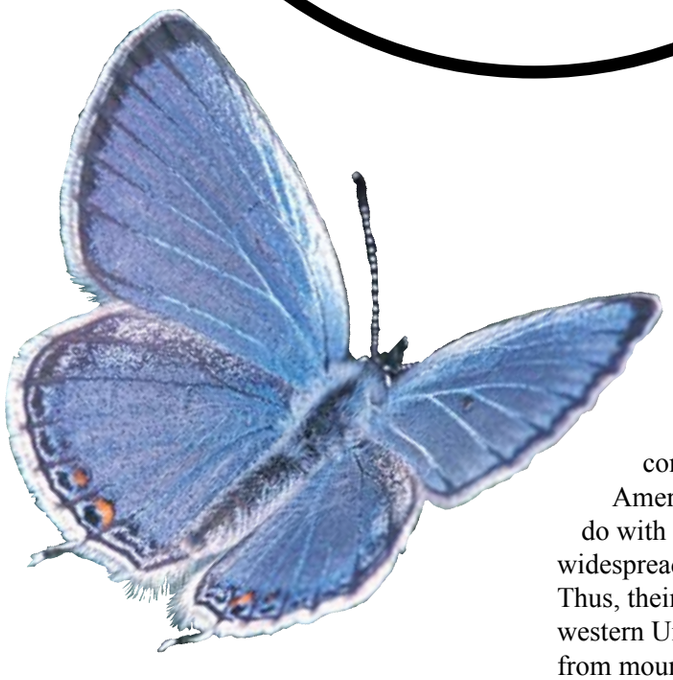
TAXONOMISTS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN

TRUE BLUE

PART ONE

by Harry Zirlin



The pretty little sprites in the family Lycaenidae, subfamily Polyommatinae, which, for all that, we simply call "blues," are among the most taxonomically complex group of butterflies in North America. Part of this complexity has to do with the fact that while many blues are widespread, they tend not to be strong fliers. Thus, their populations, especially in the western United States, often diverge somewhat from mountain range to mountain range and even from canyon to canyon within the same range. Moreover, some species emerge only when the buds and flowers of their caterpillar foodplants are present and, if these plants bloom at different times in different areas, the populations tend to become segregated in time (asynchrony) as well as space (allopatry.)

Left: One wonders if this male Spring Azure could star in cinema as a holly hunter.
April 9, 1990.
Ward Pound Ridge Reservation,
Westchester Co., NY.

Opposite page: A male Eastern Tailed-Blue.
May 13, 1996.
Reston, VA.

Before getting to the generic and specific names of the blues, I will point out that the subfamily name means "many eyes" (*poly* = many; *ommat* = eye) in Greek and refers to the fact that most blues have a row of eyespots on the underside of the hindwing. The family name, which also includes the coppers and hairstreaks, is taken from Mount Lycaeus, a mountain in the Arcadian region of Greece sacred to Zeus. Lycaeus is also the name of a Greek mythological character who was born on Mount Lycaeus and his son, Lycaon, was turned into a wolf for attempting to feed his slaughtered son's flesh to Zeus. (*Lycos* means "wolf" in Greek, so the story of Lycaon turning into a wolf may be a case of what anthropologists call "folk etymology.") But why this large and varied family was named after Mount Lycaeus is not known to me. However, the coppers (subfamily Lycaeninae), and a genus of coppers, *Lycaena*, also share the name, as do the blues in the genus *Lycaeides*. The family name, which was created in 1815 by W. E. Leach, appears to be derived from one of the genus names for coppers created by Johann Fabricius (1745-1808) in 1807.

To keep things simple, if possible, I am going to discuss the scientific names in the order that they appear in NABA's *Checklist & English Names of North American Butterflies* (Second Edition, 2001). The list contains 36 species in 16 genera and this article will treat the first eight genera, leaving the remaining eight until our next installment.

Everes, the genus of tailed-blues, seems to mean "good truth"

The two smallest butterflies in North America, and the world for that matter, are Western Pygmy-Blue, *Brephidium exile* and Eastern Pygmy-Blue, *Brephidium isophthalma*. Both range in size from 13-19 mm. The genus name, coined by Samuel H. Scudder (1837-1911) in 1876, combines the Greek word *brephos*, meaning "an infant" or "new-born child", with the Greek diminutive suffix *idium*, meaning "little."