

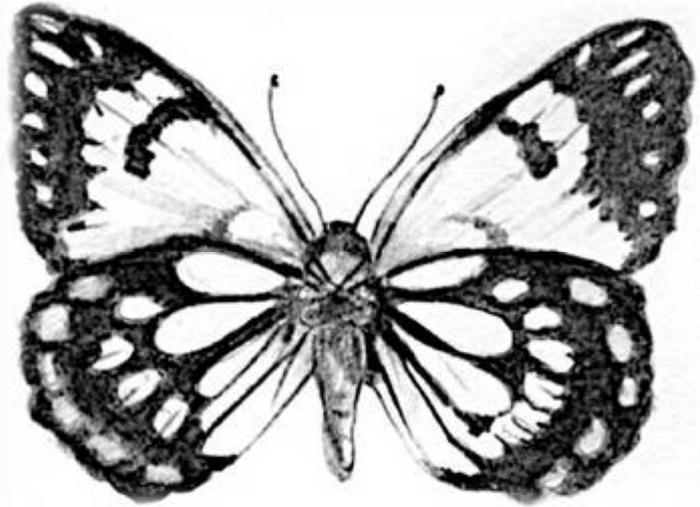
The Wonder of Caper White Migration ... Valda Dedman

... Drawings by Kaye Traynor

This is the time of the year to look for Caper White Butterflies. Valda Dedman, a member of the Geelong Field Naturalists Club, who will be our guest speaker on Friday, 18 October, has written of an interesting experience.

November 27, 2004. Pollocksford. I stood on the ridge above the Barwon River, with butterflies all around me. I was in the midst of a Caper White *Belenois java* migration. They were heading west, in ones and twos, at the rate of about one a second. I watched for about 45 minutes – that's 2,500 butterflies – and they were still coming as I left. They didn't stop, flying rapidly and low, about head height, rising only to clear the trees. A solitary male paused to sip at nectar from a grevillea flower. Another tried to do the same, but it was chased away by a bee. The weather was warm and sultry, with no wind on that day, or the previous one, although north winds had been forecast, and may have been present in other parts of Victoria.

Did anyone else see them around Geelong that season? Where were the butterflies headed? Were they swept south on northerly winds? Where did they spend the previous night? Why do Caper Whites frequently migrate to Victoria, where their larval food plants, all in the Caper family, do not naturally occur? They have been coming to Victoria for more than 100 years. In 1903, Mr. B.D. Best reported to the Victorian Field Naturalists that he saw thousands 'on the Buffalo Mountains', and Mr. J. A Kershaw said that they were 'unusually numerous all over the State. They were to be seen flying along some of the principal streets in the city and suburbs'. (*Victorian Naturalist XX*, January 1904, reprinted in *Victorian Naturalist 121* (5), October 2004). Western migrations in Victoria usually occur in central Victoria in late spring.



Caper Whites mate almost immediately after emerging from their pupal cases – the hovering males barely waiting for the females' wings to harden. I have observed this remarkable sight, just west of the Macquarie Marshes, where there were a number of Caper bushes *Capparis* sp. hanging with shiny, black, pupal cases. The males emerged first, and stayed around, each hoping to be the one to 'capture' a female the minute she was ready.

Caper Whites are seen regularly around Geelong, but are not often recorded in such large numbers. At Portarlinton, for a week at the end of October 1996, Dave King noticed a great many flying southwest. During a rainstorm in October 2000, they were hanging like white flowers on shrubs at Point Addis.



On 23 November 1999, they began migrating south through the riverland of South Australia, and reached the coast. A large front amalgamated with smaller groups that had been building up during the month. On 28 November they were seen flying out to sea, and many thousands were washed up on beaches the following day. Then the main front turned west, reaching Murray Bridge on 29 November, and soon they were seen all over the Fleurieu Peninsula from Goolwa to Victor Harbour, and as far north as Adelaide. Many flew in from the sea. They spent the night on bushes and settled on the ground like snow. For days they kept arriving in their thousands; many visited Kangaroo Island. By 3 December, the spectacle was all over. The butterflies had headed northeast again, presumably to caper trees in the north Flinders Ranges and further east. Why did they make this enormous journey? We don't know nearly enough about their movements. They have been known to reach southern Tasmania.

Where do Victoria's Caper Whites come from? Is there more than one 'wave'? How do they navigate and synchronise their flight? How far can they travel in a day? How many find the caper bushes in cultivation south of the Murray, and successfully reproduce?

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