Blue caterpillar - final stage underground (above); third stage (below)



The host plant, *Indigofera erecta*



The host ant, *Camponotus baynei*



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 **Brenton Blue Trust**
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