

Before You Go

Outline of the Butterfly Farm and Animal Rehabilitation Project

Jardín de Mariposas Piarella

Have you ever been in the middle of a glorious parade? All around you falls confetti of every color - greens, reds, yellows and even iridescent blue. But this confetti is special. It swirls and glides, floats up and down.

This confetti is alive.

A blur of vibrant color flutters and swirls and glides past your eyes. Some are busy sucking juice from rotting fruit and sweet nectar from flowers. It is easy to notice butterflies as they are flying, but when they are perched, it is a different story. Look carefully. You may see the eyes of an owl staring back at you, the threatening pattern on the underside of a butterfly wing. Look even closer. You could have sworn that that dead leaf just inched forward, or something that looks like bird droppings is writhing on a leaf. Adult and larval butterflies take on many shapes and colors, sometimes to deter predators, sometimes to avoid detection completely. The color that makes them famous is due to sexual selection; it is used to attract mates.

Butterflies are some of the most extraordinarily colorful animals on the planet and Costa Rica has around 1250 species - a tenth of the world's total and more than all of Africa. However, as with so many other types of animals, these beautiful insects are suffering as a result of habitat destruction and overexploitation. Because of their radiant colors collectors also prize adult butterflies, both alive and dead. Private gardens in North America and Europe require live butterflies for their displays to visitors. Sometimes, this demand entails removing adults and larvae (caterpillars) from the wild, particularly in the tropics. Everybody has seen butterflies on display behind glass and surrounded by wooden frames. All too often, these specimens are removed from the wild, possibly before they have had a chance to mate and reproduce.

Forests around the world are being cleared at an alarming rate, isolating animals in cramped habitats and leaving others homeless. Often, these animals venture into urban areas where they accidentally collide with cars, windows or wires. Some animals are injured and infants orphaned. Also, many people capture animals and their young from the wild to keep as pets. Some people soon discover that they do not have the resources (food, adequate space, medicine and lots of love) to tend to them. These animals would die if someone did not take care of them.

And that's where Jardín Piarella steps in. This stop on the tour is a special chance to visit a butterfly garden and animal rehabilitation facility. Practically single-handedly, Wiliam Camancho Mendez constructed, runs and maintains a several separate butterfly enclosures housing hundreds of adults. Across sprawling farmland, he has planted many plants to sustain an assortment of hungry caterpillars. These range in color from drab brown to brilliant yellow, some covered with menacing spikes. Also on site are several enclosures where he and the staff care for injured and abandoned animals. Almost accidentally, Jardín Piarella has become one of the principal animal rehabilitation sites in the Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (locally known as Puerto Viejo) area. Since its beginning in 1993, dozens of birds, mammals and reptiles have stayed at the Garden. Many of them have been re-released into the wild. Because they were so badly injured or they were raised in captivity from infancy, others sadly can never be released. At least they have a better home at the Garden and serve to educate visitors about their biology and how to conserve them.