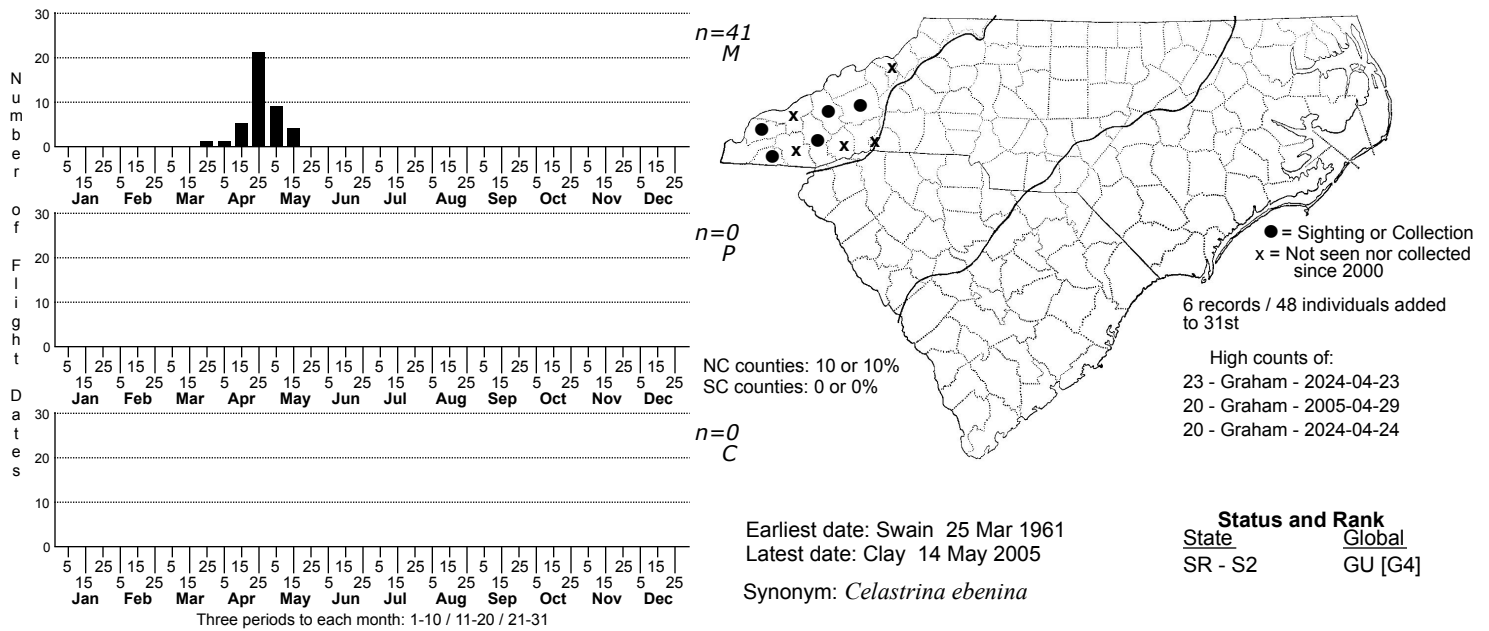


Dusky Azure *Celastrina nigra*



DISTRIBUTION: Scattered in the Mountains; likely occurs from the VA line to the GA line, but so far only recorded in ten counties, mainly in the southern Mountains. Perhaps absent in some of the northern Mountain counties, though seemingly suitable habitat is present there.

ABUNDANCE: Rare to very locally uncommon, but there appear to have been few people searching for this species, in part because of its narrow flight period, and in part because of its distant range from most butterflyers. Although large numbers of eggs can be found on the foodplants, adults are very difficult to find and are seldom seen (Harry Pavulaan, pers. comm.).

FLIGHT PERIOD: A single brood; very late March to mid-May, though potentially into late May at high elevations. At low elevations, the males peak in mid- to late April and the females peak in early May.

HABITAT: This species is found in the shade or dappled shade of rich hardwood forests, mostly on north-facing slopes. They are best looked for along logging roads or other dirt roads, or along wide trails, through such forests. The elevation range of the species is unknown; rich coves with the foodplant range from below 2000 feet to over 4000 feet in elevation.

FOOD AND NECTAR PLANTS: The only recorded foodplant is Goat's-beard (*Aruncus dioicus*); the larvae feed on the young leaves and flower buds, a few weeks after the flight period of the adults is completed for the year. Nectar plants are not well known, but Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*) is said to be most often used. I have seen the species nectaring on Carolina Vetch (*Vicia caroliniana*), and Harry Pavulaan has seen them nectaring on woodland species of violets. Males often take moisture/minerals from dirt.

COMMENTS: As with the Appalachian Azure, much is still to be learned about the Dusky Azure. Both are limited in NC to the Mountains, and both have a fairly brief spring flight (though Dusky finishes about when Appalachian begins). Fortunately, Allen (1997) provides much detail on the life history of both of these species in WV, where the two species are fairly widespread. The Carolina Butterfly Society found a colony of Dusky Azure along a logging road through a cove forest in Graham County in April 1996, and Rob Van Epps counted about 20 individuals along this road in 2005, easily a record one-day count.

The males can be separated from Spring Azure in flight by their slaty-gray upper surface, but you must let them perch to make sure that they are azures and not Eastern Tailed-Blues (whose females are also slate-colored above). Female Dusky Azures are very difficult to separate from Spring Azures above. The underparts of both sexes are a medium to sooty gray, about the same color as on Spring Azures; these two cannot safely be separated by photographs of just this side of the butterfly. The underparts of Summer Azures and Appalachian Azures are whiter or lighter gray. Some colony sites have been located by experts by finding caterpillars on Goat's-beard in late spring, and then visiting the site the next spring to find the adults.