Heard it through the Pipevine

Mar / Apr 2006

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

This newsletter is packed! Our longest yet! Jeff Taylor offers the Texan Crescent as the butterfly of the month – he must have been inspired by Doris Hill's article last year. Dan tells us about Texas Persimmon, Mike Quinn gives us good news on Monarchs' migration, and Joe Lapp reports on the moth that threatens to eat Austin.

Club Meeting

Monday March 27, 7:00 pm

Zilker Botanical Garden Center

Kim Garwood and Richard Lehman present "**The Butterflies of Northeastern Mexico**." Their book of the same title is the first of its kind on the neotropical butterflies. It's is a photographic checklist of over 600 species of butterflies found in Nuevo Leon, San Luis Potosi, Tamaulipas, and South Texas, featuring more than 1,200 photos of live butterflies. The book will be available for sale at the meeting.

Kim Garwood retired from her own computer company in 1998, travelled for a while, and then settled in Mission, TX, for the butterfly diversity. She now spends much of the year in Latin America photographing butterflies.

Richard Lehman developed an interest in butterflies after retiring from a career in education. He has photographed butterflies in Latin America and extensively in northeastern Mexico. He is now a graphic artist and teaches courses on Adobe products and PowerPoint.

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.

Texan Crescent (D. Hardy)

Butterfly of the Month: Texan Crescent

by Jeff Taylor

The scientific name for this butterfly is *Phyciodes texana*, although some authors use *Anthanassa texana*. It is probably the most common and numerous butterfly I see in my suburban yard. The adults fly slowly, fluttering and flittering a foot or so above the ground or vegetation. They fly in gardens, along heavy used pathways in wooded areas, and open fields. I frequently see them gliding along the trails in the Barton Creek Greenbelt and at St. Edwards Park.

This species ranges primarily through the southwestern United States and along the Gulf coast. They sporadically stray to Kansas and Nebraska. In Texas, they are more common in the southern two-thirds of the state.

I've observed adults nectaring on several plants in my yard, including beggarticks, cosmos, and cowpen daisy. Males patrol areas of my yard and perch on top of vegetation. From these vantage points they chase other butterflies. Adults perch with

open wings. A male encountering a female flaps his wings intensely above her. At times, I've seen 2 or 3 males flapping intensely over a single female while she nectars at a flower or perches on a leaf.

Larva food plants are members of the Family Acanthaceae. These plants include wild petunia (*Ruellia*), Mexican petunia, also called Mexican bluebell, (*Ruellia brittoniana*), false mint (*Dicliptera brachiata*), hairy tube tongue (*Siphonoglossa piloselloa*), shrimp plant (*Justicia brandegeana*), flame acanthus (*Anisacanthus quadrifidus*) and snake herb (*Dyschoriste linearis*). Although I have lots of Mexican petunia and several large flame acanthus in my yard, I have never noticed any Texan Crescent caterpillars on these plants. The shrimp plants are the preferred food for Texan Crescents in my backyard. The caterpillars will completely devour all the leaves leaving only the stems.

Females lay eggs in clusters. The caterpillars are black with a series of short spines on top. They initially feed in groups, but as they grow they begin eating separately. Caterpillars reach about an inch in length. I first notice the caterpillars on my shrimp plants when I observe portions of leaves eaten and tiny frass on the leaves below. Gradually, all the leaves on a stem will disappear. If you look for caterpillars during the daylight, you won't see them. During the day, the caterpillars hide in the leaf litter at the base of the plant. To see them, you need to go out after dusk and look for them with a flashlight. Be careful if you want to collect them. When disturbed, the caterpillars drop off the plant.

I usually have 3 broods in my backyard. The first brood appears in late March or early April. I've seen several adults already in March this year. The last brood is in October or early November.

The caterpillars are easy to raise. I raise them in a ten-gallon aquarium that has a wire mesh top. You can buy these at most pet supply stores. To supply the caterpillars with fresh host plants, I poke the plant stems through small holes drilled in the top of a cup-sized plastic container filled with water. I replace the stems as the caterpillars devour the leaves. The caterpillars form chrysalises on the sides or top of the aquarium. The chrysalises are dark brown or black. The adults emerge about 10 days later.

Thank You!

Thank you **Doris Hill**, **Marvin Lewis**, and **Mike Quinn** for manning the ABF table during the Green Garden Festival on February 26th.

Thank you **Dan Hardy** and **Roxie Rochat** for volunteering on March 4th for the monthly butterfly trail workday that Marvin Lewis organizes.

Texas Persimmon (D. Hardy)

Plant of the Month: Texas Persimmon

by Dan Hardy

One of the first trees I identified in my backyard was a Texas Persimmon, *Diospyros texana*. It is also called Mexican Persimmon. I have followed it through the seasons. I love the bark, the fruit, and the flowers. During late March and early April this tree leafs out and blooms. They have small, white, bell-shaped flowers that hang downward. The scent is heavy and somewhat like honeysuckle. Stand downwind from a bush and you will catch a perfume that epitomizes spring. I like to stand beside the tree at night with a flashlight and watch the moths come to the flowers. It is dioecious: male and female flowers are separate plants.

This tree has a lot of virtues. Foremost is the marvelous peeling bark, which leaves smooth gray patches, somewhat like a Madrone. If the tree is

trimmed and sculptured, it produces of trunk of sublime beauty. Go to Zilker Garden and study some of their examples. It is in the ebony family. I have made a walking stick from the tree and it is indeed a hard wood.

The leaves are ovoid, simple, about an inch or two long. The margin of each leaf is slightly turned under, best learned by feeling each leaf. They are slightly fuzzy underneath. If you look at enough leaves you will see bumps on the leaves that look like tiny pimples. That is pathology produced by a parasite, but it is characteristic of the persimmon, making the leaves instantly recognizable. It is not a great butterfly host plant, but I've found Henry's Elfin caterpillars among the leaves. Bagworm Moth cases are frequently found on the plant.

The fruit is black and about the size of a marble. It is okay to eat, although it is full of seeds and stains your hands. It is eagerly sought by animals when the fruit matures. In the summer and fall you will notice mammal droppings full of persimmon seeds.

Monarch (M. Quinn)

Monarchs Moving En Masse

by Mike Quinn

Monarchs are on the move across the eastern half of Texas and have even reached southern Arkansas!

A few monarchs have been reported from west Texas, but interestingly, the spring migration primarily occurs east of IH-35, unlike the fall migration which occurs primarily west of the interstate.

Starting around March 12 there was a near explosion of reports of 10 or more monarchs per location from Dallas, to Austin, to Port Lavaca, to across southeast Texas. On March 13th, I surveyed Zilker Botanical Gardens and found as many as 11 monarchs, many were nectaring on Mountain Laurels. Some years the leading edge of the spring migration crosses the Rio Grande around March 15, so this year's migrants appear to be early.

The strength of this year's migration is also a reflection of the increased number of monarchs over-wintering in central Mexico. During the last two weeks of December 2005, the monarch colonies there were estimated to occupy 5.92 hectares (or 14.6 acres). This was up from a low of 2.19 hectares in December 2004.

The monarch density (the number of butterflies per hectare) increases through the winter as they form more compact colonies. Actual monarch densities are not known, but at the time of the annual colony measurements (in late December), the density estimates range from 10 to 50 million butterflies per hectare. Using the high end of the range, the December 2005 population could have been nearly 300 million butterflies strong!

More information on the progress of the monarch's migration can be found at my Texas Monarch Watch website:

www.TexasEnto.net/dplex.htm

Please send me your observations at mike.quinn@tpwd.state.tx.us. Thanks!

Butterfly Gardening Workshop

Saturday May 6, 1:00 - 5:00 pm

Zilker Botanical Garden Center

Encourage butterflies and other beneficial insects to visit your yard. Learn how to design and create a garden to attract butterflies. The cost is $30.00 per person. Various nectar and caterpillar host plants will be provided to get you started. For more information or to register, please call Jeff Taylor at 255-0368.

Male (on left) and female Asian Gypsy Moths – notice the horizontal banding on both moths (U.S. Department of Agriculture)

The Moth that Might Eat Austin

by Joe Lapp & Mike Quinn

Last summer, as part of a routine pest detection survey, the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) found a single male Asian Gypsy Moth in Austin. The moth was found in a trap on US Hwy 290 about three miles west of the Y in Oak Hill. This single nondescript moth has the USDA threatening to quarantine southwest Austin.

The Asian Gypsy Moth (AGM) is closely related to the European Gypsy Moth that has devastated many northeastern U.S. forests over the past century. Both are variants of the species *Lymantria dispar*. Both are introduced, but the AGM is not yet established in the states. The moth found in Oak Hill is a hybrid of the Asian and European versions of the Gypsy Moth.

A significant difference between the two moths is that the female AGM can fly up to 20 km, whereas the female European moth is flightless. Another difference is the host range: AGM larvae feed on at least 500 known species of trees and shrubs, whereas the European variant feeds on about 250 species. Both moths prefer oaks. Due to the host range and the flight ability of both sexes of the AGM, the AGM is considered a greater threat.

During the 1990s, surveys periodically found the AGM in several western states, and in each case the USDA responded by aerially spraying the bacterium Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) over the surrounding region. In each case no AGM moths were subsequently found. The USDA proposed to do the same in this case as well, intending to spray over a one square mile area centered on the spot where the specimen was collected.

Bt is a naturally occurring soil organism. It has been widely used to control the spread of the European Gypsy Moth in the states. Spraying Bt spreads it across the vegetation of a region. When any lepidoptera larva eats the bacterium, the bacterium attacks the larva's gut and kills the larva, though late instars are not likely to be affected. A spraying is expected to kill most but not necessarily all of the young lepidoptera in the region, and to do so for the length of time the bacterium is viable, which can be up to one week. The USDA was proposing three applications over three weeks. In other words, the USDA was proposing to kill most butterfly and moth caterpillars within that square mile for three weeks. In particular, it was hoped that this would have killed most if not all of the AGMs present, if any additional AGMs are actually present.

Bt does not affect adult butterflies directly; it only affects larvae. It is also not known to adversely affect humans, animals, or other organisms, although some are critical of the lack of research in this regard.

To proceed with the spraying, the USDA needed permission from all landowners in the spray zone; otherwise it needed an emergency declaration from officials in Washington. On February 18 the USDA and the TDA held an informational meeting for the Oak Hill community at the local ACC campus. By the time the decision deadline arrived, of the 160 landowners in the region, 133 had responded positively, and two had declined. Because two had declined the spraying, the USDA could not proceed without special action. On March 14, the Travis County Commissioner's Court solicited citizen input on the matter at a public meeting. At least one resident is concerned about the possible effects of supposedly 'inert' ingredients that the spray contains. The USDA pointed out that Bt spray is a product approved by the FDA for use in organic gardens.

Much of the public is concerned about whether Bt might affect people, but a number of lepidopterists around Texas expressed concern via numerous emails to the TX-Butterfly listserv about the potential harm to local populations of some of the rarer moths and butterflies in the area to be treated. Many of the land owners, conversely, saw the potential suppression of native oak-feeding caterpillars as a good thing. Still others expressed concern about the potential drift of Bt spray into the surrounding area.

Ultimately, USDA officials in Washington ruled against the spraying of Bt, but instead authorized a

pheromone disruption procedure. In April the USDA will flood the region with Disparlure, which is the pheromone that the female AGM produces to attract the males. The object is to confuse any males in the area so that they cannot find the females to mate, thus minimizing or hopefully eliminating the next generation of AGM moths. USDA officials said that the pheromone has been used to prevent the spread of the European Gypsy Moth but has not been known to eliminate an established population.

The USDA will increase monitoring for gypsy moth by placing 1,300 pheromone traps throughout the area this summer, in order to determine the extent of the AGM population. Let's hope that the moth caught in the trap last year was the only one. But even if there is a local population, it's not entirely clear that the moth will become a pest. While the European Gypsy Moth has stripped and killed millions of acres in the eastern U.S., there have been cases where the moth's population stabilized or even dwindled, apparently without human cause. Experts believe that the central Texas climate may be near the edge of the region hospitable to the AGM; if the moths are present, we can always hope that our hot summer days will finally do us some good.

Send by Wingmail

John Kelly reports that the U.S. Post Office just issued a stamp that depicts the Common Buckeye. It is a 24-cent stamp for use on postcards and the 2nd oz. of postage.

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.

MARCH

25 - 26 **ZILKER GARDEN FESTIVAL** – Zilker Botanical Garden, 10am - 5pm

This annual event has something for every member of the family. ABF will have two tables and will sell tickets, $3 in advance and $5 at the door. We will be handing out information of butterfly gardening and on our organization. We still could use a few volunteers... For additional information, call 477-8672 ext. 10 or email info@zilkergarden.org

Mon 27 **Austin Butterfly Forum Meeting** – Zilker Botanical Garden Center, 7 - 9pm

Kim Garwood and Richard Lehman will give a presentation on the Butterflies of Northeastern Mexico. They will have copies of their book on the same topic for sale. For more information, see the box on the front page of this newsletter.

APRIL

7 - 9 **ENTOBLITZ** – New location: Warbler Woods, Cibilo, Guadalupe Co., TX

Held by the Texas A&M University, Department of Entomology. Come out to explore 126 acres of varied habitat featuring South Texas Plains, Blackland Prairie and Edward's Plateau ecological regions, a diverse plant community of over 220 plant species. Hosts Susan and Don Schaezler <Warblerwoods@gmail.com> are providing us with 2 large grills for cooking and 1.5 restrooms. Bring your own food, beverage, and collecting gear. Contact Glené Mynhardt for more info at 979-458-4362 or glene@tamu.edu

8 - 9 **Spring Plant Sale & Gardening Festival** – Lady Bird Wildflower Center

This unique sale features more than 23,000 hard-to-find natives and 300 plant species. Hours Saturday-Sunday, 9am-5pm - www.wildflower.org?nd=plant_sale – Ph: 292-4200

Sat 15 **Austin Nature Day** – many events throughout Austin

This is a new annual event designed to celebrate the beauty, vitality, and diversity of our natural resources. Over 20 organizations at over 15 locations in the Greater Austin will offer programs. - www.austinnatureday.org - Here are some programs of interest to bug lovers:

• **Wild-Connections Butterfly Farm & Nature Center** – Visit the 2,000 square foot butterfly flight house. Enjoy guided nature walks, scavenger hunts, picnicking and shopping. Learn how a butterfly farm raises butterflies. Join **Spider Joe** on spider hunts through 2:00 pm. $2.00/person ages 2+. See http://www.wild-connections.com/special/ for more information.

continued...

• **Spider Hunt at Wild Basin** – Learn about Austin area spiders on this walk through Wild Basin Wilderness Preserve. Spider Joe will take you on a spider hunt, introducing you to spiders and sharing amazing facts about the spiders we encounter. Both adults and children are welcome. Walk time: 4:00 pm - 5:00 pm. Live spiders available for viewing at 3:30 pm.

Sat 22 **Wimberley Butterfly Festival** – Emily Ann Theatre, Wimberley, TX

Visit Emily Ann Theatre for a day of butterfly fun. Wild-Connections will be showing of native butterflies in a butterfly flight house. There will also be live butterfly releases, music, crafts, food, and an exhibit of butterfly art created by thousands of school children throughout Texas. For more information, or to enter the art contest, visit www.emilyann.org or call 512-847-6969.

Mon 24 **Austin Butterfly Forum Meeting** – Zilker Botanical Garden Center, 7 - 9pm

Dr. Jean Krejca will give a presentation on **Karst Invertebrates**. We'll see slides of a variety of types of cave habitats here in Austin and abroad, and we'll learn about some of the challenges of working in those environments. The presentation includes macro flash photography of invertebrate fauna from caves includes arachnids, insects, crustaceans and worms. She'll talk about some basics of adaptations to cave life, biogeography, and conservation.

Jean received her undergraduate degree at Southern Illinois University and her Ph.D. researching the biogeography of central TX aquatic crustaceans at The University of Texas. She started caving in 1990 and soon thereafter combined her passion for exploration with her interest in biology. She has participated in cave exploration and cave biology projects in the U.S., Central and South America, the Carribean, and Southeast Asia.

25 - 30 **Nature Quest 2006** – many events throughout Uvalde County

An opportunity to get acquainted with the Hill Country's beautiful flora and fauna around Uvalde County - www.thcrr.com/static/index.cfm?contentID=10 – Ph: 1-800-210-0380

Sun 30 **Balcones Songbird Festival** – Balcones Canyonlands NWR

Come to the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge for a day of birding and other nature activities. The day includes programs on butterflies, aquatic insects, and spiders. – www.balconessongbirdfestival.org

MAY

Sat 6 **Austin Butterfly Forum Butterfly Watching and Gardening Workshop** – Zilker Botanical Garden Center, 1pm - 5pm

Encourage butterflies and other beneficial insects to visit your yard. Learn how to design and create a garden to attract butterflies. The cost is $30.00 per person. Various nectar and caterpillar host plants will be provided to get you started. For more information or to register, please call Jeff Taylor at 255-0368.

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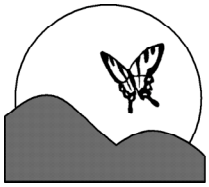

Austin Butterfly Forum Membership Form

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