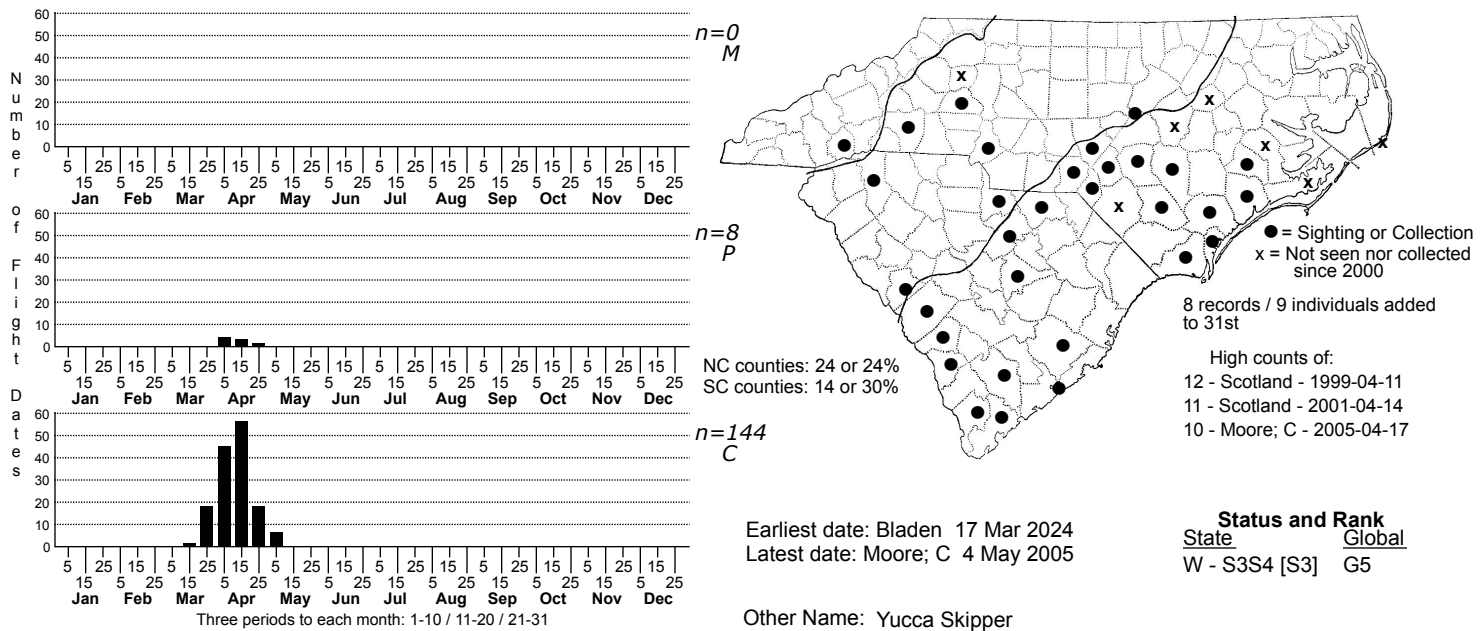


# Yucca Giant-Skipper *Megathymus yuccae*



**DISTRIBUTION:** The southern half of the Coastal Plain, plus a few widely scattered Piedmont sites, north to Alexander and Harnett counties. The species formerly ranged north to southeastern VA, but it is considered to be of historical occurrence there, and NC has no recent records from Dare, Craven, and Carteret counties. However, it still should be present in the Croatan National Forest portion of the latter two counties. Recent records from Mecklenburg and Transylvania counties are based on observations of larval tents, whereas adults were seen in 2015 by David Campbell in Catawba and Rutherford counties.

**ABUNDANCE:** Local, and closely tied to patches of yuccas. Rare to formerly uncommon in the southern Coastal Plain, and practically absent in the Piedmont and southern Mountains, where known from only a few sites. Sadly, it has declined in numbers in the past few years, with only a very few reports (at best) in a given year; some people have searched sites with previous colonies and have not seen any adults, though this might be owing to poor timing during the day or during the spring season. It seems best now to recommend a State Rank of a less numerous S3, if not a more alarming S2, than the present S3S4.

**FLIGHT PERIOD:** A single spring flight; in the Coastal Plain, from late March to very early May. In the Piedmont, probably from early April to late April.

**HABITAT:** The species is found only near yuccas (*Yucca* spp.). The habitats are mainly somewhat sandy woods or other open woods where Common Yucca (*Y. filamentosa*) is found. It is known to occur along barrier islands, at dunes and maritime forest edges along the southern coast where Aloe Yucca (*Y. aloifolia*) and Mound-lily Yucca (*Y. gloriosa*) are found. In the Brushy Mountains, it is found around rock outcrops with much Common Yucca in the adjacent woods. Other Piedmont sites are near flatrocks or in other rocky areas, of course only those with Common Yucca nearby.

**FOOD AND NECTAR PLANTS:** The foodplants are strictly yuccas. The caterpillars build a tunnel near the root of a yucca plant, where the larvae later pupate. These silk tents can often be found, and it is likely that some or many of the county records are of tents, as opposed to records of adults. The adults do not nectar, but may take moisture at wet or damp soil.

**COMMENTS:** This is a wonderful, unusual butterfly that seems to be part moth and part locust! Adults are very explosive, noisy, and fast in flight, being quite hard to follow. They are best looked for in mid-morning, as they warm up in sunny places near the yuccas; they do not nectar, so don't look for them on flowers; by about 1100 in the morning, adults are very difficult to find. This can be a tough species to find, but if you search enough patches of yucca, you just might get rewarded. And, the yucca stand does not need to have hundreds of plants; I have seen adults where there were as few as about 10-12 plants. I found them at four sites in 1995, all by purposefully walking through yucca stands, after four futile years of looking. Scott Hartley found a colony on yuccas planted near his house at Weymouth Woods-Sandhills Nature Preserve in 1997, and four individuals from this colony put on a show for a Carolina Butterfly Society field trip in 1998! A Society field trip encountered a colony of at least a dozen individuals in the Sandhills Game Lands in 1999. David Campbell has found larval tents at several counties in the western half of the state in the past few years.

There were no reports at all in 2023. There is still a concern that collectors, especially from out of state, are removing yuccas with larval tents; this was a problem locally in the past. If this dearth of reports continues in 2024, it may be time for the N.C. Natural Heritage Program to start tracking records as Significantly Rare, with a State Rank of S2 or S2S3.