

Singapore's 1st Swallowtail & Birdwing Butterfly Race - A Participant's Perspective

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by Simon Chan, Leader of Team Flying Colours

Singapore's first Swallowtail and Birdwing Butterfly Race took place on 29 June 2019 jointly hosted by the Nature Society (Singapore)/NSS and Wildlife Reserves Singapore. To find out more about the event, read the activity report [here](#).

"... meet at 7.30am, Singapore Zoological Gardens, where the race flags off..."

Omigosh! What an unearthly hour to attend a butterfly event!

That was my first impression when I saw the programme for the inaugural Swallowtail & Birdwing Butterfly Race slated for 29th June 2019.

After reading the rules and regulation, I gathered four butterfly buddies to form a team. All were passionate about butterflies and loved capturing them 'on camera'. But I knew we also had to strategize how best to find and photograph our target butterflies. Amongst ourselves, we would definitely need a fast yet safe driver, a sharp shooting 'never can fail' photographer, a sustenance officer who will keep our energy levels up, and finally, 'yours truly', the well experienced butterfly man or expert to identify these winged-wonders. But first our Team's name. "This is no brainer - it's going to be 'Flying Colours!'", I exclaimed to myself.



The people making up team Flying Colours.

Next, it was 'info and revision time' for team members! Technology helped in no small measure. WhatsApp was used to "feed" everyone with information about the 10 most common Swallowtails. We then deliberated on logistics - target species, site priority, duration, and the best travel routes. It was like an exacting military exercise!

Before we knew it, the day finally arrived! Suddenly as team leader, I felt inadequate, feeling that the little knowledge I had imparted was not enough. Well, at least they know the basics I consoled myself.

Whilst sitting through the pre-race briefing, I realised that the race duration was actually quite short - only 6 hours (8am to 2pm) as we had to return to the zoo by 3pm. That meant we had to reduce the number of places to visit from five to three!

At the buzzer, all nine teams charged out to begin their great adventure!

With my team poised for the 'great photographic capture of Swallowtails & Birdwings', we set forth to Warwick Road. This place is known for the four "Common" Swallowtails i.e. the Common Birdwing, Common Rose, Common Bluebottle, and Common Mormon. However, on that day only the Common Mormon was in attendance and we managed a shot. Hiking deeper into the area revealed a disturbing activity - that of widespread grass cutting. Alas! The butterflies' habitat was greatly disturbed. All of us were very disappointed but proceeded quickly to our second planned site hoping to cut our losses. Will Lady Luck be with us?



A nectaring female Common Mormon butterfly. Picture by Team Flying Colours

We reached Rifle Range Forest Trail with a fervent hope of spotting the Great Helen and Blue Jay. Thankfully, we managed to shoot the latter but no other Swallowtail or Birdwing (Papilionidae family) butterflies were in sight. Instead, we saw many other butterflies from other butterfly families and bumped into two other teams looking for the same butterflies!

By the time, we set off back to the zoo, we were left with an hour and a half before race time was up! On the way out, we stopped at an urban park at Jalan Gaharu to look for the Lime Butterfly. Though it was sighted, it was missed as it moved at lightning speed. But Lady Luck granted us one favour! Spencer spotted and took many shots of a courting pair of Common Mimes, which in the end, won us the 'Best Photo of the Day' award! To use Spencer's favourite word, that was 'sweet' indeed!



Team Flying Colours wins the Top Photo of the Day with this pair of Common Mimes caught in midflight.

Back at the zoo, the place yielded just Common Mormons. We proceeded back to the Night Safari court function room to hand in our photos. Of the 18 species expected, we managed only 3 with 1 sighting without any photograph. Nevertheless, we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves though it was quite an exhausting adventure! Now I know how it must feel like to be a participant in the Amazing Race.

Whilst the judges tallied the team submissions, we relaxed in the cool function room and took in several very informative talks - Swallowtail & Birdwing butterflies of Singapore and the world by Dr Anuj Jain, NSS Butterfly Race Team Organiser, Host Plants of Swallowtails and Birdwings and how to grow them by Mr Foo Jit Leang of Seletar Country Club, and a sharing by Ms Delvinder Kaur, Life Sciences Associate, WRS, on the company's conservation efforts towards butterflies.

After the excitement of the results was over, the team participants wondered aloud if there will be another race next year? Some indicated their interest to participate again. Given the success of this first race, it looked likely that a second butterfly race will be in the pipeline for June 2020!



Team Flying Colours receiving the Top Photo of the Day prize.

As for the Swallowtails and Birdwings in our island state, it will continue to be a *'race against time'* for some of them. The Common Birdwing, Common Rose, and Blue Helen are considered 'Vulnerable' (first level of threatened butterflies), while the Common Jay is 'Critically Endangered' (third and final level before extinction). It is my team's deep hope that there be a conscious effort to conserve these spectacular, iconic butterflies and ensure they grace all future Swallowtail & Birdwing Butterfly Races to come!