



Black Swallowtail Butterfly

We are all familiar with the famous Monarch butterfly but there is another beautiful pollinator around, the black Swallowtail, Oklahoma's official state butterfly since 1996. Swallowtails are found in most parts of the eastern and mid-western U.S., over to the Rocky Mountains, southwest into Arizona and northern Mexico, and up into southern Canada.

Swallowtails are found in Oklahoma from May through October.

The upper wing surface is mostly black and on the inner edge of the hindwing is a black spot centered in a larger orange spot, known as the Eye Spot. Males have yellow bands near the wing's edge. The female has a row of yellow spots and an iridescent blue band. Females are typically larger than males. All have a characteristic narrow lobe or tail on the lower hindwing, which gives them their name.

The male swallowtails emerge first to claim and defend territories with lots of nectar flowers where they perch and patrol for females. Females lay their eggs on plants in the carrot family such as Queen Anne's lace, dill, parsley, and fennel.



Bronze Fennel

The caterpillars feed on the host plants until they form a chrysalis. The eggs hatch in three to nine days. The young caterpillars go through five stages of development called instars. At first the caterpillars are spiny and mostly black with a white saddle resembling bird droppings. As they molt into the second and third instar the spines become orange or red. The older larvae, fourth and fifth instars, are green with bands of black and yellow spots making it harder to spot on their host plants. They grow to 1 ½ - 2" long. The caterpillar stage lasts from 10-30 days, depending on the weather and the amount of food available.



The mature caterpillar will pupate on a sturdy plant stem, tree trunk or wall. It attaches by spinning a slender silk-like band and forms a naked chrysalis, not a cocoon like moths do. The pupal stage lasts 2-3 weeks except in the fall when the pupa will overwinter and emerge in the spring.

Swallowtails are nectar eaters. Zinnias, coneflowers, milkweed, thistle, buddleia, lilac, rudbeckia, sunflowers, lantana, bee balm, butterfly milkweed, Joe Pye weed, sedum are some of their favorites. Welcome them to your garden by planting flowers for blooms throughout the summer to provide them with a reliable food source from May to October.



For a detailed list of butterfly nectar flowers, check out OSU Extension's HLA-6430, "Landscaping to Attract Butterflies and Moths, check out <https://extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets/landscaping-to-attract-butterflies-and-moths.html>.

Become a Swallowtail's best friend! Plant host plants and nectar flowers to attract these beautiful, hardworking pollinators to your garden. You will be really glad you did!

You can get answers to all your gardening questions by visiting our website, www.tulsamastergardeners.org, by calling the Tulsa Master Gardeners Help Line at 918-746-3701 or by emailing us at mg@tulsamastergardeners.org, or come see us at our Diagnostic Center at 4116 E 15th St., Tulsa, OK.

Sources:

University of Wisconsin Extension, "Black Swallowtail, Papilio Polyxenes

University of Florida Entomology, "Eastern Black Swallowtail"

[OSU Extension HLA 6430, "Landscaping to Attract Butterflies and Moths"](#)

Texas A&M College of Agriculture, "Black Swallowtail"

Xerces Society, "The Striking Beauty of Oklahoma's Butterflies"