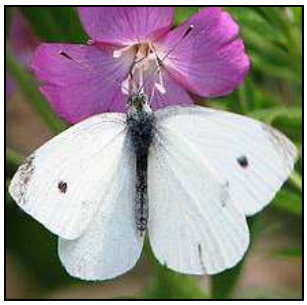
Butterflies of Northeast Iowa

Look for butterflies in fields, meadows, marshes, and other open areas that have lots of flowers and some open water.

Clouded Sulphur

Yellow with black or dark wing borders and some dark spots on the wings. Wingspan is 1.5-2.75 inches. Look for swarms of sulphurs at mud puddles or other shallow water. Found across most of America. Also known as the common sulfur or the mud puddle butterfly. Feeds on alfalfa, clovers, milkweeds, and asters. Females often use clover plants to lay eggs. Flight is April through October.

Cabbage White



Wings are white with black tips, pale green undersides, and wingspan of 2-2.25 inches. Males have one spot on their wings; females have two. Native to Europe. Probably came to the U.S. around 1860; now found all across the country. Sometimes considered a pest since the caterpillars eat vegetable crops like cabbage, broccoli, and Brussels sprouts. When a male wants to mate and a female doesn't, they will fly upward in circles around each other. Flight is April through October.

Black Swallowtail

Upper wings are mostly black with yellow marks along edges. Inner edges of hindwings have a small black spot inside a larger orange spot; hindwings also have iridescent blue spots or bands. Wingspan of 3.25-4.25 inches. Found across most of the eastern U.S. Females lay small, yellow eggs on plants like dill, carrots, or Queen Anne's Lace. Adults mimic the Pipevine Swallowtail, which is poisonous to many predators. "Swallowtails" are named for their forked tails, which look like some swallows. Flight is from April until September.

Great Spangled Fritillary

Tops of wings on males are tan to orange. Females are darker. Both have blackish marks on the tops of wings and are darker in color closer to their body. Undersides of hindwings have a wide, pale band near edges and large silver spots. Adults feed on a variety of flowers found in open, moist places. The most common fritillary in the eastern U.S. Flight is late June through early September. They often have frayed, torn wings.

Milbert's Tortoiseshell

Wings have a wide, dark brown margin, and a bright orange to yellow band inside of that. Hindwings also have a row of small blue spots. Undersides of wings are dark brown with light band along the edge. Flies swiftly. In a good year, hundreds may congregate early in the morning along country roads, but abundance varies by year. Prefers woodland edges and areas with nettles, its host plant. Also called the Fire-rim Tortoiseshell. Flight is June through October.

Monarch

Caterpillar

Adult

Chrysalis

The only insect that will migrate up to 2,500 miles. Only every 4th generation lives long enough to migrate; 1st-3rd generations live only 6 weeks. Caterpillars eat only milkweed plants, but adults eat nectar from lots of flowers. Poisonous to predators like birds and frogs, but are not harmful to humans. Wingspan is 3.5-4 inches and wings are marked with famous black and orange pattern. Flight is May through October.

Pearl Crescent

One of the most common butterflies of the eastern U.S. Orange wings with dark marks and variable black margins. There may be light colored crescents in the dark margins on the hindwing. Wingspan of 1.25-1.5 inches. Prefers woodland edges and open fields. Flight is April through October.

Red Admiral

Black hindwing has a red-orange band at margin; front wings have white marks near tips. Underside of hindwings mottled. Wingspan of 1.75-3 inches. Has a swift, erratic flight. Considered a "friendly" butterfly that might perch on humans. Prefers moist environments. Migrates to warmer climates in winter. Flight is April through September.

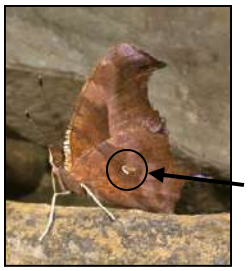
Painted Lady

Wingspan is 2-3 inches. Mostly orange. Black wingtips with five white spots. Strange, corkscrew flight pattern. One of the most widespread of all butterflies; sometimes called the "cosmopolitan" because of its global range. Good choice for raising in classrooms or for science projects. Both adults and caterpillars eat lots of different plants. Adults live only two weeks. Flight is April through October.

Summer Azure

Upper surface pale blue with dusting of white scales, especially on hindwings. Females have broad dark band along margin on upper surface of forewing. Underside chalky white with dark grey spots. One of the smallest butterflies in North America: wingspan is around 1 inch. Caterpillars have a symbiotic relationship with ants. Caterpillars supply a sugar substance for the ants and the ants protect the caterpillars. Occurs across most of the eastern and central U.S. Flight is May through September.

Question Mark



Question mark on hindwing

Hooked forewing. Upper surface red-orange with black spots. Underside light brown and hindwing has very small, white question mark in center. Wingspan of 2.25-3 inches. Adults eat rotting fruit, tree sap, dung, carrion, and, as a last resort, flower nectar. Found across all of the eastern U.S. Flight is May through October.