

Lt. Col. M. L. Ferrar – The ‘butterfly mad’ Chief Commissioner of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

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‘The list of Indian butterflies is now not often added to except when there is an Abor expedition or other excursion in the tangled hills of the North East Frontier.’

— Ferrar in a letter to his mother dated 22 December 1923

It was in April 1923 that Lt. Col. M. L. Ferrar (Figure 1 *a, b*), a slightly built man with a passion for languages and butterflies took charge as the Chief Commissioner of the Penal Settlement at Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Summer was drawing to a close and the bright sunny days with clear blue skies would soon give way to the long monsoon months with overcast skies and dull days punctuated with heavy rains. While the southwest and the northeast monsoons, which follow each other without respite would hamper Ferrar’s movements to the over 350 islands of this archipelago in search of butterflies, it would not prevent him from collecting butterflies assiduously in and around Port Blair. The 365 m high Mount Harriet, near the summit of which was located the official summer residence of the Chief Commissioner and at the base of which Lord Mayo was stabbed to death while on an official visit to the islands in February 1872, was to be one of his favourite butterfly-hunting grounds.

Born in 1876, Ferrar, who was a contemporary of Sir Winston Churchill at Sandhurst, joined the Indian Army at the tender age of 20 in 1896. Life in the army being devoid of the challenges that he craved for, Ferrar opted for a transfer to the Civil Service and was inducted into the Punjab Commission. During the five years that he was in the army, he diligently applied himself to the study of Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Punjabi and Pashtu. In recognition of his proficiency in these languages he was appointed an examiner in Urdu at Cambridge University, when he retired from service at 55 years of age in 1931.

On shifting from Punjab to Port Blair in the summer of 1923 to take up his new assignment as the Chief Commissioner of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Ferrar began to devote increasing amounts

of his spare time collecting and studying the butterflies of these islands. For assistance in collecting butterflies from the numerous islands of the archipelago, he had in his employ four Indian collectors. Bhagawan Din was the only one among them who collected butterflies during the entire period of his stay on these islands. It was Bhagawan Din who brought him the prized but battered female of the Andaman blue nawab (*Polyura schreiber tisamenus*) as

a sort of visiting card when Ferrar first arrived on these islands. During the next eight years neither he nor his collectors could so much as see another specimen of this handsome butterfly, which we today know to be confined to the mangrove areas that fringe the extensive coastline of these islands. Officials in various Government Departments also collected butterflies from a number of islands for him. It was the tahsildar of Nankauri who sent all



Figure 1. *a*, Ferrar photographed in 1928 shortly after receiving the CSI from Buckingham Palace. *b*, Ferrar with butterfly net in hand vacationing in Zambia. *c*, Facsimile of a portion of a letter written by Ferrar from the Andamans to his mother in England dated 3 March 1924. [I had with me 4 butterfly men and had looked forward to some good results but only had one whole day at Galathea Bay and 2 h there another day and 2 h at Kondul, an island between Gt. and Little Nicobar. Of these the full day was fine and the other times cloudy. However I got some 15 kinds new to my collection and a considerable number of individuals of 3 or 4 rare, very rare kinds and have actually set 134 butterflies of which 130 are perfect specimens. The biggest are 8 inches from tip to tip.] *d*, Brigadier W. H. Evans (extreme left) and Mrs Ferrar (extreme right) picnicking at Corbyn's Cove, South Andaman, 1931.

the 20 specimens of the rare Malay tiger (*Danaus affinis malayana*) that are in his collection. No more could be collected by Ferrar on any of his many visits to the Central Nicobars² and its exact habitat remains unknown to this day.

Other rarities that Ferrar saw or caught once and never even saw again during the period of his stay on the islands were the lurcher (*Yoma sabina vasuki*), the branded yeoman (*Cirrachroa fasciata*) and the Nicobar bamboo treebrown (*Lethe europa tamuna*). Some species like the green flash (*Artipe eryx*) and the common clubtail (*Pachliopta coon sambilanga*), which had been reported earlier from isolated islands or were restricted to pockets within islands, were never seen or collected by Ferrar or his collectors during the entire period that he was stationed here.

As a result of eight years of painstaking collection and observation, Ferrar could list over a dozen species including the tawny rajah, the painted lady, the blue pansy, the painted courtesan and the common leopard among others as stragglers – species that are not native to these islands, but a few individuals of which had blundered onto these shores in gales and storms. This categorization would have been impossible for anyone who would have collected only briefly on these islands. We would have searched in vain for these species which are not resident on these islands and unable to find them, the more careless amongst us may even have listed them as currently extinct!

Ferrar was justly proud of his incomparable collection of over 4000 specimens of butterflies from these islands, which almost doubled the total number of species known from here from about a 100 to over 200 species. While the greater part of this collection is today housed in the Natural History Museum in London, a few cabinets are in the Chelmsford Museum at Essex. The legendary Brigadier W. H. Evans whose *The Identification of the Indian Butterflies*² remains till today the only book to contain all the butterflies of our vast country (as well as those of Myanmar), was his chief contact on Indian butterflies. Evans (Figure 1d) paid Ferrar a visit just three months before he left these islands for good in April 1931. They collected together in several localities in the Great and Little Andamans and even went on a trip round the Nicobar Islands collecting butterflies. Evans' examination of Ferrar's collection during this fruitful trip resulted in the discovery of 22 new subspecies of

butterflies and a new species of Lycaenidae from these islands, which he named Ferrar's cerulean or *Jamides ferrari* in honour of the man whose work on the butterflies of these islands remains unrivalled to this day.

Though well past forty, Ferrar led an active life in the Andamans. He not only played cricket and a lot of tennis, he even played hockey with the convicts in the jail compound! He loved walking all the way up to the summit of Mount Harriet, while children, the elderly and the female guests rode ponies and donkeys. Although in those days there was no road but only a rough track, the sprightly Ferrar sped or 'cantered' along it 'nearly killing' many of his male guests who were the only ones expected to walk up the 4 km long slope and keep up with his brisk pace.

Mount Harriet, which harbours so many interesting species of butterflies, was perhaps Ferrar's favourite hunting ground. In his own words, 'hill tops other than Mt. Harriet [were] disappointing, neither Saddle Peak nor Mt. Ford produced anything', for it was here on Mount Harriet and not on any of the other peaks that he discovered at least a dozen species new to these islands. Many of them are quite rare, so that most professional entomologists have not succeeded in collecting them in all the years since his time. The path to Black Rock (down the sheer sides of which a number of lonely, tormented prisoners are believed to have jumped to extinguish their wretched lives) along the eastern slope of Mount Harriet was the haunt of so many prize specimens. The banded dandy (*Laranga horsfieldii andamanensis*), the common lascar (*Neptis hordonia cnacalis*), the orchid tit (*Chliaria othona*), the white royal (*Pratapa deva lila*), the rosy oakblue (*Arhopala alea constancea*) and the Andaman palmking (*Amathusia phidippus andamanica*) were all to be found there.

The common lascar and the banded dandy intrigued Ferrar with their fidelity to certain spots on the Black Rock path. Whenever he caught a specimen of either of these striking butterflies, he would see another at the same spot the very next day. It was on the western slope of Mount Harriet that he caught the rare Andaman palmking. Of this butterfly he says that 'during the latter half of April [it] gets on the wing every evening at ten past six. Any I managed to take with a net were caught at this precise time...'. Among the swallowtails he felt that the 'best locality' for the Andaman mormon (*Papilio mayo*)

was the Black Rock path, while one of the 'good places' to take the common bird-wing (*Troides helena heliconoides*) and a 'sure place to look for' the graceful Andaman tree-nymph (*Idea agamarshcana cadelli*) were also along this path, where it 'entered well grown secondary jungle'.

Species like the Andaman banded dandy continue to remain restricted to Mount Harriet, as noted by Ferrar over 65 years ago. But others like the psyche (*Leptosia nina nina*), which he reported as 'not common and extremely local in Port Blair, being confined to the neighbourhood of Tusonabad and Cadellgunj', have today become common and may be found all over North, Middle and South Andamans.

During times of fair weather he sailed to various islands in search of butterflies. When he visited Great Nicobar in late December 1923, he wrote eloquently to his mother about '... its great mountains (2500 ft [high]) and forests which equal those of the Andamans [but which] in beauty surpass them'. He also wrote that here, unlike in the Andamans, 'the streams are real rivers'. Accompanied by 3 or 4 of his 'butterfly men', he would spend as much time as he could – ranging from a few hours to a couple of days – on various islands looking for butterflies. Since his collection and sailing schedules were inextricably tied together he had to leave many an island with little by way of butterflies in his net, hoping for better luck the next time. His dismal observation that 'butterfly collection and a government steamer programme are necessarily a bad fit', is as true today as in his time and his remark that 'all these islands should be worked by collectors as Boden Kloss [the indomitable American naturalist who mainly collected birds from these islands for the American Museum of Natural History in the early years of this century] worked then in a privately owned craft' is yet to be realized. On a trip to the southern Nicobars in the first week of March 1924, he 'got some 15 kinds new to his collection and a considerable number of individuals of 3 or 4 rare and very rare kinds...', and while still on-board the ship he was sailing in he actually set 134 butterflies, of which 130 [were] perfect specimens. The biggest [being] 8 inches from tip to tip (Figure 1c). But as every butterfly collector knows, *Fortuna* does not shower one with such luck at all times. Ferrar ruefully recounts one such instance when he ran into a patch of bad luck on Kondul, a little island sandwiched be-

tween the Great and Little Nicobars. 'I took 3 men and landed to catch if I could the big black and yellow prize butterfly of the place, *Troides heliconoides ferrari* (sic) [Ferrari's common birdwing, which is restricted to the southern Nicobars], but had only the mortification of seeing him in attenuated numbers floating quietly about the sky quite 40 ft up. However [for consolation, he] got a few other rarities'.

Fishing and hunting were part of his fare in addition to butterfly collection during these voyages. The large, plump Nicobar pied imperial pigeon was a prize coveted by every hunter to these islands. Having evolved on these islands which are devoid of major predators, these birds were easy targets, rarely disappointing any hunter who chose to shoot them. Ferrari too shot a fair share of this magnificent bird, some of which he 'found gorged with wild nutmegs [and which] burst on hitting the ground'. Many years earlier in 1856, Alfred Russell Wallace, the great British naturalist who with Charles Darwin propounded the theory of evolution by means of natural selection, made a similar observation when he shot these 'fine birds' on the tiny Indonesian island of Lombok in the Flores Sea.

Ferrari, it appears, was so highly thought of by his superiors in Delhi that he was asked to stay on for three consecutive terms as the Chief Commissioner of these islands. Tom Cadell was the only person to have been Chief Commissioner for a period longer than him. Ferrari loved the Andamans dearly and immensely enjoyed his work here. Evolving methods to contain malaria, the dreaded disease which took a heavy toll of human lives in those days, was one of his major concerns and to this he devoted considerable amounts of his time. Being held in high esteem by the powers that be in Delhi, it was perhaps not too difficult for him to get the large sums of money that he needed to finance these schemes which involved the filling in of malarial swamps – dredges had to be commissioned for years on these mammoth projects! Malaria was the scourge of the British since the earliest days of colo-

nization of these islands. It was malaria that drove the British from these islands in 1796 and kept them at bay till 1858, when they made their successful second attempt at colonizing these islands. It was malaria again that brought Lord Mayo, the Viceroy of India, to these islands in search of a suitable site to locate a sanitarium for those convalescing from a bout of the disease which was to lead to his tragic death at the hands of a Pathan convict.

Ferrari was also keen on making the Andamans an attractive place to live in – so attractive in fact that convicts would of their own accord choose to stay on in these islands, even after they had served out their sentences. He also made plans to entice non-convict settlers from mainland India with the offer of grants of land. The Government of India approved of his proposals to give these people 'occupancy rights over land, a secure tenure and incentives to improve their land and their houses'. Ferrari hoped that 'good would come of this'. By the latter half of 1925 his plans were fructifying, with volunteers arriving in hundreds every month from the Malabar in Kerala, Bellary in Karnataka and from many other places. Ferrar-gunj, named in his honour, was one such free village in South Andaman, which in March 1929 'was going strong with a population of 530 people and 200 more from India wanting to come'.

While Ferrari was busy with the affairs of state, tackling health problems or engrossed, poring over and arranging his stupendous collection of butterflies in his study on the ground floor of Government House (which was perched atop the 60 m high hill on Ross Island), his wife Nancy busied herself with gardening. It was she who planted trees like the 'flame of the forest', casuarina, plumbago bushes and hibiscus on Ross, the island on which the British resided. Rockeries and shrubberies were also tastefully laid out by her. While her husband's all-consuming passion for butterflies infected so many of those who came into contact with him, Nancy, assisted by ten gardeners, engaged in fashioning an exquisite garden on Ross

with as much or more passion. In spite of long years of exposure to Ferrari's potent 'butterfly madness', she remained immune to the pleasures of butterfly collecting throughout her life.

With Ferrari's departure from these islands in early April 1931, the butterflies of these islands were almost forgotten. In fact, from then till the 1990s, for a period of over 50 years, the butterflies of these islands ceased to be the subject of studies of any kind. Those eight years of Ferrari's stay on these islands were the 'golden years' for butterfly studies on these islands and it is largely because of his untiring efforts that the butterflies of these islands are so well known today leading D. N. McVean, the IUCN consultant to the Government of India to state that along with snails 'butterflies were the best known invertebrates of these islands', in his 1976 'Report on landuse in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands'.

1. Evans, W. H., *The Identification of the Indian Butterflies*, The Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai, 1932 [reprinted 1985], 2nd edn.
2. Ferrari, M. L., *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.*, 1948, 47, 470–491.

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