

Oskar Brattström - Nigerian butterflies

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Version 1.0

# SKIPPERS OF THE NIGERIAN SAVANNAH

(Family Hesperiidae)



Millet Skipper  
(*Pelopidas thrax*)

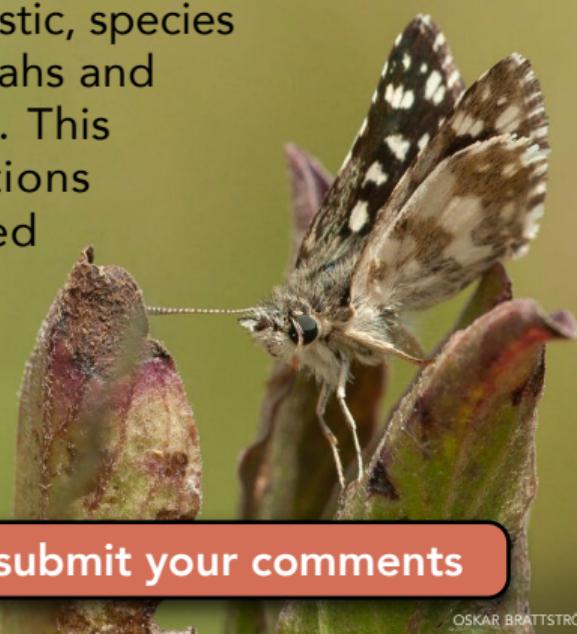
# SKIPPERS

OF THE NIGERIAN

# SAVANNAH

(Family Hesperiidae)

The Skippers (Family Hesperiidae) is a large group of butterflies, often neglected by scientists and naturalists in general. This is partly due to the fact that they were historically not always seen as 'true butterflies', which modern genetic phylogenetics now have shown that they most definately are. This past neglect means that we know less about their systematics and distributions compared to many other butterflies groups, and they are therefore the focus of much renewed studies. There are over 230 species known from Nigeria, but a majority of them are tied to rainforest habitats, and many are incredibly rare, or hard to identify. This guide focuses mostly on common, or highly characteristic, species occurring in savannahs and other dry habitats. This means identifications need to be treated with some caution, especially when working in wetter savannah habitats.



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Jon Baker who proofread all the text sections and provided many valuable comments, all the photographers who provided the photos, without whom a project such as this would be almost impossible, all the early field testers who helped me work out technical issues, Steve Collins and the African Butterfly Research Institute (ABRI) for all the support over the years, A.P. Leventis Ornithological Research Institute (APLORI) for their incredible work to promote biodiversity in Nigeria, the Nigerian Bird Atlas Project for leading the way on Nigerian Citizen Science, and Ulf Ottosson for his constant enthusiasm and dedication to conservation.

This project is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Torben B. Larsen. Without his early support I would probably never have begun my work with Nigerian butterflies.



# PHOTOGRAPHERS

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# SKIPPERS

OF THE NIGERIAN

# SAVANNAH

(Family Hesperiidae)

## INCLUDED GENERA

(CLICKABLE LINKS)

[Coeliades](#)

[Gorgyra](#)

[Tagiades](#)

[Gomalia](#)

[Sarangesa](#)

[Gegenes](#)

[Eretis](#)

[Afrogegenes](#)

[Abantis](#)

[Pelopidas](#)

[Isoteinon](#)

[Borbo](#)

[Prosopalpus](#)

[Torbenlarsenia](#)

[Acleros](#)

[Platylesches](#)

[Ernsta](#)

[Spialia](#)



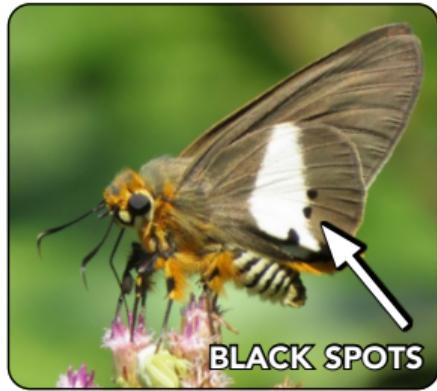
**SKIPERS (HESPERIIDAE)**

*Coeliades forestan forestan* (Stoll, 1782)  
**Striped Policeman**

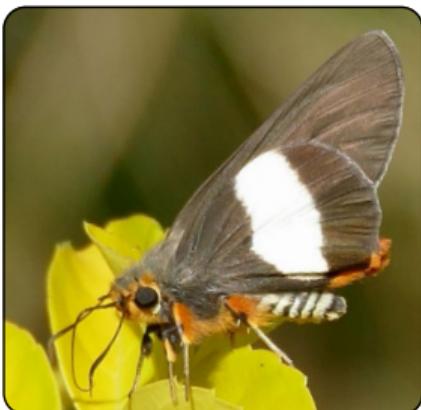
*Coeliades pisistratus* (Fabricius, 1793)  
**Two-pip Policeman**

These two species are among the largest skippers found in Nigerian savannah habitats, and fly with fast, buzzing wing beats. Both species are often found hill-topping, and frequently visit flowers for nectar. They rest with the wings closed above their body and can easily be identified in the field as both species have a broad white stripe across the ventral hindwing. At the lower edge of this stripe the **Two-pip Policeman** (*C. pisistratus*) has a set of black spots, which are missing in the **Striped Policeman** (*C. forestan*). The dorsal wing surfaces are similar in both species with uniform dark brown forewings, while the hindwings are yellow brown with a dark border.

PHIL WHITE

*Coeliades pisistratus*

MARTIN WEIGAND

*Coeliades forestan*

THOMAS DESLOGES



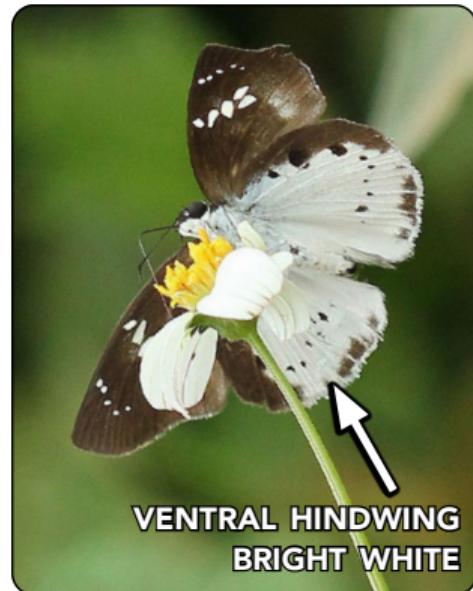
**SKIPERS (HESPERIIDAE)****Tagiades flesus** (Fabricius, 1781)  
**Clouded Flat**

The **Clouded Flat** (*Tagiades flesus*) is often found resting under leaves a few metres above ground. Males typically defend small territories and swoop down towards any passing butterflies. The dorsal pattern is somewhat similar to the [Grey Elfin](#) (*Sarangesa loelius*), but the ventral hindwing has a bright white ground colour, making the species unmistakable. It is normally found in more forested habitats, but extends far into the savannah as long as some trees are present. In actual forest habitats several other similar species co-occur, so caution with identification is needed. Most, but not all, of these have either more yellow light markings, or strong light patterns on the dorsal side of the hindwings. Even in forests, the **Clouded Flat** (*T. flesus*) tends to be the more common species.

PHIL WHITE



RAINER WENDT

**VENTRAL HINDWING  
BRIGHT WHITE**

**SKIPERS (HESPERIIDAE)**

***Sarangesa phidyle*** (Walker, 1870)  
**Small Elfin**

***Sarangesa loelius*** (Mabille, 1877)  
**Grey Elfin**

These two species look quite similar to the [Savannah Elf \(\*Eretis lugens\*\)](#), but are both larger, and with more regular wing margins. Their wing patterns are quite



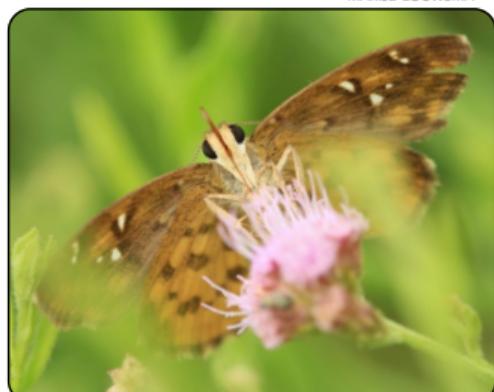
*Sarangesa loelius*

variable, but the **Small Elfin** (*S. phidyle*) usually has a warmer, almost yellow, colour tone. It also has clear dark spots on the ventral hindwing that are missing in the **Grey Elfin** (*S. loelius*). Both species tend to rest on the ground, or seek shade under over-hanging rocks. They often co-occur, but the **Grey Elfin** (*S. loelius*) is more frequent in slightly wetter habitats, while the **Small Elfin** (*S. phidyle*) can be found very far to the north.

JOHN WILKINSON



MARIE LOUWSMA

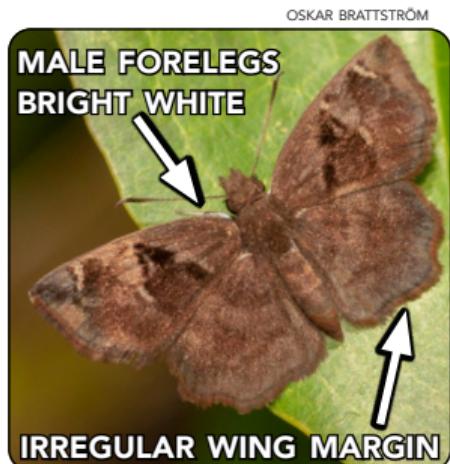


*Sarangesa phidyle*

**SKIPERS (HESPERIIDAE)**

## *Eretis lugens* (Rogenhofer, 1891) Savannah Elf

This small skipper is one of the most common species in Nigerian savannah habitats, and frequently found sitting either on bare sandy ground, or on low vegetation. The flight is fast and irregular, making it look more like a large fly rather than a butterflies when moving. The sexes can be told apart as the male has bright white forelegs (see photo). The wings have an unusually irregular outline that separates it from the similar, but larger, [Grey Elfin \(Sarangesa loelius\)](#) and [Clouded Flat \(Tagiades flesus\)](#).



## *Abantis canopus* (Trimen, 1864) Buff-tipped Paradise Skipper

The wing pattern of this species is completely unique among Nigerian skippers. However, it could possibly be mistaken for a small moth and it is likely often overlooked in the field. It is an uncommon species, normally linked to Guinea Savannah, and from the few Nigerian records available, it seems to prefer hilly and submontane areas.



**SKIPPIERS (HESPERIIDAE)*****Abantis adelica* (Karsch, 1892)****Western Ragged Paradise Skipper**

This species can be told apart from the highly similar **Ragged Paradise Skipper** (*A. adelica*)

by the presence of a clear dark spot on the hindwing underside, fairly close to the base.



VENTRAL SPOT

***Abantis pillaana* (Wallengren, 1857)****Ragged Paradise Skipper**

This species has two morphs, the darker of these has a large cinnamon coloured patch on the dorsal hindwing that is always missing in the **Western Ragged Paradise Skipper** (*A. adelica*). However, the light morph of the **Ragged Paradise Skipper** (*A. pillaana*) can normally not be told apart from ***A. adelica***, unless the ventral side can be seen. Both species are generally rare and found in dry savannah type habitats.



MARK WILLIAMS

LUCKY ATABO



DARK MORPH



NO VENTRAL SPOT

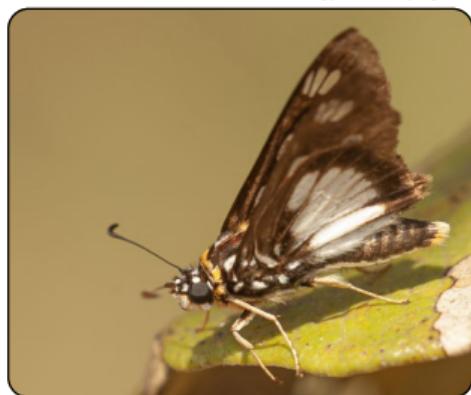


**SKIPERS (HESPERIIDAE)**

## *Abantis nigeriana* (Butler, 1901) Nigerian Paradise Skipper

The **Nigerian Paradise Skipper** (*Abantis nigeriana*) is the more common species in a group of quite large *Abantis* species, all with a brownish-black ground colour and multiple large lighter spots on the forewing. The hindwing is almost fully white, but with a broad black margin. There are at least three more similar looking *Abantis* species (see examples below) found in Nigerian savannahs, but they very rare, and specialist literature is needed to be able to separate them. Given the rarity of most *Abantis* species, every single specimen will worth an extra look if encountered in the field as exciting new records are bound to be made for this group. Males are known to hilltop, and are attracted to smelly baits.

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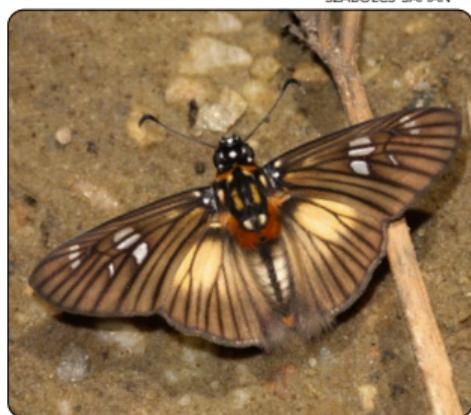
Abantis nigeriana - Male

BART WURSTEN



Abantis paradisea - Female

SZabolcs SÁFIÁN



Abantis elegatula - Male

**SKIPPIERS (HESPERIIDAE)**

*Isoteinon abjecta* (Snellen, 1872)  
**Abject Dark Ranger**

*Prosopalpus stylo* (Evans, 1937)  
**Arcate Dwarf Skipper**

These two skipper species are almost fully black on the dorsal side, and have an indistinct, rather similar ventral pattern. They can be separated by their size, with that of the Abject Dark Ranger (*I. abjecta*) being almost double that of the Arcate Dwarf Skipper (*P. stylo*). Both species have patchy distributions, usually tied to fairly wet grassland areas, but can be found in clearings inside wet forests. The [\*\*Minimal Leaf Sitter \(\*Gorgyra minima\*\)\*\*](#) is quite similar, but compared to the two species on this page it always have small, but still well defined, white spots on the dorsal wing surfaces.

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*Isoteinon abjecta*

REINER WENDT (BOTH IMAGES OF THIS SPECIES)

*Prosopalpus stylo*

**SKIPERS (HESPERIIDAE)**

## *Acleros mackenii olaus* (Plötz, 1884) Northern Shade Dart

This small species is easily recognised by the distinct ventral hindwing pattern. The dorsal wings are mostly black with a few light spots. It is typically found in fringes of forests and in moist savannah.

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GEOFF NICHOLS



## *Platylesches moritili* (Wallengren, 1857) Honey Hopper

The **Honey Hopper** (*Platylesches moritili*) is a rather common, woodland savannah species. The ventral hindwing has a diffuse light grey band across a reddish-brown ground colour. The row of dorsal hindwing spots is also a quite distinct character compared to other savannah skippers.

MAGDASTLUCIA (INATURALIST.ORG USERNAME)



GONZALO ROGET



## SKIPPERS (HESPERIIDAE)

*Ernsta dromus* (Plötz, 1884)

**Forest Sandman**

*Spalia spio* (Linnaeus, 1764)

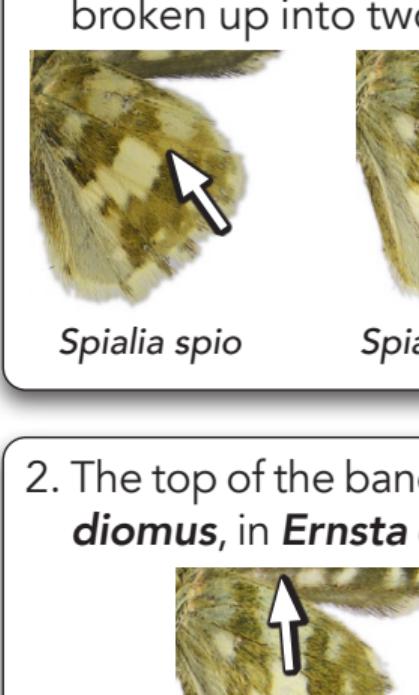
**Blotched Sandman**

*Spalia diomus diomus* (Hopffer, 1855)

**African Sandman**

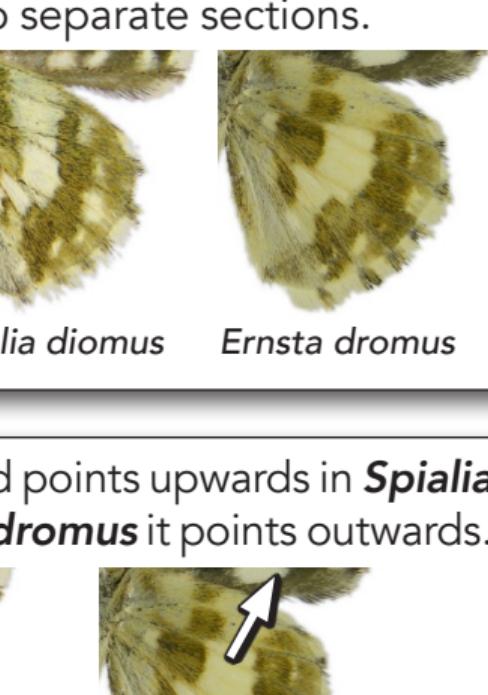
The Sandmen (*Ernsta* & *Spalia*) are all small and restless butterflies, but their highly characteristic wing patterns makes it fairly easy to identify the group in the field. However, to pin down the actual species often requires detailed observations, and will sometimes not be possible from photos if some key characters are obscured. The identification guide below shows how to separate the three common savannah species that are found across much of Nigeria.

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*Spalia spio*

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*Ernsta dromus*

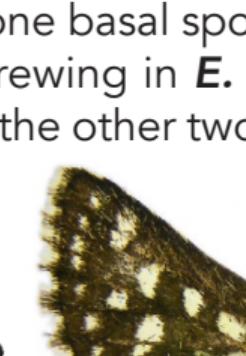
**Scroll down for identification guide!**

**Identification guide for *Ernsta* & *Spalia***

1. In *Spalia spio* the ventral hindwing band is broken up into two separate sections.



*Spalia spio*

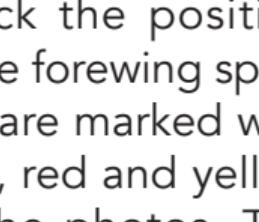


*Spalia diomus*



*Ernsta dromus*

2. The top of the band points upwards in *Spalia diomus*, in *Ernsta dromus* it points outwards.

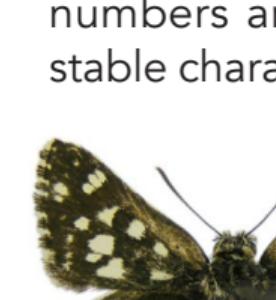


*Spalia diomus*



*Ernsta dromus*

3. The white band on the dorsal hindwing is longer in *S. diomus* than the other species, almost reaching the upper wing edge (costa).



*Spalia diomus*



*Ernsta dromus*



*Spalia spio*

4. There is just one basal spot in Space 1b on the dorsal forewing in *E. dromus*, but two such spots in the other two species.



*Ernsta dromus*



*Spalia diomus*



*Spalia spio*

5. Check the position of the forewing spots that are marked with blue, red and yellow on the photos. The size of these spots can vary between individuals, but their relative position and numbers are always stable characters.



*Ernsta dromus*



*Spalia diomus*



*Spalia spio*

**SKIPERS (HESPERIIDAE)**

***Gorgyra minima*** (Holland, 1896)  
**Minimal Leaf Sitter**

***Gorgyra mocquerysii*** (Holland, 1896)  
**Grey Leaf Sitter**

The Leaf Sitters (*Gorgyra*) are small, rather dark skippers, that are normally very hard to identify beyond genus level. Most *Gorgyra* species are found in the forest zone, but some occurs in drier forests and savannah. The fairly common Minimal Leaf Sitter (*G. minima*) is a tiny dark species, with just a few white spots. The much rarer Grey Leaf Sitter (*G. mocquerysii*) has more spots and chequered cilia (hairs) at wing edge. The latter species can be fairly common on the Jos Plateau. In the Nigerian savannah zone there are **two very similar dark species**, but these lack the clear dorsal white spots of the Leaf Sitters.



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*Gorgyra minima*

JOSEPH IBRAHIM

*Gorgyra mocquerysii*

**SKIPPIERS (HESPERIIDAE)**

## *Gomalia elma elma* (Trimen, 1862) Green-marbled Sandman

The Green-marbled Sandman (*Gomalia elma*) has similar camouflaged pattern on the forewings as some other common savannah species. Size, colour hue, and contrast of the patterns are variable, but the hindwing always has a clear dorsal white band making the species highly distinctive in the field.

REGINE HAKENBECK



WYAND UYS



## *Gegenes pumilio gambica* (Mabille, 1878) African Dark Dodger

This small skipper has a light brown ground-colour on the ventral surface, sometimes with a few faint spots or patches. Most other savannah skippers with limited ventral wing patterning tend to be darker. The dorsal surface is darker, and the female normally has a few light spots. Just like the more heavily patterned *Afrogegenes*, the *Gegenes* antennae are unusually short.

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**SKIPERS (HESPERIIDAE)**

## *Afrogegenes hottentota* (Latreille, [1824]) Masked Dodger

## *Afrogegenes letterstedi* (Wallengren, 1857) Brown Dodger

Both of the Nigerian *Afrogegenes* species have a characteristic yellow ventral pattern, combined with very short antennae, setting them apart from other small savannah skippers. The females of both species have multiple light dorsal spots, but cannot be identified to species level without microscopic examination of their genitalia. The males lack these light dorsal spots, but the **Masked Dodger** (*A. hottentota*)

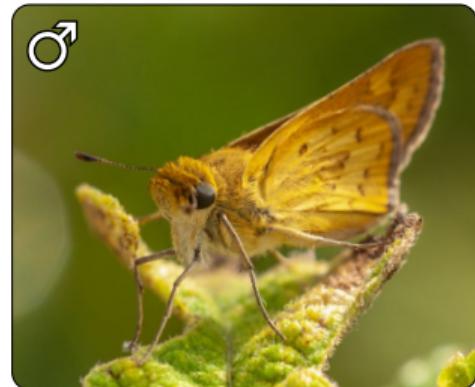
has a dark forewing patch that is not present in the similar **Brown Dodger** (*A. letterstedi*). This makes it possible to tell them apart when they perch with their forewings slightly open.



DOUG MACDONALD



OSKAR BRATTSTRÖM

*Afrogegenes sp.*

**SKIPERS (HESPERIIDAE)****Genus *Pelopidas*  
Branded Swifts****Genera *Borbo* & *Torbenlarsenia*  
Swifts**

The genera ***Borbo***, ***Pelopidas***, and ***Torbenlarsenia*** all have similar wing shape and arrangements of most light wing spots. Identifying them to species level is very hard in the field, and challenging even with collected specimens, especially the females.

The best way to begin to identify any specimen to species level is by checking how many well-developed spots are present in the forewing cell. Occasionally these spots are missing (or tiny additional spots are present), so whilst useful still treat these characters with some caution.

THOMAS DESLOGES



**Two cell spots:**  
*Pelopidas* spp.  
*Borbo fallax*  
*Borbo fanta*

THOMAS DESLOGES



**One cell spot:**  
*Borbo borbonica*  
*Borbo micans*  
*Torbenlarsenia gemella*  
*Torbenlarsenia perobscura*

THOMAS DESLOGES



**No cell spots:**  
*Borbo fatuellus*  
*Torbenlarsenia holtzi*

## SKIPPERS (HESPERIIDAE)

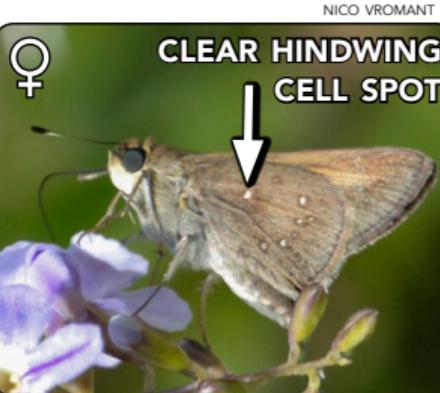
*Pelopidas mathias mathias* (Fabricius, 1798)  
**Black-branded Swift**

*Pelopidas thrax* (Hübner, 1821)  
**White-branded Swift**

TWO SPOTS  
IN FW CELL

Males of both **Branded Swifts** (*Pelopidas* spp.) can be separated by the colour of a forewing brand, but the shiny black brand of the **Black-branded Swift** (*P. thrax*) can appear lighter at some angles. Females of both species look very similar, but the **White-branded Swift** (*B. thrax*) usually has two spots in Space 1b on the dorsal forewing, while the **Black-branded Swift** (*B. mathias*) has just one. The females can be confused with both sexes of the [False Swift \(Borbo fallax\)](#) and the [Yellow Swift \(Borbo fanta\)](#), but these two species never have a strong spot in the ventral hindwing cell on the inside of the row of small discal spots.

TAMSIN CARLISLE

WHITE FOREWING  
BRAND IN MALE*Pelopidas thrax*

ANIRUDDHA SINGHAMAHAPATRA

BLACK FOREWING  
BRAND IN MALE*Pelopidas mathias*

## SKIPPERS (HESPERIIDAE)

*Borbo fallax* (Gaede, 1916)  
False Swift

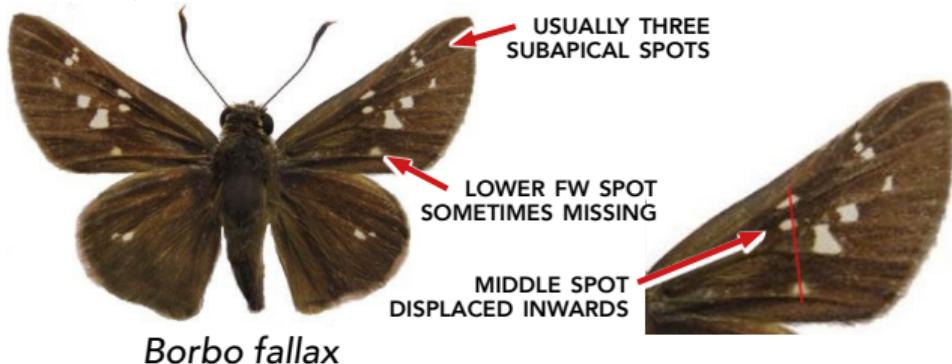
*Borbo fanta* (Evans, 1937)  
Yellow Swift

TWO SPOTS  
IN FW CELL

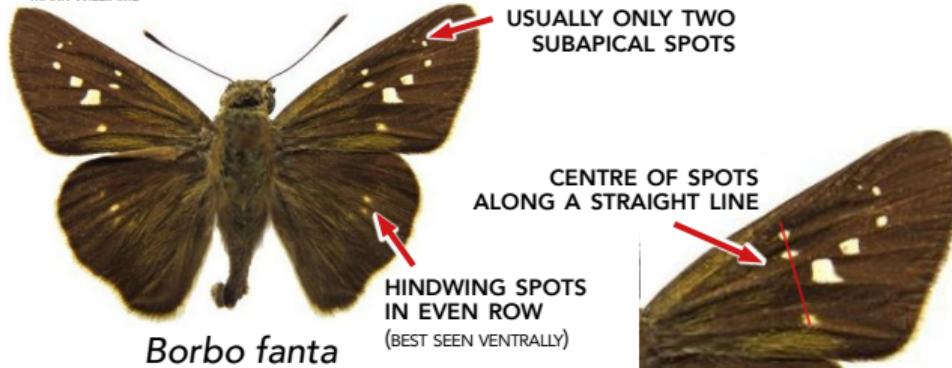
These two species have forewing patterns that are similar to the Branded Swifts (*Pelopidas*). However, *Borbo* and *Torbenlarsenia* species never have a well-developed spot in the ventral hindwing cell (always present in *Pelopidas*).

The *Borbo* species on this page are the only ones to have two spots in the forewing cell. They are not easy to separate, but a combination of characters usually helps. The sexes are very similar, but females tend to have better developed spots.

MARK WILLIAMS



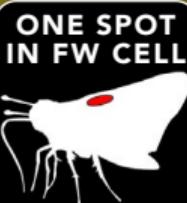
MARK WILLIAMS



## SKIPPERS (HESPERIIDAE)

*Torbenlarsenia gemella* (Mabille, 1884)  
**Twin Swift**

*Borbo b. borbonica* (Boisduval, 1833)  
**Olived-haired Swift**



These two **Swifts** species both have a single forewing cell-spot, and the hindwing have three usually very well defined spots on the ventral side, with two of them placed close together.

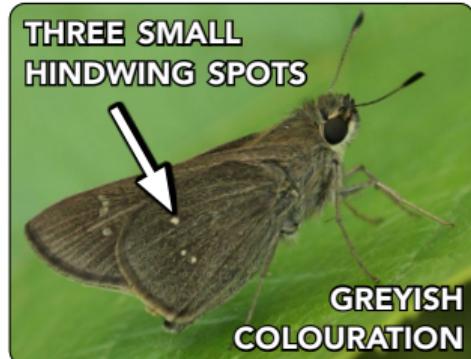
The **Olive-haired Swift** (*Borbo borbonica*) stands out by its large size (forewing length 19mm) and warm olive brown ground colour. The hindwing spots are ringed with a thin black line.

The smaller **Twin Swift** (*Torbenlarsenia gemella*), (forewing length 16mm) has a greyish ground colour, and the three hindwing spots are normally less conspicuous.



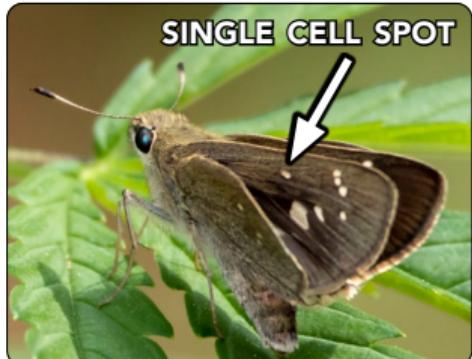
*Borbo borbonica*

RAINER WENDT



*Torbenlarseni gemella*

STEVE WOODHALL



## SKIPPERS (HESPERIIDAE)

*Torbenlarseni perobscura* (Druce, 1912)  
**Small Swift**

*Borbo micans* (Holland, 1896)  
**Marsh Swift**

ONE SPOT  
IN FW CELL



The **Marsh Swift** (*Borbo micans*) can be told apart from similar small species by the light overlay of orange scales that sometimes almost cover the light spots. It is frequently found close to wetlands.

The **Small Swift** (*Torbenlarseni perobscura*) can be mistaken for the [\*\*Twin Swift\*\* \(\*T. gemella\*\)](#), but the latter has three distinct spots on the ventral hindwing, while the former has a diffuse row of around five spots, arranged in an irregular fashion.

THOMAS DESLOGES



DORSAL

MARK WILLIAMS

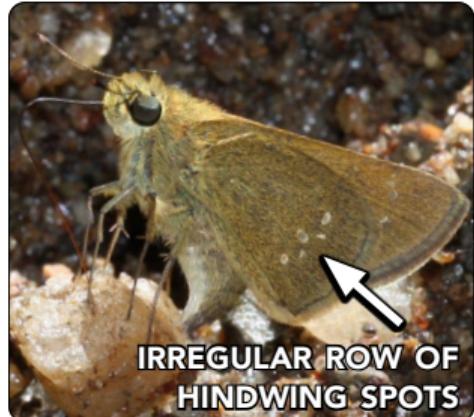


VENTRAL

MAGDASTLUCIA (INATURALIST.ORG USERNAME)

*Borbo micans*

SZabolcs Sáfán



IRREGULAR ROW OF  
HINDWING SPOTS

*Torbenlarseni perobscura*

**SKIPERS (HESPERIIDAE)**

***Borbo fatuellus fatuellus*** (Hopffer, 1855)  
**Long-horned Swift**

***Torbenlarsenia holtzi*** (Plötz, 1883)  
**Variable Swift**

**NO SPOTS  
IN FW CELL**



The **Long-horned Swift** (*Borbo fatuellus*) is the larger of these two species, and can sometimes have a small spot in the forewing cell. The ventral hindwing usually has a light cover of greyish scales, especially in the dry season. It is a common and ecologically tolerant species.

The **Variable Swift** (*Torbenlarsenia holtzi*) is smaller and can sometimes have very reduced dorsal pattern. The ventral hindwing pattern is highly variable, but the spots, or dark outlines of spots, are normally arranged in neat lines. It is a quite rare species.

THOMAS DESLOGES



THOMAS DESLOGES



R GUINNESS

*Borbo fatuellus*

WILLIAM VAN NIEKERK

*Torbenlarsenia holtzi*