Heard it through the Pipevine

Nov / Dec 2006

Newsletter of the Austin Butterfly Forum • www.austinbutterflies.org

We have a special treat in this newsletter: Dragonfly Photography 101 by Eric Isley, who frequently surveys/shoots at Hornsby Bend Bird Observatory. The article is well-written, easy to understand, and full of great dragonfly photos. But first several observers summarize the butterflies found this year around Austin. As Dan Hardy reports, the year was a bit dry and sparse on butterflies (except for snouts!), up until the amazing showings this fall that more than made up for the year's scarcity. Chuck Sexton also reports on sightings at the Balcones NWR, and Phil Schappert tells us a bit about the grass-feeding butterflies that have visited the Stengl "Lost Pines" Biological Station. Dr. Schappert provides mind-blowing estimates of the number of snouts visiting the station in November.

Christmas Potluck Dinner

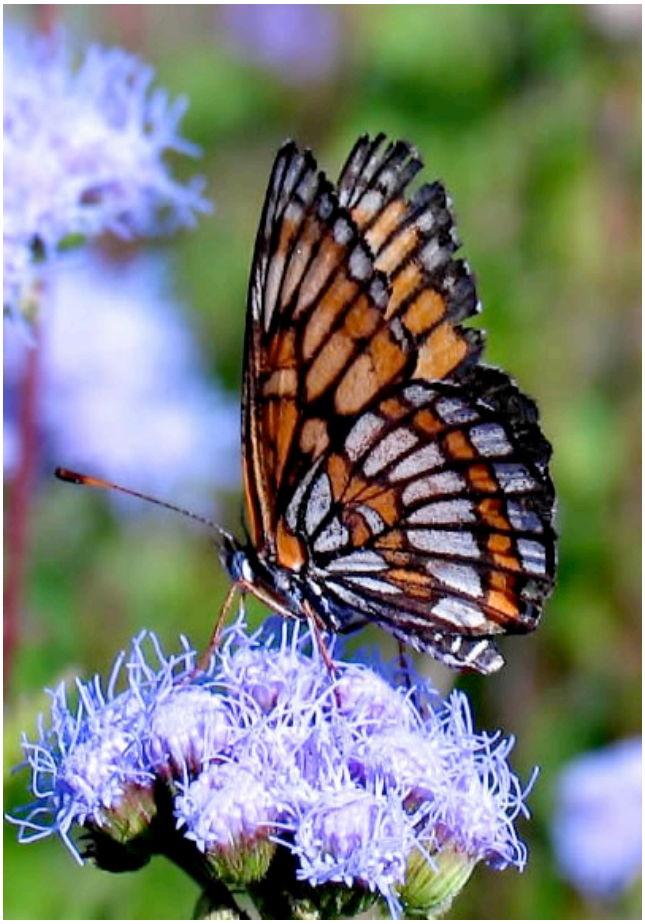
Wednesday December 6, 7:00 pm

Zilker Botanical Garden Center

The club provides a ham and we ask members to bring a dish. The dinner will be held at our usual meeting place, the Zilker Botanical Garden Center. See you there!

Membership Reminder

Membership is now paid per calendar year with quarterly prorating after the first quarter. The cost is $20 per household. If your membership has expired please don't forget to renew.



Theona Checkerspot (J. Lapp)

Exciting Finish to the Fall

by Dan Hardy

Although I will remember 2006 for the Crimson Patches in Winnie Spitz's yard and the influx of White Peacocks and Theona Checkerspots, I thought most of 2006 was a down year for butterflies around Austin. The lack of rain dried out so much vegetation, especially during the summer and early fall. I was particularly disappointed with the early fall. Numbers and diversity were just not up to par. But in late October and early November, there was a explosion

of butterflies. Every patch of Lantana and Goldeneye had several sulphurs flitting about. Variegated Fritillaries seemed to be everywhere in my subdivision on the west side of Austin.

The enormous snout explosion in South Texas during the summer—which we only read about here in Austin—finally hit town in the fall. Snouts movement was obvious to anyone driving and they continue to be in strong numbers as of late November.

Theona Checkerspots appeared in unprecedented numbers in Austin. Chris Durden's 1990 checklist, primarily compiled from along Barton Creek, has sporadic reports from March to July. This year they were reported from almost every well-flowered garden: the yards of Shawn Ashbaugh and Joe Lapp, the Zilker Botanical Garden, Lady Bird Wildflower Center, and Dromgoole's Nursery. Their hostplant is Cenizo or Purple Sage (*Leucophyllum frutescens*). We should start looking for caterpillars, if the next freeze doesn't get them.

The Theona Checkerspot is responsible for an accident to one of our club members, John Ingram. While photographing one of the first reports of Theona in the Zilker Botanical Garden parking lot, a car backed into him. He is now recovering with a broken leg. Best wishes, John!

Sulphurs of all sorts were very common during this spell. Most were Dogface, Lysides and Orange Sulphurs, but there were reports of Mexican Yellows from Barbara Ribble's yard and from Zilker. Orange-barred Sulphurs are being seen more and more, but they are still one of my favorite butterflies. There has been at least one male around the parking lot of Zilker Garden for the last three falls. I love to watch his fast, powerful flight. If he would only land!

Well Wishes

Butterfliers will go to great lengths to get the shot of that elusive butterfly. Some have endured thorns, some mosquitoes, and some fire ants. But **John Ingram** has topped us all. While photographing one of the first sightings of the Theona Checkerspot, in the parking lot of the Zilker Botanical Garden, a car backed into him. He apparently still got the shot, but he is now recovering with a broken leg. He can now claim to have endured being hit by a car to get a butterfly shot. We wish you well, John!

This has been a banner year for White Peacocks. Sporadic reports have occurred from summer to fall. Breeding on frogfruit was reported in the last newsletter.

I'm sure I'm missing sightings, but other rarities include: Turk's-cap White-Skipper in the Barton Greenbelt (new county record), White-patched Skipper in Barbara's yard; Soldiers in Shawn's yard and Dromgoole's; Mexican Fritillary by Chuck Sexton at Balcones Canyonlands.

Common Buckeye, *Junonia coenia*,
on KR Bluestem (P. Schappert)

Grass-Feeding Butterflies

by Phil Schappert
Stengl "Lost Pines" Biological Station

A couple of years ago I wrote a short piece for the News of the Lepidopterists' Society to fill some empty space. The piece, "Strange Attractors: Coastal Sandbur, *Cenchrus spinifex* (Poaceae)" (News Lepid. Soc. 46(4): 126-128), was about some observations of a Mestra and some Danaid butterflies seeming to feed at ripe fruits of the nasty coastal sandbur grass. Since I could find little literature about this phenomenon, I hypothesized that the butterflies were visiting the grass looking for alkaloids from a rust fungus infecting the seed heads.

Since then I've heard from a number of people who have seen a variety of butterflies visiting many different species of grasses. Recently, Larry Gilbert told me of seeing Snouts and other species visiting tangletop (*Leptochloa* sp.) at Chaparral Wildlife Management Area north of Laredo and he suggested

that when other nectar resources become scarce, as in an outbreak of Snouts, grass flowers/fruits become the only nectar sources available. Despite that most grasses are wind-pollinated; their seed dispersal may depend on insect vectors so many grasses exude sugary secretions thought to attract seed dispersers.

When I returned from the LRGV after the Texas Butterfly Festival this year, I was amazed at how many Snouts—and many other "tag-alongs"—had inundated the Lost Pines in my absence. We missed out almost completely on the first wave of Snout migrants in mid-Summer but the second mid-October wave had more than made up for the discrepancy. Almost immediately I noticed that the vast bulk of the numbers of Snouts had settled into the North Meadow at the Biology Station, an area of "clay pan" with typical characteristics of Blackland Prairie despite the presence of an alien invasive grass.

Common Mestra, *Mestra amymone*,
on Green Sprangletop (P. Schappert)

In fact, the Snouts, and a few other species, were visiting the flowers/fruits of the invader, KR (King Ranch) Bluestem, *Bothriochloa ischaemum*, in large numbers. "At last," I thought, "a use for the KR…what could be more appropriate than an invader feeding on another invader!" On October 28 and 29, I photographed Snouts, a few Buckeyes and a Queen feeding at the grass heads. On November 18, almost a month after their arrival (!), I estimated (crudely but, I think, effectively) that there were some 66,000 Snouts in the roughly 3 acres of KR Bluestem.

Extending the estimate, with the assumption that the density of Snouts on other grasses was only one-half of that on the bluestem, to the entire meadow system (approx. 19 acres) here at the Station, yields a rough estimate of about 190,000 Snouts (and this doesn't take into account the thousands of Snouts associated with the co-dominant Post Oaks occupying about two-thirds of the other 185 or so acres!). Finally, on November 22, I photographed a Mestra—the species that had started these "grass-feeder" observations in 2003—visiting and probing the spikes of Green Sprangletop, *Leptochloa dubia*.

What goes around, comes around, eh? Chasing butterflies through the KR Bluestem is a lot less painful than trying to photograph them in a field of sandbur, too!

Some Quick Notes from Balcones NWR

by Chuck Sexton

This Fall was a particularly interesting one for butterflies at the Refuge. Although my duties kept me desk bound for much of the time, that wasn't all bad because some of the best butterfly-watching was right outside my office door. The drought conditions for the past year or so had seriously diminished the floral resources over much of the Refuge but we kept a very small set of butterfly plants well watered around our headquarters building on RR 1431 and that paid extra dividends in October and November.

From early October to early November we actually added a surprising four new butterfly species to the Refuge list and enjoyed the high diversity that much of central Texas saw during that period. I haven't yet tallied up the butterfly diversity of recent times but it's probably on the order of about 50 species. New for the Refuge during this stretch were a Dorantes Skipper, Mexican Fritillary (two in different locations), a tattered White Peacock (first for Burnet County), and a photographed Theona Checkerspot (for which we only had one previous tentative report).

We shared in the clouds of Snouts which arrived here about October 5-6. We also enjoyed the massive Monarch push that went through (with Swainson's Hawks, etc.) on the strong front of October 11-12. We tagged and released about 70 captive-reared Monarchs at the Refuge HQ.

We have some newly expanded office space nearing completion at the headquarters and we're looking forward to reclaiming and re-landscaping all the disturbed ground around the new facilities over the winter and next growing season. We'll be looking for some volunteer landscaping help and even donations of good local butterfly plants for that effort. If you'd like to help in this effort, please contact me at 512-339-9432 x30 or email me at chuck_sexton@fws.gov. The Refuge HQ is located about four miles west of Lago Vista on RR 1431.

Black Setwing (E. Isley)

Dragonfly Photography 101

by Eric Isley

Learn your subject's behavior

Knowing your subjects when shooting dragonflies is very important; learning their behavior and habits will benefit you in the field and help you get those great images with clean backgrounds. Watch them in the field. Study how they react in their surroundings. Some species will seem to fly all the time, never landing and others will land and perch on dead plants, stems, tree branches on the ground, and some high up in trees. Study them and you see their behavior change as they mature. Some species will allow for very close approach while others seem to be very easily spooked, and slow movements are the best, as dragonflies have excellent eyesight.

Equipment

Know your equipment and its limits; if you have cameras or lenses with image stabilization built-in, use them to your advantage, otherwise with smaller apertures and slower shutter speeds, you should always use a tripod or monopod.

Finding subjects

Dragonflies are fast, skilled flyer's and can cover huge distances in a very short time, so being a mile or two away from the nearest water is only a couple minutes flight for them. They can be found in open fields or along roadside ditches. When a species of dragonfly matures for mating, they will then be found closer to water, as they need water to lay their eggs.

Getting started

For getting started with shooting dragonflies, you can use almost any camera made as long as you have the correct lenses or camera with some macro capabilities. I recommend a tripod for stability, although cameras or lenses with image stabilization can allow many shots to be handheld. I prefer a long lens and extension tubes, as it allows a greater working distance from the subject, making it less likely to be scared off by your presence.

Long lenses

Long lens technique is what I use the most often with dragonflies. Almost any long (telephoto or zoom) lens with extension tubes will allow good subject size in the frame and a comfortable working distance from the subject with all but the smallest of dragonflies.

Macro

Macro lenses will allow you the most detailed images of dragonflies, but your technique and skill of approach will need to improve along with subjects that will cooperate. And your tripod will often disturb the subject.

AF Versus MF

AF or MF: I always use manual focus as it gives one better control over the area in focus. With MF, you can move the focus point to the area you want sharp. Auto focus on most cameras is highly accurate, but you lose control of the fine focus and you are letting the camera pick the focus point for you, which may not be the best choice.

Using Flash

Flash for dragonflies is an issue many will argue over; some will say the only way to shoot is without to keep the bright highlights out of the eyes. I feel images look better without flash, but flash, when used correctly with a diffuser and proper power setting can produce balanced lighting, especially when the sun is high and shadows can be harsh. Dragonflies like it hot, more sun the better it seems for them, but a lot of sweat for the photographer. Shooting at your flash's maximum sync speed with manual power settings will often give some great results in low light and on windy days. It can also be used to bring up details on an otherwise dark subject without bringing up background colors.

Making the best images

When shooting dragonflies, always get the first shot just to have that species on file. Then you need to work all the angles, as just an inch or two up or down can make a huge difference in the image, and the same with moving left or right. I prefer to shoot dragonflies with the head area showing, as that gives the dragonfly the most appeal. They do have some wonderful looking faces, with those huge eyes being a focal point. I feel wings are important to be sharp in species that have lots of wing colors or markings. Always experiment with aperture and DOF. Some shots will look great with the eyes sharp and the wings out of focus. Also, not all shots need to fill the frame with the subject. Sometimes an excellent compositional image can be made with the subject rather small in the frame.

High Speed sync on windy days

Wind is the nemesis of macro shooting. On windy days, I often utilize high speed flash synchronization which allows use of faster shutter speed with flash. With high speed sync, maximum flash output distance is greatly reduced, but that is usually not a problem with normal, relatively short working distances for dragonflies.

ISO speed and noise reduction

Your digital camera's higher ISO speeds will eliminate possible motion blur or camera shake if hand holding but will add some unwanted noise in many cases. There are great noise reduction software programs that can reduce the noise levels and still keep details sharp. A noisy image is better then a blurred image, and I have not seen any software that can save a severely blurred image. Most noise can be reduced or removed completely.

Halloween Pennant (E. Isley)

The Ultimate Challenge - Flight Shooting

For some fun when in the field, try some in-flight shots. Some tips on getting those shots are to study the dragonfly and see if there is any pattern to its flight. Windy days are great for shooting them in-flight, as they tend to hover longer in one area. Pay attention to mating dragonflies, as many males will watch over the female they have mated with and may tend to stay in a smaller area where the female is laying eggs. Some dragonflies remain paired in-flight, and the male holds onto the female by the head with some appendages on its tail. Often other males will be close by, looking for a chance to mate with the same female, offering more in-flight shot possibilities.

AF Ring of Fire versus one AF point

Auto focus or manual focus as well as use of one or all AF points depend greatly on your camera's ability to acquire fast focus and on the lens you are using. Most of the high-end pro cameras are fast and can acquire focus on a dragonfly while in flight. I shoot manual as I do not have a pro camera, and I have a fairly good success ratio with in-flight shots. Timing and patience are very important, so don't give up. You might experiment with handheld or tripod support, but I most often find tripod support is key when shooting manual focus, and handheld works nicely if you have a camera that can auto focus fast enough to keep up. The key to in-flight is observing your subjects behavior! The best time to use all AF points or the "ring of fire," as it is often called is when the background is uncluttered. With busy backgrounds, the camera tends to want to lock onto the background rather than the subject.

Hairstreak Quiz Answers

Here are the answers to the Hairstreak Quiz in the September/October issue:

1. Lacey's Scrub-Hairstreak
2. Mallow Scrub-Hairstreak
3. White M Hairstreak
4. Dusky-Blue Groundstreak

Wandering Glider (E. Isley)

Entomological Calendar

Mike Quinn brings you a more extensive calendar of entomological events, focusing on events of possible interest to us bug-lovin' folks here in central Texas. For an even more complete listing, see the calendar on his web site at www.texasento.net/events.htm.

DECEMBER '06

Wed 6

Christmas Potluck Dinner – Zilker Botanical Garden Center, 7pm

The club provides a ham and we ask members to bring a dish. The dinner will be held at our usual meeting place, the Zilker Botanical Garden Center.

JANUARY '07

Mon 22

Austin Butterfly Forum Meeting – Zilker Botanical Garden Center, 7 - 9pm

Elizabeth Brown of the Agriculture Extension Service will talk about insect control issues.

FEBRUARY '07

Mon 26

Austin Butterfly Forum Meeting – Zilker Botanical Garden Center, 7 - 9pm

Catalina Estrada, a graduate student in Larry Gilbert's UT lab, will talk about her work on Heliconian butterflies.

Other speakers who have agreed to give a presentation to the Austin Butterfly Forum in 2007 include Nan Wilson on capturing the butterfly lifecycle in art; Ro Wauer on his new "Finding Butterflies in Texas" book; Mike Overton on the butterflies of northeastern Mexico; Joe Lapp on black widows and brown recluses; and Mike Quinn with an overview of the beetles of Texas (hopefully with photos this time, as we will be netting and bottling the media guy well in advance).

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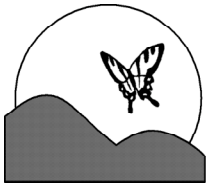

Austin Butterfly Forum Membership Form

Become a member or renew your membership.

Your membership helps support our club activities, but members also receive bimonthly **newsletters** with upcoming events and informative articles, **butterfly plants** that we often give away, and **discounts** on books, T-shirts and more.

Name:	**Daytime phone:**
Street:	**Evening phone:**
City: **State:** **Zip:**	**Email:**

Membership is $20 annually per household, due each January and prorated thereafter.
Make check payable to the Austin Butterfly Forum and send to:

ABF c/o Doris Hill, 1605 Broadmoor Drive, Austin, TX 78723