

Migratory Butterflies on Edisto Beach

General Description

Numerous butterflies call Edisto Beach home throughout the year; however, this section will only discuss the monarch and the gulf fritillary species. Both of these butterflies can migrate causing them to travel south in the fall and north in the spring. Both butterflies can be found in our town during the fall and spring migrations (and may be seen during any warm month of the year). As adults, they feed on the same blooming plants, as well as having similarities in appearance. Gulf fritillaries get their name from their great migration southward over the Gulf of Mexico. Considered to be a medium-sized butterfly, their wingspan reaches up to three and a quarter inches. Commonly mistaken as monarchs, gulf fritillaries have narrower wings with silver markings. Both have prominent black “veins” on their wings, but monarch wing edges are black with numerous white spots. By contrast, gulf fritillaries are somewhat smaller, with more scattered black spots and streaks on the upper wing surfaces and three black-rimmed white spots on each forewing. The undersides of gulf fritillary wings are brownish with large, silvery patches.



Gulf Fritillary (top) and Monarch (bottom)

Photo by Ken Tingman

Migration

It was widely believed that in the fall monarchs only passed through South Carolina on their

way to winter in Mexico. Recent findings of a five-year study by South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) biologists suggest that coastal South Carolina is home to a unique group of monarchs and that monarch butterflies are here year-round in South Carolina, relying on swamps in spring, summer, and fall and sea islands in the winter.

Gulf fritillaries are native to the southern United States, Mexico, Central America, and South America. In the spring, they migrate north toward the central United States to breed. Florida and Georgia populations migrate north throughout the southeastern U.S. for breeding. They cannot tolerate colder weather, so they migrate back down to the southern portions of their range in the late summer and fall where the last generation will overwinter.

Protect Our Butterflies

On Edisto Beach monarchs can be found spending the evenings high in trees, particularly in cedar trees. Gulf fritillaries frequently overwinter in the vegetation of the beach sand dunes, and silvery patches of the undersides of their wings act as very effective camouflage. Please be mindful of these butterflies, and do not disturb them as they roost!

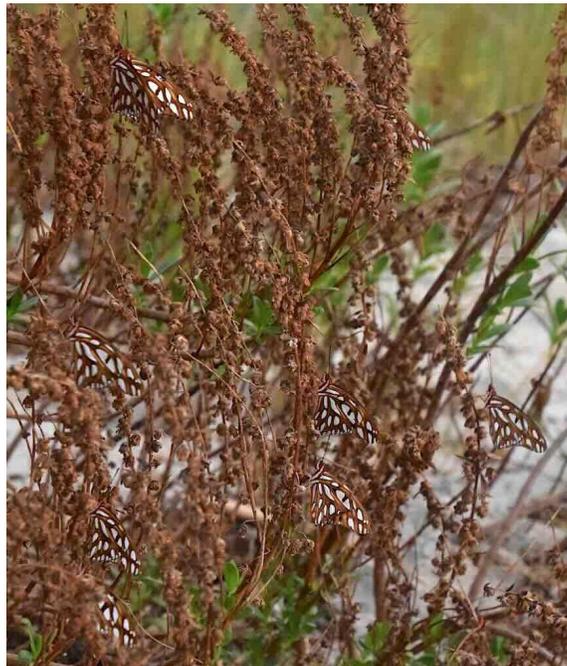


Photo by Ken Tingman

Sources: South Carolina Department of Natural Resources <https://dnr.sc.gov> and Carolinas Butterfly Monitoring Program <https://thebutterflynetwork.org>