

# British Nature Guide

## The Painted Lady butterfly migration into Europe

Painted Lady butterflies spend the winter in the high Atlas Mountains of Morocco in North Africa. When spring starts and the weather gets a little warmer they set out for Europe, flying north across the Mediterranean.

Painted Ladies stop to breed in southern Europe in early spring. They lay their eggs on Thistles and Nettles. Their caterpillars eat the leaves of these plants.

Protected from predators by prickles and stings the caterpillars grow very quickly. Within a few weeks they turn into a pupa, and then a week or so later a new adult butterfly emerges.



The next generation of Painted Ladies continues the migration north, some reaching Britain as early as April. They feed on nectar and will visit many types of plants. They are good flyers and can travel all of the way up to Scotland.

In most years only a few thousand butterflies arrive in Britain, but every few years when the breeding conditions have been right for them in Europe millions arrive.

In 2009 more than ten million Painted Ladies arrived in Britain. They bred successfully, and in the autumn more than twenty-five million left Britain and headed back to Africa. It is amazing to think that such a fragile looking insect can fly all the way across Europe.

During the return migration they can reach heights of 3000 feet and fly at up to 30 miles an hour. They fly so high that they cannot be seen from the ground, but when large numbers are migrating together they can be seen by radar.

The Painted Lady butterflies which return to Africa in late autumn are the great grandchildren of the butterflies which left in early spring.