

spotted jezebels

By Andrew A.E. Williams

The spotted jezebel (*Delias aganippe*) is a spectacular endemic Australian butterfly. In Western Australia it is found in near-coastal areas from North West Cape to the south coast between Albany and Esperance, and inland through the Wheatbelt into the semi-arid and arid zone. The species has been recorded in all months of the year, though it flies predominantly in spring and summer.

It is a relatively large butterfly with a wingspan over 60mm. From a distance it appears white, but closer examination shows that the upper surface of the wings are extensively washed with silvery-grey scales, with the outer border edged with black and white markings. The underside of the hind wing is more heavily marked and especially beautiful, having brilliant large red spots and yellow markings incorporated into the black and white base pattern.

Spotted jezebels are master gliders, using rising warm air currents to carry them to the summits of high hills. Here males congregate, sometimes in large numbers, gliding effortlessly on the rising air currents. They float round the prominent

hilltops, waiting for unmated females to arrive. This mate-finding strategy is referred to as 'hill-topping' behaviour.

It stands to reason that isolated hilltops are amongst the best places to find spotted jezebels. At times the butterflies may hang almost motionless in the air 2–3m above an observer, their brilliant underside wing patterns clearly visible, making it possible to obtain remarkable photographs of them in flight. The Stirling Range, with its multiple high points, is a particularly good place to observe the butterflies.

Spotted jezebels generally occur in woodland habitats where their larval food-plants grow. Females lay their eggs in clusters on the leaves of parasitic plants on which the larvae feed – often quandong trees or sandalwood trees (Santalaceae), or parasitic mistletoes (Loranthaceae). When the eggs hatch, the larvae feed gregariously, unusual for butterflies. Pupation usually takes place en masse, and it is not uncommon to see dozens of pupae (chrysalises) clustered on the trunks of sandalwood or quandong host trees in spring or early summer.



Photo – Jeremy Storey.