



# Clear Lake's Butterflies

by Ellie Shultz



As an environmental educator, one of my favorite ways to share conservation information is through success stories. That is why one of my favorite animals is the atala butterfly.



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The atala is a small and unassuming butterfly, but it carries a remarkable history. When the coontie plant was overharvested in Florida in the early 1900s, it caused the decline of the atala butterfly, whose only host plant is the coontie. Without enough coontie

to lay their eggs on, the atala butterflies declined in such large numbers that they were thought to be extinct.

Fortunately, after several decades with no sightings, a small population of atala butterflies was discovered. People quickly took action, and coontie was planted across Florida by businesses, on public lands, and most importantly: in the yards and gardens of many everyday Floridians. Nowadays, the atala is not an uncommon sight in the green spaces of South Florida!

While the atala is a Florida native butterfly, Indiana has no shortage of show-stopping butterflies. Look no further than the **red-spotted purple**, the **zebra swallowtail**, or the **regal fritillary** butterfly!



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Indiana's butterflies add a magnificent kaleidoscope of color to our landscapes, but many of them are facing existential threats, just as the atala butterflies did.

In Steuben County, several species are endangered or threatened, with many more facing population declines.

Just as Floridians decided not to settle for a future without the atala, I hope that Clear Lakers will take up the fight to defend our own butterflies so that future generations will be able to watch the dainty wings of these important pollinators.

The good news is that many residents are likely well-equipped to help our fluttering friends! Many homes around Clear Lake already boast beautiful gardens and yards, although the non-native plants and large expanses of grass are not doing as much to help our native pollinators like butterflies.

By landscaping our homes more consciously, we can easily provide better habitat for butterflies. Many butterflies need particular plants to support the various stages of their life cycle. Host plants are where a female butterfly will lay her eggs so that the freshly-hatched caterpillar will be able to feed on that plant. Nectar plants are where adult butterflies will get their food.

### **Planting a pollinator garden full of host plants and nectar plants is one of the best ways to help the local butterfly population!**

Consider gardening with these Indiana native plants:

- **arrowleaf violet** (*Viola sagittata*)
- **birdfoot violet** (*Viola pedata*)
- **bog white violet** (*Viola lanceolata*)
- **butterfly milkweed** (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
- **butterfly milkweed** (*Asclepias tuberosa* subsp. *interior*)
- **clasping milkweed** (*Asclepias amplexicaulis*)
- **common milkweed** (*Asclepias syriaca*)
- **green comet milkweed** (*Asclepias viridiflora*)
- **poke milkweed** (*Asclepias exaltata*)
- **purple milkweed** (*Asclepias purpurascens*)
- **swamp milkweed** (*Asclepias incarnata*)
- **swamp milkweed** (*Asclepias incarnata* subsp. *incarnata*)
- **Nieuwland's blazing star** (*Liatris scariosa* var. *nieuwlandii*)
- **Pale purple coneflower** (*Echinacea pallia*)
- **Rose mallow** (*Hibiscus moscheutos*)
- **American pawpaw** (*Asimina triloba*)

A great resource for finding other plants that are native to your area is the [National Wildlife Federation's Native Plant Finder](#) website.





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1. **Violets** are the only host plant of the endangered Regal Fritillary butterfly, and they also act as a host plant for 26 other butterfly and moth species.



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2. **Milkweed** is the only host plant of the Monarch butterfly. Many milkweed species are native to the area and will also feed 12 other species of butterfly!



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3. **Nieuwland's blazing star** is a fall-blooming plant that will attract a variety of butterflies as well as hummingbirds and bumblebees.



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4. **Pale purple coneflower** is a nectar source not only for many butterfly species, but also for hummingbirds!



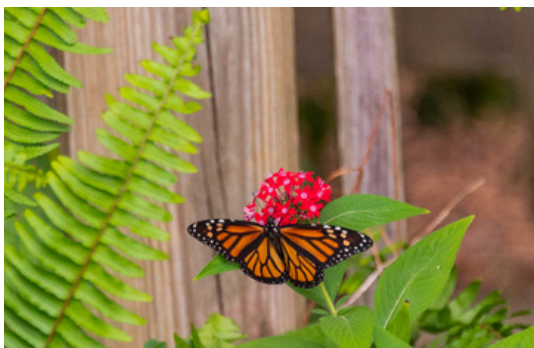
5. **Rose mallow** is a gorgeous native hibiscus plant that will support many butterflies and moths in their caterpillar and adult stages.



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6. **American pawpaw** is a flowering shrub or tree that supports not only butterflies (residents of Pittsburgh, PA, successfully re-introduced zebra swallowtails into their previous northernmost range by planting pawpaw), but its fruit is edible to birds *and* humans!

Remember that although it's nice for us to enjoy the blooms on these beautiful plants, they provide a vital food source to baby butterflies, so expect to see caterpillars (and potentially other insects) munching on these plants. The payoff will be worth it when you get to see them grow up and flutter around your garden!



**Avoiding pesticides and herbicides in these pollinator gardens is also important.** Many insecticides are not targeted toward a specific insect and end up harming all the insects in the vicinity, including the beneficial ones. Butterflies like the monarch have seen an 80-95% decline because of herbicides that kill the milkweed plants vital to their survival.

**And finally, being mindful of our consumption (so that we aren't buying many more things than we need) can help butterflies and other wildlife.** When fewer natural areas are removed to provide resources and space for consumer goods to be produced, more butterfly habitat is left intact!



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Change can be hard, but just as a caterpillar undergoes a transformation and comes out of its chrysalis as a beautiful butterfly, we also have the power to embrace transformation in our own lives to create a more beautiful world.

As Floridians showed decades ago, the actions of everyday people who come together as communities can truly bring butterflies back from the brink. I believe that Clear Lakers have what it takes to replicate that success story in our own backyards and help our own butterflies!

Ellie Shultz is an environmental educator, artist, and writer. She is currently Florida-based but grew up in Ohio and Indiana, with many holidays and school breaks spent visiting her grandparents at Clear Lake. She still spends as much time there as possible every year!

Aside from science communication as a whole, her interests include entomology, manatees, and fire ecology. More of her work can be found at [ecologyellie.com](http://ecologyellie.com).