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Life Cycle of a Butterfly



Butterfly life cycle

A life cycle is made up of the stages that a living organism goes through during its lifetime from beginning to end. A butterfly undergoes a process called complete metamorphosis during its life cycle. This means that the butterfly changes completely from its early larval stage, when it is a caterpillar, until the final stage, when it becomes a beautiful and graceful adult butterfly. The butterfly life cycle has four stages: egg, larva, pupa, and adult.



The first stage of the butterfly life cycle is the egg or ovum. Butterfly eggs are tiny, vary in color and may be round, cylindrical or oval. The female butterfly attaches the eggs to leaves or stems of plants that will also serve as a suitable food source for the larvae when they hatch.



The larva, or caterpillar, that hatches from the egg is the second stage in the life cycle. Caterpillars often, but not always, have several pairs of true legs, along with several pairs of false legs or prolegs. A caterpillar's primary activity is eating. They have a voracious appetite and eat almost constantly. As the caterpillar continues to eat, its body grows considerably. The tough outer skin or exoskeleton, however, does not grow or stretch along with the enlarging caterpillar. Instead, the old exoskeleton is shed in a process called molting and it is replaced by a new, larger exoskeleton. A caterpillar may go through as many as four to five molts before it becomes a pupa.



The third stage is known as the pupa or chrysalis. The caterpillar attaches itself to a twig, a wall or some other support and the exoskeleton splits open to reveal the chrysalis. The chrysalis hangs down like a small sack until the transformation to butterfly is complete. The casual observer may think that because the pupa is motionless that very little is going on during this "resting stage." However, it is within the chrysalis shell that the caterpillar's structure is broken down and rearranged into the wings, body and legs of the adult butterfly. The pupa does not feed but instead gets its energy from the food eaten by the larval stage. Depending on the species, the pupal stage may last for just a few days or it may last for more than a year. Many butterfly species overwinter or hibernate as pupae.



The fourth and final stage of the life cycle is the adult. Once the chrysalis casing splits, the butterfly emerges. It will eventually mate and lay eggs to begin the cycle all over again. Most adult butterflies will live only a week or two, while a few species may live as long as 18 months.