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BIOSYSTEMATICE RESEARCH UNIT,
DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY,
UNIVERSITY OF KALYANI,
KALYANI - 741 235. INDIA.
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SANTANU SAHA
S. CHAKRABARTI

25. A BUTTERFLY PHENOMENON

Butterflies have been a source of fascination for me ever since childhood, but the simple thrill of photographing them is a recent discovery. More than the satisfaction of securing a good close-up of a beautiful butterfly, what lingers in the mind is the pleasure of peeping into the wonderful world of those jewelled angels through the close-up lens.

On 10.v.1984, I was with a group of friends near the Banatheertham waterfalls, inside the Mundanthurai Tiger Sanctuary of Tamil Nadu, when my attention was suddenly caught by a group of seven or eight bluish butterflies trying to alight near a tiny pool in a rocky depression. For about three or four minutes, the butterflies fluttered about, apparently trying to land near the water.

Finally, three or four of them landed by the water's edge. When I was close enough, I cautiously, lowered my camera and slowly started clicking. Only after the first two or three shots, did I become aware of what I was seeing through my camera lens — something

I had never seen or read about before. The butterfly was spurting tiny drops of liquid through its anus. It was doing this roughly at the rate of one spurt every five seconds. Each drop was spurted with such force that it fell four or five cm away from the insect's vent. The other butterflies were also doing the same. It was almost as if they were sucking water through their proboscis and ejecting it through their rear. Were they doing it to bring down the body temperature? If not, what could be the real reason behind the phenomenon?

Later on, I identified the butterflies as Blue Bottles (*Graphium sarpedon*). On another occasion I saw the same phenomenon in another butterfly, a 'Common Banded Peacock'. It also happened near a stream bed. But in this case there was only a solitary butterfly and it was resting on damp ground with wings spread out. There was no puddle of water anywhere near it. The rate of squirting was erratic but I was able to see the butterfly doing it four or five times before it flew away.

ELAMON HOUSE,
THYCAUD,
TRIVANDRUM-695 014,
February 26, 1987.

SURESH ELAMON



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