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Address for Correspondence

Butterfly Research Centre, Bhimtal, Uttarakhand 263 136, India. Phone: +91 8938896403.

Email: editorbionotes@gmail.com

Board of Editors

Peter Smetacek, (Executive Editor) Butterfly Research Centre, Bhimtal, India
petersmetacek@gmail.com

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jatishworirungbam@gmail.com

Devanshu Gupta, Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata, India devanshuguptagb4102@gmail.com

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A NEW ELEVATION RECORD FOR THE COMMON MORMON BUTTERFLY *PAPILIO POLYTES* (LEPIDOPTERA: PAPILIONIDAE) FROM UTTARAKHAND, INDIA

NIKHIL RAMOLA¹, MAYANK PANDEY², DEEPAK KUMAR³ & PETER SMETACEK^{4*}

¹Department of Zoology, Ramjas College, University Enclave, Delhi 110007

²Department of Zoology, Deshbandhu College, Kalkaji, New Delhi 110019

³Department of Physics, S.C.S.S. Government P.G. College, Kapkote, Bageshwar, Uttarakhand.

⁴Butterfly Research Centre, Bhimtal, Uttarakhand, 263 136

*Corresponding author: petersmetacek@gmail.com

Reviewer: *Piet van der Poel*

The Common Mormon *Papilio polytes* Linnaeus, 1758 (Lepidoptera: Papilionidae) occurs from Pakistan across the Indian sub-continent to Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines (Smetacek, 2017). In the larval stage, it feeds on leaves of Rutaceae, both cultivated and wild Robinson *et al.*, 2001). At times, the males of the species congregate in large numbers, often hundreds, at wet sand (Smetacek, 2016). Females do not congregate in numbers and are usually found singly.

The species is commonest in dense forest at low elevation, along the base of the Himalaya and in peninsular India. The species is known to breed in the hills up to an elevation of 1500 m (Peter Smetacek *pers. obs.*) and stragglers have been reported from as high as 1600 m (Smetacek, 2017) and 1830 m (Kehimkar, 2016).

On 23 September 2024, between 11 am and 12.30 pm, we observed 6 individuals

of *P. polytes* crossing the motor road between Bhowali and Ramgarh in Nainital district, Uttarakhand, India, on the southern face of the Gagar range, some 200 m elevation below the Gagar Pass, flying from west to east towards Maheshkhan Reserve Forest.

We observed four males and two females of the *stichius* form. The butterflies appeared singly. Among low-elevation butterflies recorded on that day were over 50 individuals of Common Emigrants *Catopsilia pomona* (Fabricius, 1775) (Lepidoptera: Pieridae) also travelling along the range from west to east.

It was a very warm, sunny day with few clouds. This was the third sunny day after continuous heavy rain for three days (18-20 September, 2024). It is likely that a very large number of *P. polytes* and *C. pomona* butterflies emerged from their pupae during the sunny days at low elevations

and the individuals observed were part of a small local migration taking place.

The butterflies were observed flying across the hillside with their general flight path along the 2000 m contour for as far as we could visually follow them. Males of *P. polytes* are singular in the Kumaon Himalaya; of the six specimens observed, three briefly visited wild flowers before moving on; the individuals observed were from 5-10 m distant and although it was too far to photograph with the equipment available at the time, the identity of the butterflies observed is indisputable.

Citrus trees are cultivated in the village of Shyamkhet a little lower down the hillside, but it is unlikely that the *P. polytes* observed had bred in the area because they were in company of *C. pomona*, which had certainly not bred in the area since the larval host plants mentioned by Robinson *et al.* (2001) do not grow above 1400 m elevation in the area.

This is the highest elevation at which *P. polytes* has ever been observed in India. Further observations on sunny days during the same season in the coming years will confirm whether this is a regular phenomenon or whether unusual conditions during 2024 enabled this to happen. The area was visited in September

during earlier years, but no *P. polytes* were ever observed in the area during the past 40 years. However, the visits were sporadic and perhaps the timing of the present visit was important, being on the third sunny day of a spell of warm weather. This is also the first time this species has been recorded around Maheshkhan Reserve Forest, since it is not mentioned in Smetacek (2011).

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