

# SKIPPERS



While skippers are indeed butterflies, they actually share traits with both butterflies and moths, making them somewhat intermediate between the two groups. Therefore, they're treated separately here, mainly because of several significant and distinctive differences from their more classic-looking relatives. Similar to moths, skippers, members of the family [Hesperiidae](#), are stockier and larger headed, have shorter wings and larger eyes, and have antennae that are set wider apart at the base. Also, the antennae of skippers are hooked--rather than knobbed--at the apex of each. At rest, these little beauties hold their wings more open than butterflies, but not horizontal like moths. One key trait skippers share with butterflies is the absence of a frenulum that, in moths, hooks the forewings to the hindwings, allowing both sets to act in unison during flight. Like all butterflies, skippers are diurnal, flying only during the day; unlike butterflies, however, skipper caterpillars pupate in a cocoon made of leaves bound with silk.

The name of the group is a description of their fast, darting, bouncy flight. With over 3,500 species worldwide and some 275 across North America, skippers are represented by only a few dozen or so species in the Mojave Desert region.



# Family HESPERIIDAE (Grizzled Skippers)

## Common Checkered Skipper (*Burnsius communis*)

Measurements:

Average: Length: .75" Wing Span: 1.25"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

small size; dorsal wings brown with white **checkerboard pattern**; ventral white with pale brown pattern; long, banded antennae with apical scoops; **(m)** furry blue-gray body; bold pattern; black stigmata on dorsal forewings; **(f)** darker, almost black body; less bold pattern; transparent white spots on dorsal forewings

Notes:

common; at home in a variety of urban and rural environments throughout NA from southern CAN south into nw SA; formerly in the genus **Pyrgus**; females lay singular eggs on members of the mallow family; tiny caterpillar (tannish-green with dark line down back, and black head) feeds within leaf nest on host mallow, adults on nectar of white composite flowers (e.g. asters, daisies, fleabanes); mature caterpillars hibernate through winter; adults generally active from April to November; unknown lifespan, but probably no more than a couple weeks

Mojave presence: rare; transient

Comments:

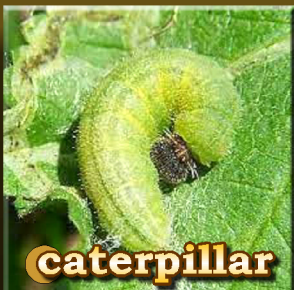
The dorsal surface of these skippers, shown here investigating a rabbitbrush (left) and goldenbush (right) at **Red Rock Canyon NCA** near Las Vegas in October, 2016, is much darker and more boldly patterned than the ventral side (seen on the specimens above). The bands are broader on males, but that is difficult to determine in the field. Seen separately, one could think these were two different species, however, the bluish (male) to blackish (female) furry body is characteristic. However, distinguishing this species from the **White Checkered Skipper** is impossible without dissection and examination of the male genitalia. Ouch!



Dolan Springs, AZ



Dolan Springs, AZ



Red Rock Cyn NCA; NV



South Rim; GCNP; AZ



South Rim; GCNP; AZ





# Family HESPERIIDAE (Grizzled Skippers)

## White Checkered Skipper (*Pyrgus/Burnsius albescens*)

Measurements:

Average: Length: .75" Wing Span: 1.25"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

small size; dorsal wings brown with white checkerboard pattern; ventral white with gray pattern; (m) furry blue-gray body; (f) furry black body

Notes:

uncommon; prefers scrublands, prairies, fields, deserts, etc., across southern tier of US from FL west to CA, south to MEX; females lay singular eggs on leaf buds and leaf tops of various plants, mainly members of the mallow family (*Malvaceae*); tiny caterpillar (green with faint lines down back; dark head) feeds on host plant; adults rely on nectar; mature caterpillars hibernate through winter; adults active year round across most of range; unknown lifespan, but probably no more than a couple weeks

Mojave presence: rare; transient

Comments:

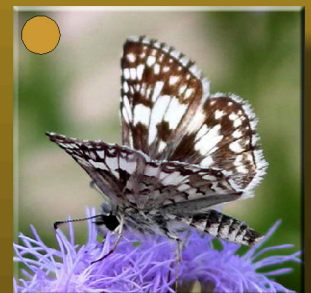
Checkered skimmers are quite uncommon to rare in the Mojave region, especially the **White**. I have only seen/photographed a few representatives, such as the specimen shown upper right at Antelope Canyon in the **Mt. Tipton Wilderness Area** near Dolan Springs, AZ, in March of 2022. Judging from its somewhat paler presentation (due to larger and more extensive white spots, bars, and crescent patches) compared to the **Common Checkered Skipper**, it's likely--but not conclusively-- a white.

It is impractical to try to distinguish the **White Checkered** from the **Common Checkered** in the field where their ranges overlap, and especially so in the Mojave Desert since both species are rare in the region. Even in the laboratory, absolutely positive ID can only be made by an experienced investigator by means of dissection and study

of the male's genitalia...talk about intrusive! For casual observers, best guess from good photographs is the most we can expect! The general consensus is that the "white" is paler above than the "common" as depicted by the two adjacent photos. Even so, unless you claim to be an expert, take a good guess and own it!



Mt Tipton; Dolan Springs; AZ



He3



# Family HESPERIIDAE (Grass Skippers)

## Fiery Skipper (*Hylephila phyleus*)

Measurements:

Average: Length: 1" Wing Span: 1.35"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

small size; dark to pale spots on wings to varying degrees (even none); large dark eyes; short antennae with **orange apices**; **(m)** orange or yellow body and upperwings; black stigma (scent cells) on forewings; **(f)** brown body; upperside of wings brown with orange band (paler underside)

Notes:

common; ranges throughout the US from s CAN south to FL, east to CA, south in summer to Argentina in open areas (fields, lawns, roadsides, etc.); female lays singular eggs under leaf blades of various grasses; several broods per year; caterpillars to 1" in length (green to brownish with black heads and constricted neck) feed on host grass leaves; adults feed on nectar of numerous flowers; larva considered a pest in some areas; active spring through late fall; lifespan of adults about 10 days

Mojave presence: native

Comments:

This skipper is more common in the eastern US than the Mojave region, such as these two in Pompano Beach, FL. They're normally spotted flying fast and low over grassy areas where females search for suitable sites to lay their eggs (left). They also seek delectable flowers for sweet nectar (right).

Active spring to fall as a species, individuals are not so lucky. These two lovebirds were caught getting busy in Florida. Since their adult lifespans are only a week or so, they have a lot to accomplish in such a short amount of time!



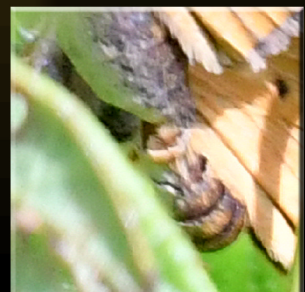
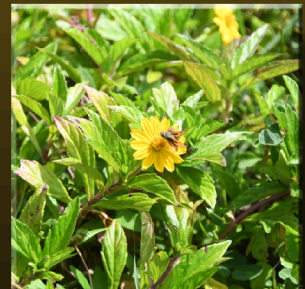
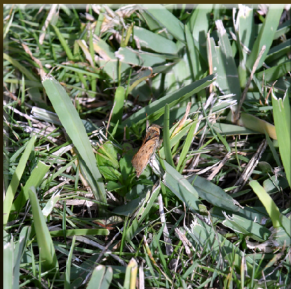
Corn Creek; Desert NWR; NV



Corn Creek; Desert NWR; NV



Pompano Beach, Florida





# Family **HESPERIIDAE** (White-Skippers)

## Northern White-Skipper (*Heliopetes ericetorum*)

### Measurements:

Average: Length: 1" Wing Span: 1.5"

### Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

small size; furry gray body; dorsal wings white with **dark chevrons along margins**; ventral wings white with pale tannish markings; large dark eyes; short, banded antennae with **dark apical scoops**; **(m)** narrow chevrons; **(f)** darker chevrons, black at wing bases

### Notes:

common; prefers riparian habitats, woodlands, washes, etc. in western US from NM west to CA and adjacent areas of n MEX, north to WA; female lays singular eggs on leaves of host plants (mainly mallows); several broods per year; caterpillar (green with dark head, constricted neck) feeds on host leaves while living in rolled or silk-tied leaf foliage; adults feed on nectar of various flowers (males "puddle" for nutrients); males patrol for females, flights from April to October; lifespan of adults about 10 days

Mojave presence: native

### Comments:

While generally common, these skippers are seldom encountered in the dry Mojave. When they are spotted, it's always near sources of water (springs, oases, wetlands, etc.), such as at Corn Creek in the **Desert National Wildlife Refuge** northwest of Las Vegas, and the spring-fed streams in the canyons of **Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area** west of the city. However, the specimens shown here near Peach Springs on the Colorado Plateau Province in May of 2024 are the first I have seen and photographed.



Peach Springs, Arizona



Peach Springs, Arizona



Peach Springs, Arizona



Peach Springs, Arizona