

It can be helpful for identification to be able to know in which family a butterfly belongs. Learning the species in terms of familial characteristics can quickly narrow the possibilities when looking up a butterfly in a field guide. Many characteristics are true to the family; however, in the case of Nymphalidae and Hesperidae, further subgroupings are necessary. Use Appendix C: The Butterfly Families to help you learn these characteristics.

The Butterfly Families

There are 9 butterfly families in Illinois:

Papilionidae	Swallowtails
Pieridae	Whites, Sulfurs
Nymphalidae	Brushfoots
Danaidae	Monarchs
Satyridae	Satyrs
Libytheidae	Snouts
Riodinidae	Metalmarks
Lycaenidae	Hairstreaks, Coppers, Blues
Hesperidae	Skippers

Family or Subgrouping Characteristics

Papilionidae - Swallowtails

All Midwestern species are large butterflies with conspicuous tails
Six Species in the Chicago Region

Pieridae - Whites and Sulphurs

Mostly small to medium sized butterflies
Midwestern species yellow or white, with little patterning on the wings (dark borders on some)
Except for the large tiger and zebra swallowtails, all yellow and white butterflies of the region belong to this family

Nymphalidae - Brushfoots

Only 4 walking legs, + 2 "brush feet"
Largest North American family- can also includes snouts, monarchs, and satyrs
Greatest variability in size, color, wing shape
Informal subdivisions help group like species (see below)

Danaidae - Monarchs

Considered by some to be a subfamily of the Nymphalidae
Only one (very familiar) species in Illinois - Monarch
Most members of family feed on plants in the Asclepiadaceae
Many species toxic

Satyridae - Satyrs

Classified by some as a subfamily in the Nymphalidae
Small to medium brown butterflies
Five species in the Chicago region
Many species tolerate low light - shade dwelling, active at dawn or dusk
Base of forewing veins often swollen

Libytheidae - Snouts

Smallest butterfly family- only about a dozen species world wide
Easily recognized by "beak"
Only one species in eastern North America

Riodinidae - Metalmarks

Classified by some as a subfamily of the Lycaenidae
Large, diverse family, mostly neotropical, poorly represented elsewhere
North American species small, drab, many confusingly similar
Mostly Western
Only one representative in Illinois- very rare, possibly extirpated from the state

Hesperiidae - Skippers

Can be hard to distinguish
Two subfamilies: Hesperinae and Pyrginae
See following section "Making Sense of the Folded-winged Skippers" for subgroupings of the Hesperinae

Lycaenidae - Gossamer Winged Butterflies

4 subfamilies: Hairstreaks, Blues, Coppers, Harvesters (see below)
Small butterflies
Often brightly patterned
Legs and antennae often conspicuously ringed

Theclinae - Hairstreaks

Mostly gray to brown
All but one have tailed hindwings
Key features usually on underside of wings

Lycaeninae - Coppers

Mostly Red/Orange marked
Spotting pattern on upperside characteristic
4 Species in Chicago region
Usually butterflies of wetlands
Host Plants Rumex and Polygonum

Plebejinae - Blues

Blue to gray above, whitish below
4 resident species in Chicago region- 2 common, 2 very rare
2 rare migrant species occasionally reach the region

Liphyrinae - Harvesters

Considered a separate family by some authors
Only 1 uncommon species in North America

Subgroupings of the Nymphalidae (Brushfoots):

Admirals	Ladies & Allies
Viceroy	Painted Lady
Red Spotted Purple	American Painted Lady
Angle Wings	Red Admiral
Question Mark	Mourning Cloak
Comma	Milbert's Tortoiseshell
Gray Comma	Fritillaries (Greater & Lesser)
Emperors	Greater Fritillaries
Hackberry Butterfly	Great Spangled Fritillary
Tawny Emperor	Aphrodite
Checkerspot	Regal Fritillary
Baltimore Checkerspot	Variegated Fritillary
Silvery Checkerspot	Lesser Fritillaries
Gorgon Checkerspot	Silver Bordered Fritillary
Crescents	Meadow Fritillary
Pearl Crescent	Buckeyes
	Buckeye

Subgroupings of the Hesperidae (Skippers): Two subfamilies

Hesperiinae	Folded-winged Skippers
Pyrginae	Spread-Winged Skippers

Hesperiinae (subfamily not to be confused with the family name Hesperidae) sit with their wings in the "airplane formation" or partially open and do not have any easy subgroupings. See "Making Sense of the Folded-winged Skippers " next page. Pyrginae, which sit with their wings open like "normal" butterflies, contain 4 major subgroups:

Sooty Wings	Duskywings
Cloudy Wings	Checkered Skippers

Making Sense of the Folded-winged Skippers

Hesperiinae do not have any easy subgroupings analogous to those seen for the Pyrginae, or Nymphalidae. A few very informal groupings made on the basis of color and habitat are helpful in identification, however:

Orange/Yellow Skippers, mostly unmarked beneath:

- European Skipper
- Delaware Skipper
- Least Skipper

The "Gang of Four" - skippers of sedge meadows that fly in midsummer:

- Black Dash
- Mulberrywing Skipper
- Broadwing Skipper
- Dion Skipper

Dull brown skippers with orange wing edges above:

- Tawny Edge
- Crossline Skipper

Witches - wide-ranging, females essentially unmarked

- Little Glassywing
- Dun Skipper
- Broken Dash

Skippers with dark markings on a light background below:

- Ottoo Skipper
- Fiery Skipper

The "Gang of Four" can be distinguished from each other by the shape of the markings on the underside of the hindwing. The coloring of the skippers can vary quite a bit based on how faded the individual is. However, the lighter markings will still be readily visible.

Black Dash - looks like the knuckles of a fist
all of the "knuckles" are roughly the same size

Mulberry Wing - shape of a cross

Broadwing - large center stripe with small dots close to the body

Dion - two stripes radiating out from body
look carefully for lower stripe, can be partially obscured by fold in wing