

Monsoon Wings

A Butterfly Migration and Life Cycle Game

This game can be played with children or adults who are able to read. It takes them through the journey of a butterfly's life cycle and its migration from the Western Ghats to the Eastern Plains.

This game has 6 rounds, with each round representing one stage of the butterfly's journey, in the order given below.



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Inspired by 'All in a Bird's Life- Bird Survivor and Lifecycle Game' by Early Bird (NCF) and 'Bird Sleuth' from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Facilitator's Guide: How to Run the Game

This game is a fun and interactive way for children and adults to learn about the journey and challenges faced by migrating butterflies in South India. Follow these steps to ensure a smooth, educational experience.



Preparation

1. **Print the Materials:** Print the game cards on pages 8-15 (ideally on thicker/card paper) and cut them. You must have a total of 24 cards. The number of cards in each stage reduces from Stage 3 onwards.
2. **Organize:** Arrange the cards in your hand round-wise, starting from round 1.
3. **Natural History Reading:** Read the “The Great South-Indian Butterfly Migration” story on page 5 to learn about this phenomenon in detail. Read all the cards and the events mentioned in them, to be prepared with some ecological terms and phenomena beforehand.
4. **Game Space:** Find a large, open space like an open classroom, corridor, or playground. Use chalk/stones to mark the starting line in one side of the space.

Introducing the Game

1. **Introduction:**
 - Ask the audience about the life cycle of a butterfly, as they know it. (This may be Egg > Larva > Pupa > Adult). Discuss prompts like “In books, the arrow always points safely to the next stage. But in nature, is it always this straightforward? What else might happen in between the stages?” Use the following themes to guide their thinking: Finding food (nectar and host plants), avoiding predators, weather changes, finding shelter, etc.
 - Ask: “Have you seen huge numbers of butterflies at certain times of the year?” (this happens close to monsoon season) “Why do you think this is happening?” (Briefly explain the west-east butterfly migration that occurs in south India. Pause where necessary to unpack unfamiliar ecological terms. Depict the movement illustratively on a board/paper or draw on the ground with chalk or a stick, if it helps.)
 - Tell the group that they will now be playing ‘Monsoon Wings’ to experience the journey and life cycle of a butterfly.

2. **Team Formation:** Divide the group into 4 teams. Let them pick/randomly assign a "butterfly species" name to their team (Choose between Blue Tiger, Plain Tiger, Striped Tiger and Common Crow). You may also show and/or give pictures of these butterflies to them.
3. **The Starting Line:** Have each team stand in a cluster behind the starting line. All butterflies line up at the start.

How to Play

1. For every round (1 through 6), let each team pick one card blindly from the corresponding round's set of cards. One participant reads all the information on the card aloud (including the title of the round and the event that occurs). The team then performs the action (e.g. "Spin 2 steps back" or "Flutter 2 steps forward").
2. After each round, pause and ask all the groups: "What stage are you in now? What happened to each team in this round?" (They must share what event happened to them as butterflies, not just the action they did!). You can also ask them to guess what will potentially happen next.

Note: Teams keep their positions at the end of each round. They move forward or backwards from this position in the following rounds. After each round, it is assumed that every team completed that round's event, even if a negative event occurred to them. They do not return to the start line unless a card specifically tells them the game is over.

3. Similarly, continue for all the other rounds. Towards the last two rounds, some teams may get eliminated due to environmental or human-made factors. The team(s) that survive till the end of Round 6 win, and the team that has moved ahead the most from the starting line is the most successfully migrated butterfly.
4. At the end of the game, gather all the teams and encourage them to recall the entire journey and reflect on their experiences and learnings, along with listing the challenges the butterflies faced along their life cycle and migration.

Accessibility: If a participant has mobility constraints, adapt the actions to accommodate their movement.

Focus on the Story: Keep reminding participants to note why their butterfly is moving forward or backward. Connect the physical movement back to the science of migration!





Blue Tiger



Common Crow



Striped Tiger



Plain Tiger

This page can be printed and cut to give each team its corresponding butterfly mascots!

The Great South-Indian Butterfly Migration

Have you seen a sudden surge in the number of butterflies around you during the months of April-June if you live in Southwest India and the months of July-September if you live in Southeast India? Where are these butterflies coming from? Why are they there, and where do they go after these months?

Across the vast mountain ranges and plains of the Indian peninsula, a spectacular pulse of life occurs twice a year, owing to the life cycle and migration of the milkweed butterflies (family Nymphalidae, subfamily Danainae). They travel between 300-500 kilometers over 6-8 weeks, but unlike the famous North American Monarchs that take a single 4,000 km trip, Indian milkweed butterflies (like the Blue Tiger and Common Crow) move in short hops. The leading butterflies lay eggs along the way, and new generations continue the route.

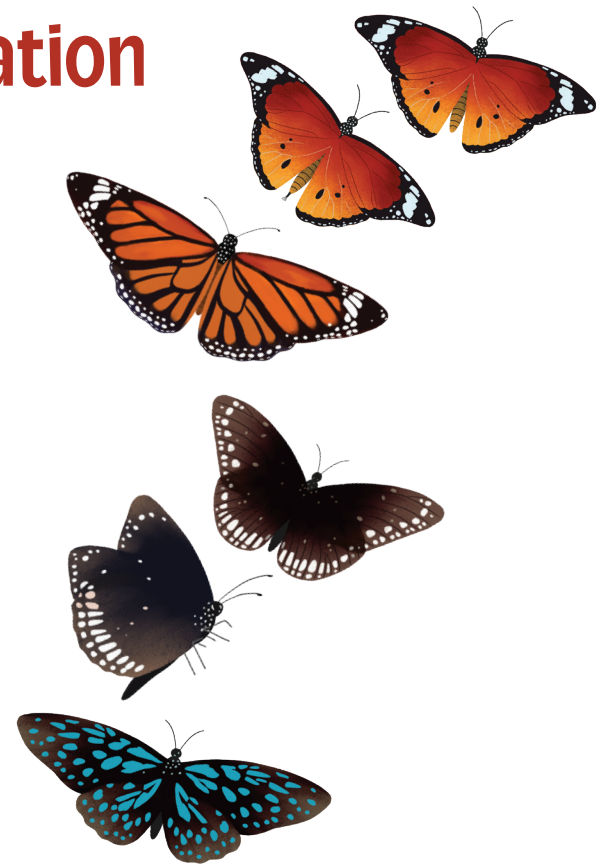


Illustration by Labonie Roy

These butterflies are called “Milkweed” Butterflies because of their preferred host plants— Milkweed Plants (family Asclepiadaceae) — some of which we commonly see around us: The Giant Milkweed (*Calotropis gigantea*), Tropical Milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*), Trellis-Vine (*Pergularia daemia*) and Indian Ipecac (*Tylophora indica*), among others. These butterflies lay their eggs on these milkweed and related plants, the leaves of which the caterpillars then feed on. These plants have special chemicals which the caterpillars accumulate in their body as they feed, making them toxic and distasteful to predators.

Unlike the well-known north-south migration by many birds to escape harsh weather conditions, these butterflies are one of the few animals in India that migrate longitudinally— from east to west, and back!



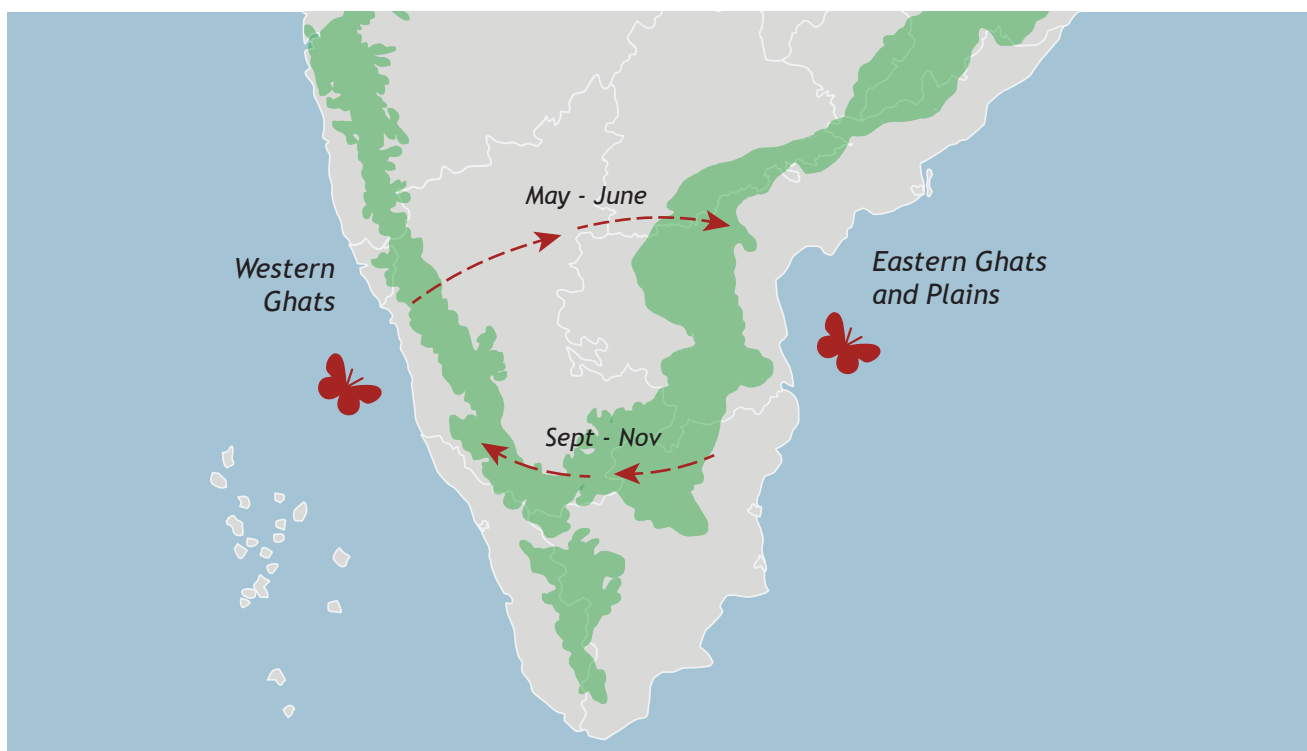
Why do they migrate?

Six species of Milkweed Butterflies have been observed to migrate: the Dark Blue Tiger (*Tirumala septentrionis*), Blue Tiger (*Tirumala limniace*), the Common Crow (*Euploea core*), and the Double-branded Crow (*Euploea sylvester*), Plain Tiger (*Danaus chrysippus*) and the Striped Tiger (*Danaus genutia*).



Peninsular India has a unique topography and a dual monsoon system. Between June and September, the Western Ghats and nearby regions experience heavy rains due to the southwest monsoon. These conditions are not suitable for adult butterflies, and hence, as the pre-monsoon showers start in April-May, they start moving eastward. These pre-monsoon rains also trigger a sudden growth of host plants, increase food availability and reduce predation, contributing to the sudden increase in butterfly numbers. This could also cause a shortage in resources, further pushing the butterflies to migrate!

The Eastern Ghats and Plains have milder showers until October, giving the butterflies enough time to migrate over multiple generations to the east (i.e. the butterflies may reproduce and complete multiple life cycles before they finish their journey). Come September-October, as the northeast monsoon arrives in southeast India, these butterflies start migrating back towards the Western Ghats, where they will feed and rest in large congregations until the next flowering of trees trigger active feeding and reproduction before the next April-May migration event.



Illustrative depiction of the annual South-Indian butterfly migration event

When do we see this happening?

Depending on which part of Southern India you are in, you may see swarms of these butterflies congregating in flowering gardens, flying along rivers or highways, ‘mudpuddling’ (sucking in water and minerals) on wet soil, or even just flying outside your window in numbers more than usual during certain times of the year. Regions in the southwestern parts of India see the first increase starting April-May, and the population moves towards the southeastern states by June-July, staying and starting to move back around October. They gather in huge swarms and move in large numbers, making them easy to spot as they cross cities and forests.



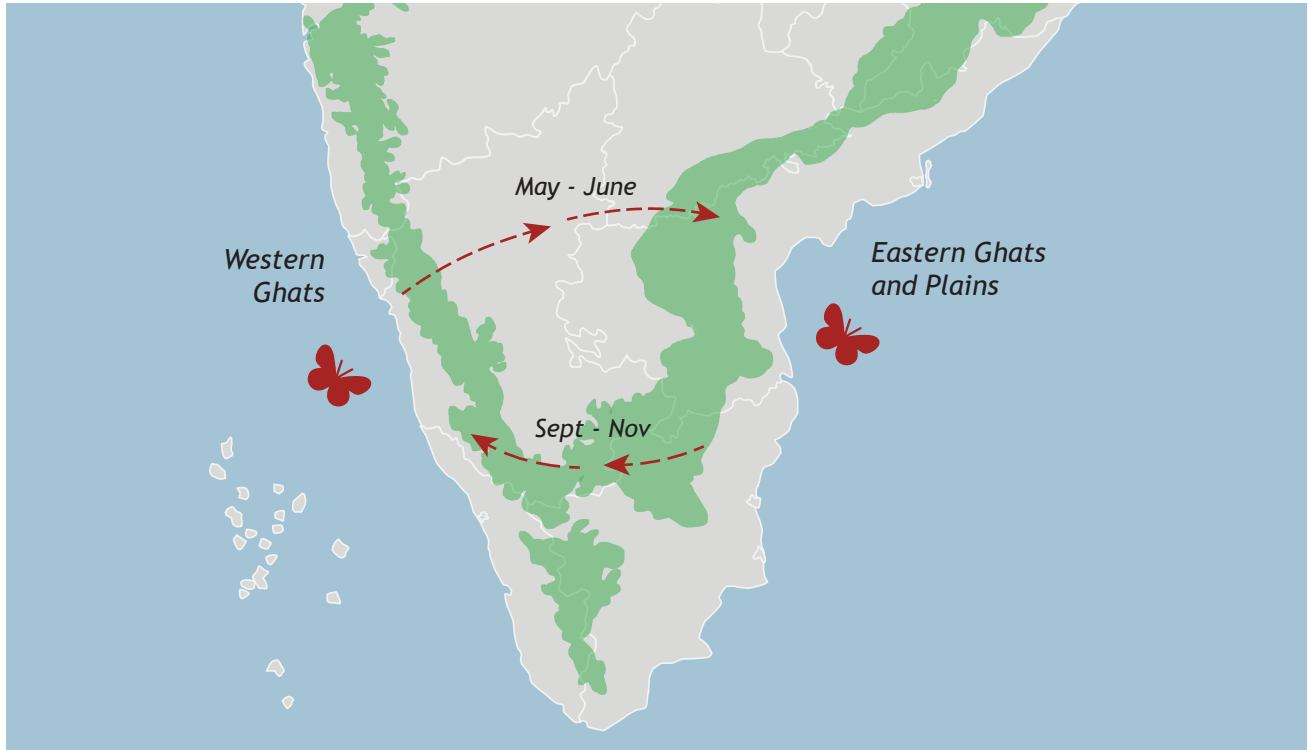
The survival of this migration depends on the health of the entire peninsula. Busy roads, habitat fragmentation, and climate shifts pose constant threats. When we protect their corridors—the forests, the grasslands, and gardens with nectar and host plants—we are not just protecting important pollinators, but also a living, breathing connection between the mountains and the plains across the Indian peninsula.

References & Further Reading

- Mongabay India (2025). "Why are butterflies migrating across the Indian peninsula? [Explainer]" Mongabay India. <https://india.mongabay.com/2025/08/why-are-butterflies-migrating-across-the-indian-peninsula-explainer/>
- RoundGlass Sustain (2024). "Bewitching Butterflies Take Wing." RoundGlass Sustain. <https://roundglassustain.com/species/bewitching-butterflies-take-wing>
- Vinayan, P., et al. (2023). "Pattern and drivers of danaine butterfly migration in Southern India: implications for conservation." Journal of Insect Conservation.

Note: Researchers are still studying this amazing phenomenon to better understand how and why these butterflies migrate!



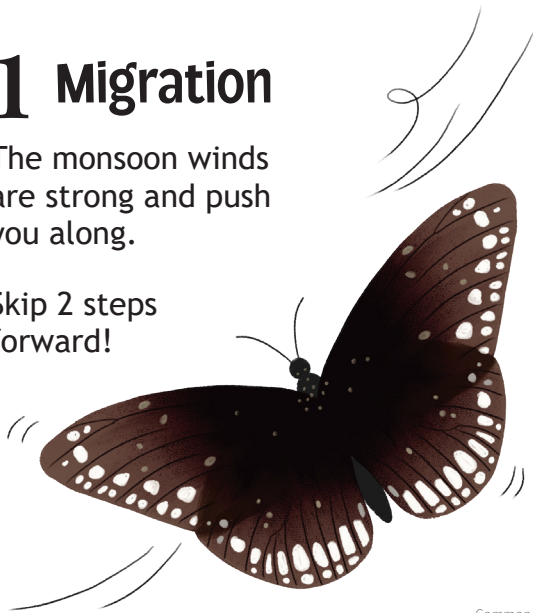


Illustrative depiction of the annual South-Indian butterfly migration event

1 Migration

The monsoon winds are strong and push you along.

Skip 2 steps forward!

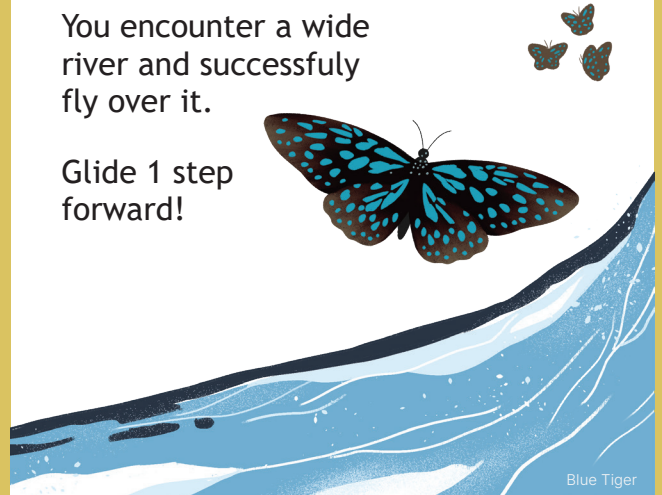


Common Crow

1 Migration

You encounter a wide river and successfully fly over it.

Glide 1 step forward!

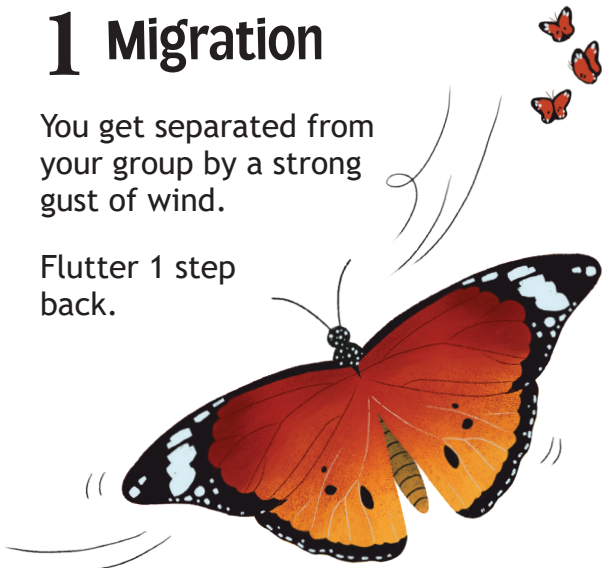


Blue Tiger

1 Migration

You get separated from your group by a strong gust of wind.

Flutter 1 step back.



Plain Tiger

1 Migration

Your path is blocked by a busy highway.

Stay in place until the cars pass.



1 Migration

A bird tries to catch you, but you manage to make a quick escape!

Stay in place.

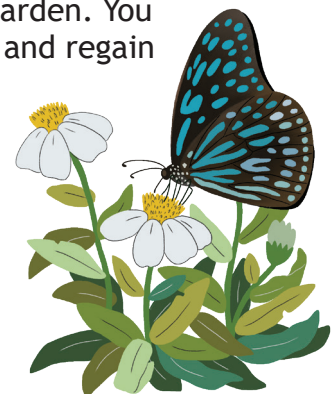


Common Crow / Asian Green Bee-eater

2 Reaching the Eastern Plains

You find a safe resting spot in a flowering garden. You slurp up nectar and regain energy.

Flutter 2 steps forward!



Blue Tiger

Round 1

Monsoon Wings



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Round 1

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Round 1

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Round 1

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Round 2

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Round 1

Monsoon Wings

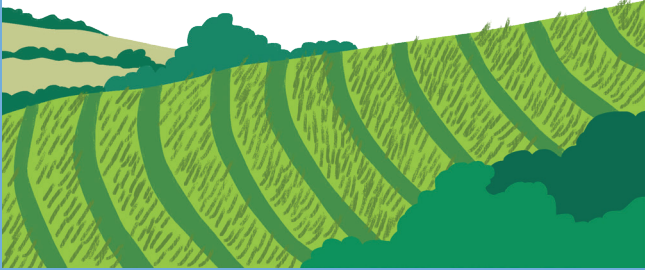


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2 Reaching the Eastern Plains

The forest you were headed to has been cut down and is now a plantation.

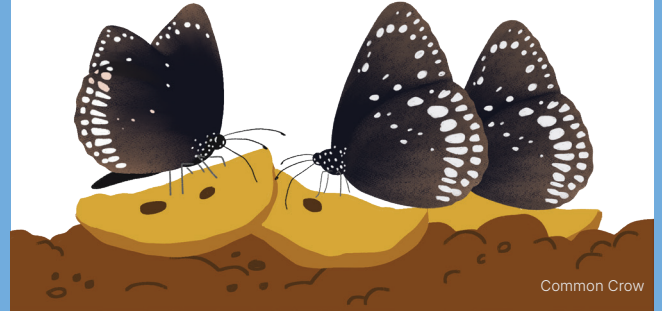
Fly 1 step back in slow motion.



2 Reaching the Eastern Plains

You find rotting fruits and wet soil, and slurp up salts and minerals from it.

Flutter 1 step forward and dance in joy!



2 Reaching the Eastern Plains

You are chased by a lizard.

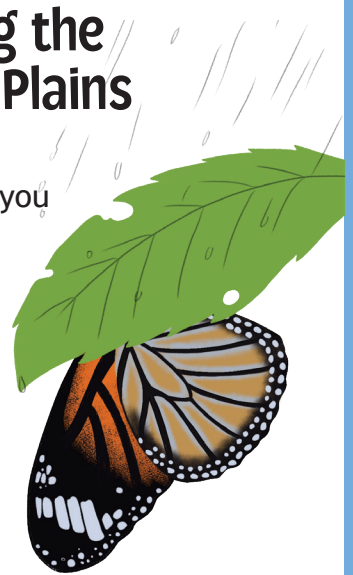
Flutter 2 steps back.



2 Reaching the Eastern Plains

A sudden heavy downpour forces you to find shelter.

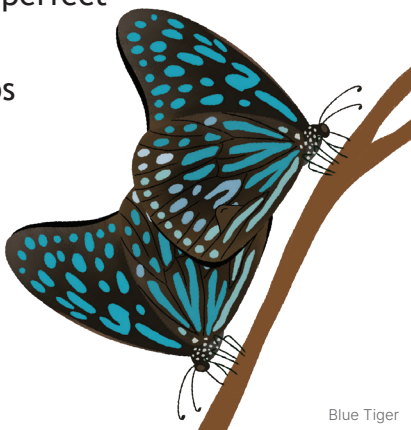
Stay in place and take cover.



3 Finding A Mate

After a long search, you find the perfect partner!

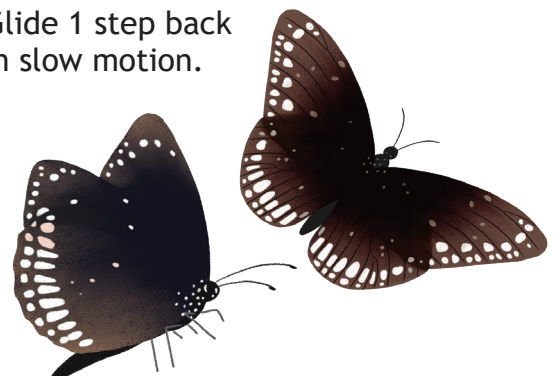
Dance 2 steps forward.



3 Finding A Mate

You try to impress a mate, but are chased away by a rival butterfly.

Glide 1 step back in slow motion.



Round 2

Monsoon Wings



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Round 2

Monsoon Wings



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Round 2

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Round 2

Monsoon Wings



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Round 3

Monsoon Wings



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Round 3

Monsoon Wings



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3 Finding A Mate

Despite your best efforts, you are unable to find a mate.

Take 1 step back.



Striped Tiger

3 Finding A Mate

You find a partner and perform a graceful courtship dance.

Spin around in a circle and fly two steps forward.



Plain Tiger

4 Laying Eggs

You find the perfect milkweed plant to lay your eggs!

Jump 2 steps forward and lay some eggs!

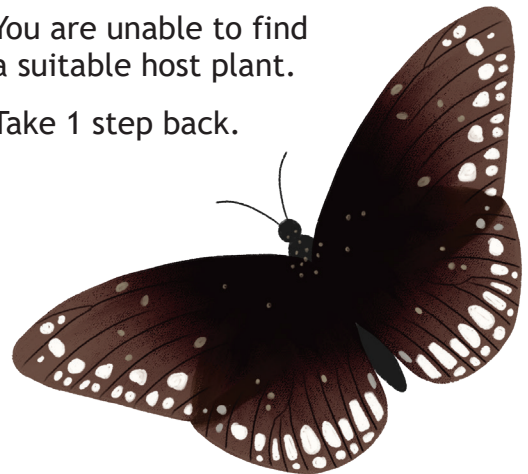


Plain Tiger

4 Laying Eggs

You are unable to find a suitable host plant.

Take 1 step back.



Common Crow

4 Laying Eggs

Your eggs are taken by ants.

Your journey is over.

Fly back to the starting line.



4 Laying Eggs

You fly a lot to find your host plant and lay your eggs successfully!

Hop 1 step forward on one leg.



Blue Tiger

Round 3

Monsoon Wings



Round 3

Monsoon Wings



Round 4

Monsoon Wings



Round 4

Monsoon Wings



Round 4

Monsoon Wings



Round 4

Monsoon Wings



5 Caterpillar Life

You successfully hatch and begin to eat the leaves of your host plant. You grow big and strong!

Wiggle like a caterpillar and take 2 steps forward.



5 Caterpillar Life

A parasitic wasp finds you and lays its eggs in you.

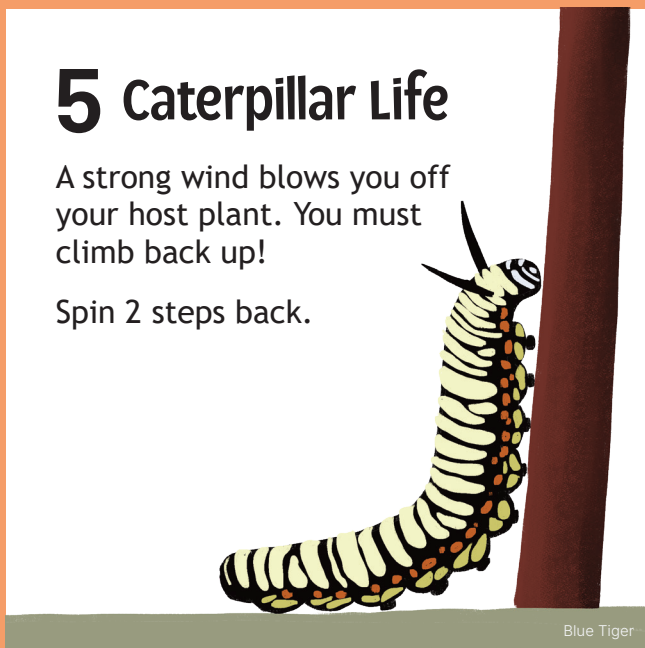
Your journey is over.
Fly back to the starting line.



5 Caterpillar Life

A strong wind blows you off your host plant. You must climb back up!

Spin 2 steps back.



6 Butterflies Emerge!

You successfully pupate and a new butterfly emerges!

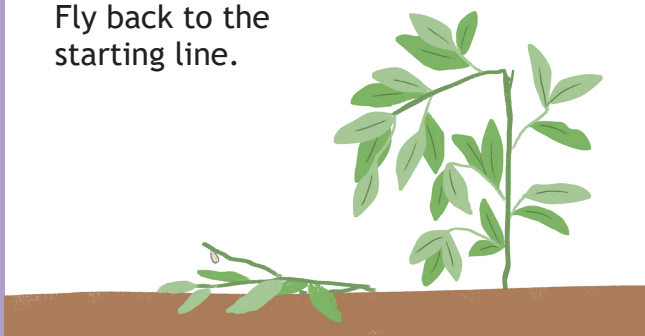
Take 2 big steps forward while dancing.



6 Butterflies Emerge!

A human destroys the plant in which you pupated

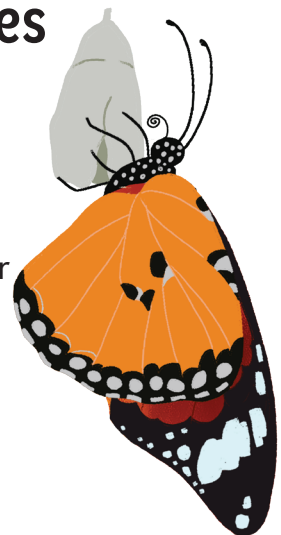
Your journey is over.
Fly back to the starting line.



6 Butterflies Emerge!

You emerge from your chrysalis (pupa) a little late, but ready for your own journey.

Jump 1 step forward.



Round 5

Monsoon Wings



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Round 5

Monsoon Wings



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Round 6

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Round 6

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