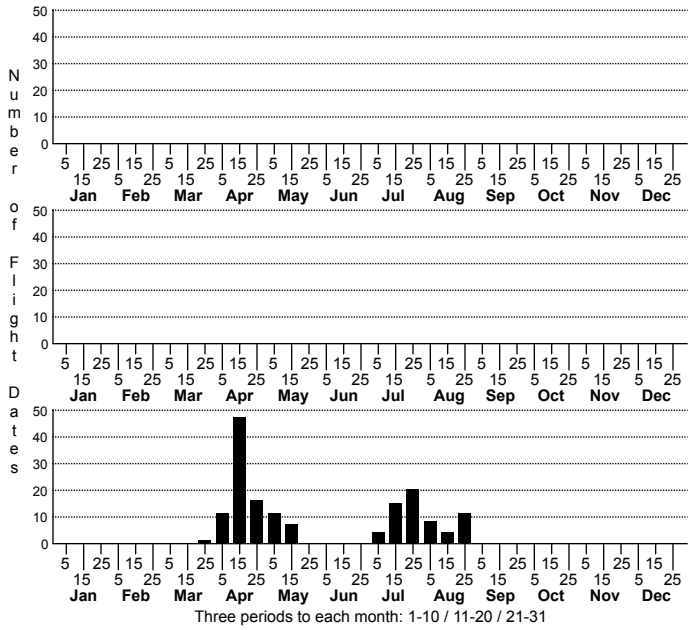
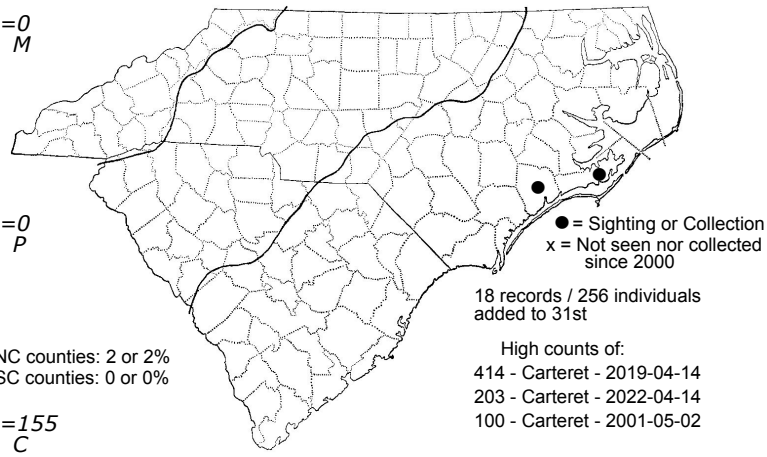
Crystal Skipper *Atrytonopsis quinteri*





Earliest date: Carteret 30 Mar 2023
Latest date: Carteret 31 Aug 2004

Status and Rank

State	Global
SR - S1	G1

Synonym: *Atrytonopsis hianna loammi, Atrytonopsis loammi, Atrytonopsis sp.*
Other Name: Southern Dusted Skipper, Seaside Dusted-Skipper, Loammi Skipper, Loamm's Skipper

DISTRIBUTION: This newly described species (in 2015), considered a subspecies of Dusted Skipper by some references, is known only from several islands in Carteret and Onslow counties (i.e., is endemic to NC).

ABUNDANCE: This skipper is locally common to very common (in spring) within its tiny range. The first brood is much the larger of the two, though it can be fairly common to common locally during the second brood. Despite seemingly suitable dune habitat, and containing populations of the foodplant, the skipper has not been found in adjacent coastal counties. Note the remarkable count made by Randy Newman, Fort Macon State Park ranger, on April 14, 2019; in a one-hour walk through dunes at the park, he tallied a remarkable 414 adults, by far the most ever recorded. Hurricane Florence had hit the NC coast in September 2018 and flooded parts of the park, causing concern for the species; how rare or common would it be in spring 2019? He indicated that the dune habitat that the species uses did not flood during the hurricane, and thus the species seems to be quite hardy in terms of weathering heavy rainfall events. Sadly, the species has been hard to find in the past few years in coastal Onslow County, despite its local abundance farther east at Fort Macon. Hopefully, this scarcity is just a temporary one, as its already tiny range does not need further reduction.

FLIGHT PERIOD: This species has two broods; the flights occur from early April to mid-May, and from early or mid-July to late August. Though the spring brood is the larger (more adults flying), each brood lasts for about six weeks. (Note that the Dusted Skipper has only one brood, in the spring.) In a warm spring, the peak of the first brood is in mid-April, but in a cooler spring not until the end of April or early May.

HABITAT: The habitats in NC are all coastal ones -- low dunes, sandy grasslands, weedy dredge spoil deposits, and old weedy fields, particularly where native grasses are common.

FOOD AND NECTAR PLANTS: The foodplant appears to be a single species -- Dune Bluestem (Schizachyrium littorale), also often called Seaside Little Bluestem. Yellow Thistle (Cirsium horridulum) is a favored nectar source for the first brood, and morning-glories (Ipomoea spp.) are often used by the second brood.

COMMENTS: In late November 2015, John Burns published a paper that described this taxon as a new species -- Atrytonopsis quinteri, named after Eric Quinter, who first observed these butterflies in the 1980's and realized that they represented a new taxon. Burns studied these butterflies in the mid-1980's, and Steve Hall and Allison Leidner also studied this unusual beach/dune taxon in more recent years and published their findings. However, Burns did not provide a suggested common name in his paper. In fact, it was Leidner who coined the common name as "Crystal Skipper", because it is found primarily on Bogue Banks, known in the travel and tourism lingo as the Crystal Coast. Also, Burns makes it clear that A. quinteri is a valid species distinct from A. hianna [Dusted Skipper], as Dusted Skipper has only a single brood, even though it occurs on the nearby mainland at the same latitude as the double-brooded A. quinteri. Disappointingly, in his 2015 paper, Burns did not study the Loammi Skipper (the populations in peninsular Florida that visually look almost identical to Crystal Skippers), and thus he left that taxon "in limbo" as to whether it is specifically distinct from both Crystal Skipper and Dusted Skipper. The Butterflies of America website and Pelham (2023) list all three taxa -- hianna, loammi, and quinteri -- as valid species.

Cech and Tudor (2005) provides several photographs and considerable text on this Carteret/Onslow taxon, calling it the "Seaside Dusted-Skipper" and posing that it might be a good species. Unfortunately, this latter reference has a photo of the FL Loammi included under the Dusted Skipper account, and refers to "loammi" (that population in FL) as a subspecies of the Dusted Skipper, though stating that "Some argue these two variable forms are sibling species."