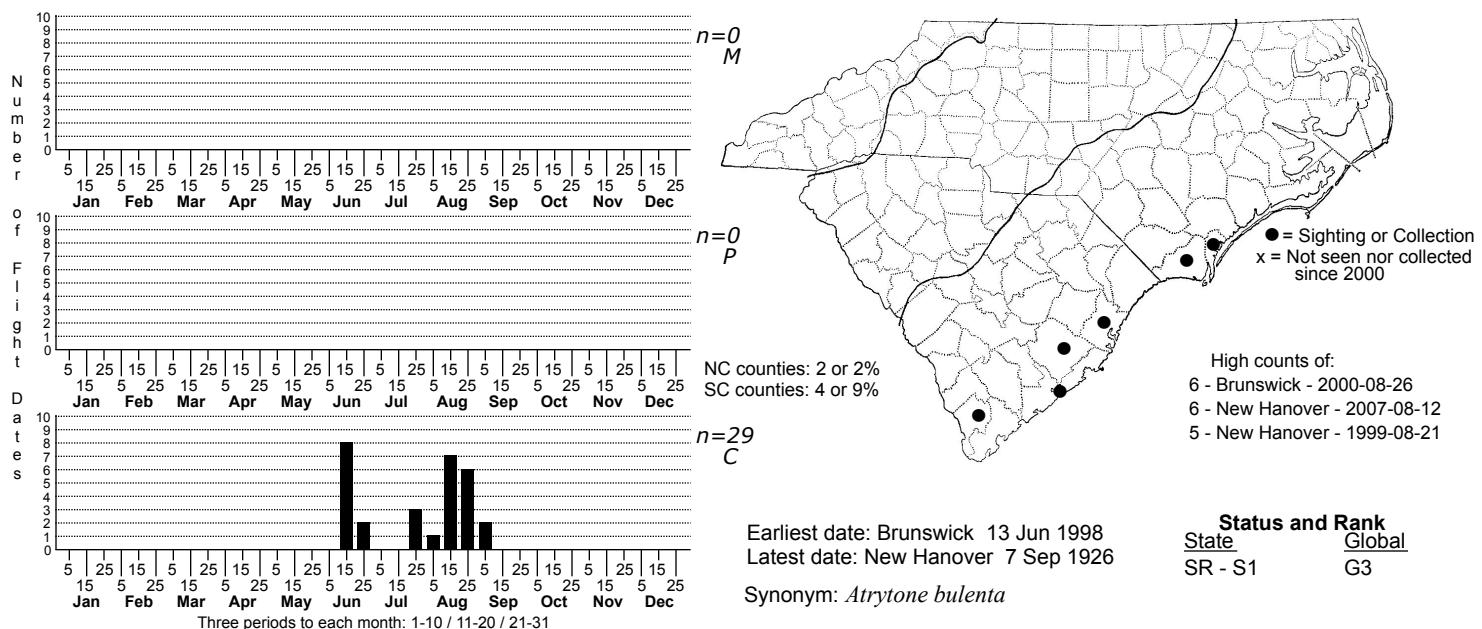


## Rare Skipper *Problema bulenta*



**DISTRIBUTION:** This is an Atlantic coastal marsh species throughout its range. At the present time, it has been found only near Wilmington in Brunswick and New Hanover counties. It has been looked for in many other marshes in other coastal counties, with no success; it might truly be limited in NC to just the Cape Fear River estuary and its tributaries.

**ABUNDANCE:** Rare to uncommon in the extensive fresh to slightly brackish marshes near Wilmington; not known elsewhere in the state.

**FLIGHT PERIOD:** Two broods, with a seemingly small gap between flight periods. Apparently early June to late June, and mid- or late July to early September. More data are needed.

**HABITAT:** This skipper has one of the most restricted habitats of any species in the Eastern United States. It is found only amid tall vegetation of coastal tidal marshes, where fresh to brackish. In NC, these are only the tidal fresh to slightly brackish marshes along the Cape Fear River near Wilmington. Characteristic marsh species are cattails (*Typha* spp.), Big Cordgrass (*Spartina cynosuroides*), and (sadly) the non-native Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*). It does forage in adjacent uplands, such as formerly along the dikes at Eagles Island.

**FOOD AND NECTAR PLANTS:** The foodplants are very tall grasses, thought to be mostly Big Cordgrass in NJ, and Southern Wild-rice (*Zizaniopsis miliacea*) in GA. In NC, Annual Wild-rice (*Zizania aquatica*) is suspected to be the primary foodplant; it is present in marshes around Wilmington but is scarce in other coastal marshes. Within the overall range, adults nectar mostly on Swamp Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) and Pickerelweed (*Pontederia cordata*); in NC, we have seen them nectaring on tall vervains (*Verbena* spp.) at Eagles Island and on Pickerelweed and arrowheads (*Sagittaria* spp.) at a nearby site.

**COMMENTS:** This is one of the genuinely scarce butterflies in the Eastern United States because of its restricted habitat. I suspect that *Zizania* is a foodplant in the Wilmington area. I have checked extensive stands of Big Cordgrass along the mainland shore of Pamlico Sound of Hyde and Dare counties, and in the Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuge area, with no success. After these dismal failures, I truly doubt that Big Cordgrass is a foodplant in NC. In fact, Swamp Milkweed was blooming profusely at Mackay Island; yet there were no Rare Skippers on them.

Portions of the habitat most easily accessible on foot are under considerable threats. Construction work on the dikes at Eagles Island has removed most of the *Verbena* used as a nectar source. Common Reed has been increasing near highways and other disturbances along marsh margins. A boat/kayak may be necessary to best survey for Rare Skippers now, as most of the marshes are difficult to reach on foot. A second option is wading, which is the method Jeff Pippen and John Dole used in 2006 to "re-discover" the species after a five-year lapse in records for NC. Another group of observers, including me, tallied six Rare Skippers at this site in 2007. Sadly, few people make the effort anymore to look for this highly localized and scarce species in NC. However, around the summer of 2021, Kay Lynn Hernandez found a few of them, with documenting photos by Bryan Putnam, on several dates by kayaking around the edges of Eagles Island; photos and story are in the Spring 2022 issue of "Cape Fear's Going Green". Thankfully, observers in SC have been finding a few new coastal sites in that state in recent years, some of which are much more accessible than are the NC sites.