

# Chequered Copper



also known as the 'Small Copper' and 'Grassland Copper'

**Class:** Insecta  
**Order:** Lepidoptera  
**Family:** Lycaenidae  
**Genus:** *Lucia*  
**Species:** *limbaria*

This 'copper' butterfly belongs to the endemic Australian Theclinae group, which have a strong obligatory association with ants. This symbiotic relationship is a close one and the caterpillars are unlikely to survive in the wild without the ants.

An elusive butterfly, it occurs in well-defined small colonies which can exist for many years if left undisturbed. The butterflies often remain near the colony, with males being highly visible as they sun themselves with open wings. When not feeding, males will take up territorial positions near the hostplant, while females will preoccupy themselves with egg laying.

The butterflies fly near to the ground. Both sexes are immune to attacks from their larval attendant ants by having pheromones the same as the ants. The butterflies remain with safety in the presence of ant trails or near the entrance to ant nests. When settled, the butterflies are easily approached.

## Description

*Wingspan:* male 23mm, female 25mm.

*Upperside:* central forewing area bright orange, fringes of both wings chequered brown and white.

*Underside:* grey-brown, forewing pale orange in central area with one or two spots and rows of brown spots, hindwing with a series of obscure dark spots edged white, ground colour pale whitish-grey.



Photos: L.F.Hunt

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**Larval foodplants:**

*Oxalis perennans* (native sorrel or creeping yellow oxalis) and the introduced *Oxalis corniculata* ssp. *corniculata* (yellow wood-sorrel) (Oxalidaceae). The plants are perennial herbs, erect or creeping rarely to 30cm tall, 3 leaflets each 2 - 25 mm long, flowers with yellow petals 6 - 12 mm long, fruit 4 - 30mm long. The larvae will eat all parts of the hostplant, but prefer the leaves and flowers.

**Larval attendant ant:**

Larvae are attended by numerous small, common black ants *Iridomyrmex* sp. (*gracilis* and *rufoniger* groups). The relationship is obligatory although the early stages can survive in captivity without the presence of ants.

**Habitat and Ecology:**

The butterfly is usually seen in moist grassland or very open woodland areas in which the grasses or understorey are sparse and open. The butterfly appears to best survive where its hostplants can remain alive (at least in perennial mode) over the hot summer months. Larvae and pupae are found in tunnels and galleries made by a small black ant (*Iridomyrmex* sp.) beneath the host plant.

**Distribution**

Early specimens were recorded in the lower north of SA, the Barossa Valley, Adelaide plains and nearby areas in the Mt. Lofty Ranges. The butterfly is presently known from the Fleurieu Peninsula, Barossa Valley, Mount Lofty, Flinders Ranges, the SE Region of SA and in March 2011, from the Adelaide Park Lands. The butterfly has always been considered rare however based on the distribution of its larval hostplants and similar habitat areas, the range of the butterfly could be more extensive.

The species is also recorded from the higher rainfall areas of Victoria, New South Wales and southern Queensland.

**Flight period:****Abundance (in SA):**

Rare



Photo: LFHunt *Oxalis perennans*

**Threats:**

Its habitat is prime agricultural and grazing land, and its existence is therefore under constant threat from agricultural processes, particularly the effects of herbicides, insecticides, stock trampling, overgrazing and indiscriminate mowing. Colonies should be able to survive a light grass-fire, but not regular burnoffs.

**Conservation Strategy:**

Specific grassland habitat may have to be conserved for the long-term survival of this butterfly. Strategies may include the introduction of local provenance nectar plants for the adults to feed upon. Some grazing by native or domestic animals is beneficial as it stops grasses from becoming too rank and obliterating the hostplants for this species. The butterfly would be a good candidate for re-introduction into conserved areas, as eggs or adults. Council reserves and parks that receive some watering should be ideal.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS *Lucia limbaria* fact sheet:**

Majority of text, map and flight bar from: 'Butterflies of South Australia' website by Roger Grund much of which includes biological information by the late Lindsay Hunt (Victorian Entomologist 36:5 2006). Other references include: Michael Moore; Fisher RH 1978 *Butterflies of South Australia*; Braby MJ 2004 *The complete field guide to Butterflies of Australia*; Dashorst RM & Jessop JP 'Plants of the Adelaide Plains & Hills'. Production: Jan Forrest OAM

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is a not-for-profit organisation for those interested in conserving the habitat of Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) and other animals.

For further Information or to purchase our book 'Attracting Butterflies to your Garden, what to grow and conserve in the Adelaide region' or to purchase a 'Butterfly Garden' DVD contact the Secretary, c/- South Australian Museum, North Terrace, ADELAIDE 5000.

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