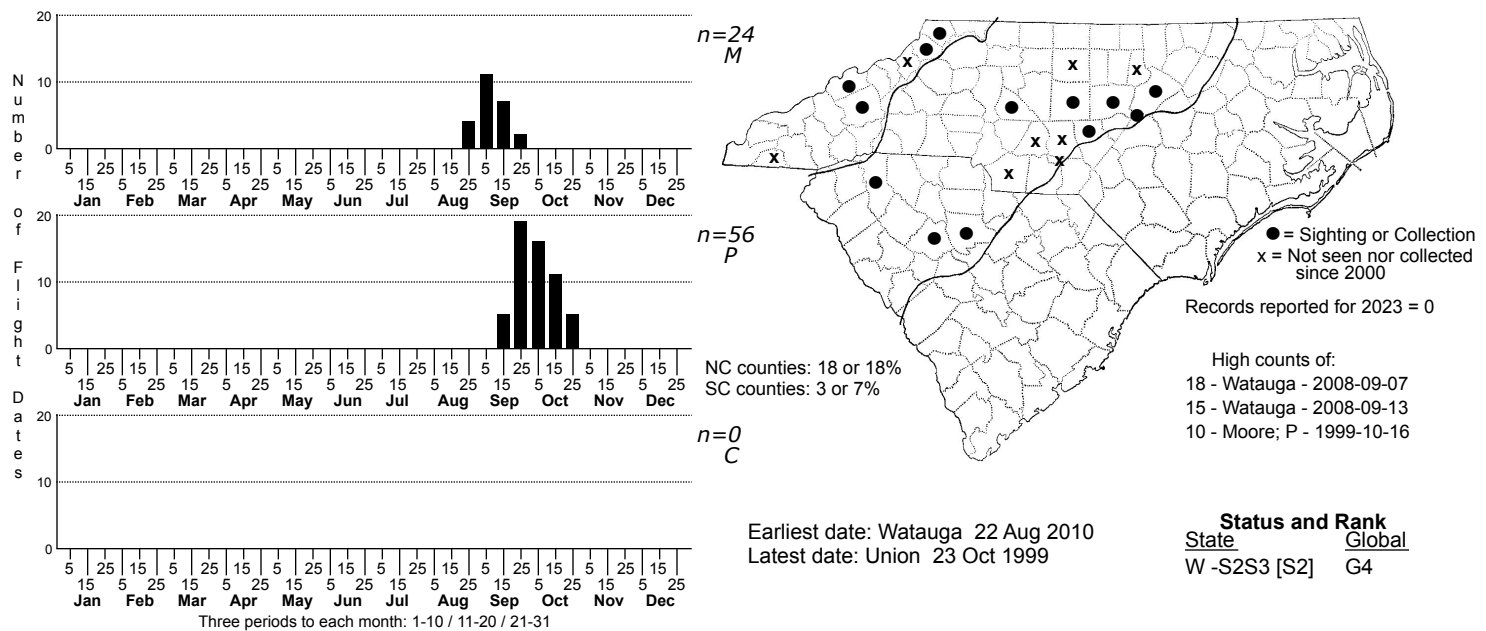


# Leonard's Skipper *Hesperia leonardus*



**DISTRIBUTION:** Scattered in the Mountains and the Piedmont, east to Wake, Harnett, and Richmond counties. Probably occurs (or occurred in the past) over nearly all of the counties in these two provinces, but presently we have records for just 18 counties (six in the mountains, 12 in the Piedmont/Fall Line).

**ABUNDANCE:** Declining alarmingly in the past decade, at least in the Piedmont. Formerly, uncommon in the southeastern quarter of the Piedmont, from the Fall Line west to the Uwharrie Mountains (west to Randolph and Stanly counties); however, now rare (or at least rarely reported) in this region. Very rare in the northeastern portion of the Piedmont, where it has been looked for without success in recent years. Seemingly very rare (but almost certainly not absent) in the western half of the Piedmont. In the Mountains, rare to locally uncommon south to Buncombe County, being most numerous in the northern counties. Very rare to absent in the southern 40% of the Mountains, with only one old record known. Interestingly, a one-day count of 18 individuals from a meadow in Watauga County in 2008 almost doubled our previous single day count.

**FLIGHT PERIOD:** A single autumn brood -- the only Eastern butterfly with a single brood in the fall season. In the Piedmont, it flies from roughly September 20 to October 20. In the Mountains, the flight is from late August to late September.

**HABITAT:** In the Piedmont, this species occurs along woodland borders, openings in upland woods (along powerline cuts), and in brushy fields, usually not far from woods. Unlike in the Northern States, where it occurs in meadows, often where moist, most seen in NC have been in wide wooded edges along dirt roads. However, the colony found by Ted Wilcox in Watauga County in 2008 was at a wet meadow. The presence of purple-flowering composites seems to be an important habitat factor. It is usually found not far from blooming asters (*Symphyotrichum* spp.) and blazing-stars (*Liatris* spp.) in the Piedmont, or thistles (*Cirsium* spp.) or ironweeds (*Vernonia* spp.), among other pink/purple flowering species, in the Mountains.

**FOOD AND NECTAR PLANTS:** The main foodplants are various native grasses such as broomsedges and bluestems (*Andropogon* spp., *Schizachyrium* spp.). The species nectars on many flowers, particularly on pink or purple (to blue) ones. Most of the Leonard's that I have seen were nectaring on asters, particularly purple-flowered species, such as Largeflower Aster (*Symphyotrichum grandiflorum*); blazing-star is another favored nectar plant.

**COMMENTS:** This is a poorly-known species in NC that formerly was not overly rare, because its preferred habitats are abundant. I have seen many in Wake, Chatham, Moore, Stanly, Randolph, and Montgomery counties, in powerline clearings, clearcuts, and wooded margins. However, I (and several others) have spent many hours looking in suitable habitat in northern Piedmont counties from Caswell east to Franklin without success, and the species is clearly much more numerous in the southeastern Piedmont counties. On the other hand, I get a feeling that very few lepidopterists have collected (or observed) butterflies in the upper Piedmont or Mountains in September or October. It is a fairly large and colorful skipper that is hard to mis-identify, if the under wing pattern can be seen; however, a female Sachem can be "turned into" this and other *Hesperia* species by eager or inexperienced observers. Sadly, the species has declined considerably in the past several years in the Piedmont, and most people not only fail to find it now but have even given up looking any more. Whether this decline is due to collecting or some other factor is unknown, but most other skippers seem to be in normal numbers in the fall season. Another likely factor causing declines are roadside mowing and herbiciding, and herbiciding of powerline clearings. Most skippers whose primary habitat in the Piedmont consists of broomsedge or little bluestem dominated "grasslands" (powerline cuts, weedy fields, etc.) are facing major threats from utility companies. This species has been moved from S3 to S2S3 State Rank, and though still on the Watch List, it likely will need to be tracked as Significantly Rare by the N.C. Natural Heritage Program in 2024. It probably seems best to now suggest a State Rank of S2, and a Significantly Rare status, as records away from the Mountains have been nearly absent in recent years.