Elinor Klapp-Phipps Park is the perfect location to see a wide selection of hard-to-find Florida butterflies. The Park is a relatively new, 670-acre, city park at the northern edge of Tallahassee, Florida, located where the Florida Panhandle joins peninsular Florida. Phipps Park is managed jointly by the Tallahassee Parks & Recreation Department and the Northwest Florida Water Management District (ND). Primarily used for passive recreation (butterflying, birding, hiking, biking, riding, etc.), each March it also hosts The Red Hills Horse Trials, an internationally-recognized three-day event, plus occasional special activities (e.g., orienteering competitions).

The park property was sold to the ND by Colin Phipps in 1992 and the park is named for Colin’s mother. Mr. Phipps still owns The Farm, an equestrian center adjacent to the park on the south side (where the Horse Trials’ cross-country competition takes place). The land contains high species and biological community diversity. The ND’s goals for the park include managing the land to protect Florida’s water supply (the park is on the east side of Lake Jackson, which periodically drains into the Floridan aquifer as suddenly as a bathtub with a pulled plug), and the protection and restoration of the land to its natural state.

It is believed that the area surrounding the lake has been farmed off-and-on since at least the 16th century, when the Apalachee tribe occupied the Tallahassee area (Hernando De Soto’s expedition encountered them while passing through in 1540). Large earthen mounds made by this tribe can be seen about two miles southwest of Phipps Park, at Lake Jackson Mounds Archaeological State Park. A 17th century Apalachee village and Spanish mission/fort have been reconstructed at the San Luis Archaeological and Historic Site on the west side of town.

Phipps Park, Lake Jackson, and the whole north side of town, are in a region known as the Tallahassee Red Hills. This region, which extends into the southwestern corner of Georgia, isn’t like the Florida touted in travel ads — no sandy beaches, palm trees, or theme parks here. Instead, there are gently rolling hills with red clay near the surface (hence the name), live oaks dripping with Spanish moss, and antebellum plantations converted to museums or nature centers.

The Florida Panhandle has a great variety of butterflies. North Florida is the southern limit for several dozen species. A few of them occur here as disjunct populations, hundreds of miles south of their main ranges. At the same time, it is the northern limit for a number of species more common in the Florida peninsula. These overlapping northern and southern faunas contribute to the area’s butterfly diversity and more than 120 species are found within 75 miles of Tallahassee.