

# The Painted Lady

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**Noordboek** Natuur



All one's butterfly memories are sunny ones,  
bright pictures in the mind  
which colour the dark days of winter

- BB & Denys Watkins-Pitchford (1979)

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# Looking for eternal spring

It was the height of summer as I sat with my family on a Sardinian terrace, looking out over a tranquil, sapphire blue sea, with the shores of Africa far over the distant horizon. We had intended to take a boat trip, but technical issues put paid to our plans, so we remained on the European continent and gravitated to this terrace, hewn from the cliff face. The closest village was two hours' drive away. Besides Italian and Sardinian, the terrace proprietor also spoke fluent Dutch. He summarised what he had to offer: coffee, tea, non-alcoholic cold beverages and pasta dishes. Pasta sounded good, and we had plenty of time anyway. There was nothing and no one waiting for us. As we, a small fortune poorer, waited on plastic seats for the 'ping' of the microwave – only after paying discovering that it was not a freshly cooked meal – we watched the painted ladies. Dozens of them were voraciously gulping nectar from the yellow flowers surrounding the terrace. Fresh from Africa.

The painted lady is an extraordinary butterfly with an epic life. A powerful long-distance flyer and by far the most widespread. Weighing an average of one and a half grams, with a brain the size of a pinhead, they can easily fly more than 4000 kilometres from all over Europe to the tropical African savannah every autumn. Or from Canada to the deserts of Mexico. The return flight northwards takes place in the spring; by then, however, several generations have passed. A single painted lady makes a one-way trip, but the species is eternally on the move. There are eight to ten generations a year, collectively travelling almost 15,000 kilometres. The relay baton is passed on and the next

generation continues the journey. A never-ending marathon. The quest for eternal spring.

The lives of painted ladies had long been shrouded in mystery. In the nineteenth century, lepidopterists still had no idea what butterflies did in the winter. Just as it had once been thought that swallows buried themselves in mud to hibernate through the cold months, butterfly migration was also an unknown phenomenon at that time. Explanations for the great fluctuations in painted lady numbers – a few hundred in some years and thousands in others – were frequently sought for in mowing activities (a perennial concern!) However, discoveries made by dedicated lepidopterists and artists over the last two hundred years have revealed that the painted lady fluttering over your herbaceous border in May is a true global traveller. Who were these lepidopterists, and what did they discover about the painted lady? Where do the butterflies go in autumn and what do they do in winter? Why do they occasionally invade the Netherlands? Let us join the painted ladies on their journey.





