



# Heard it through the Pipevine



Nov /  
Dec  
2007

Newsletter of the Austin Butterfly Forum • [www.austinbutterflies.org](http://www.austinbutterflies.org)

## Christmas Potluck Dinner

**Thursday December 6, 6:30 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. We will also vote on the 2008 board nominees. See you there!

## January Club Meeting

**Monday January 28, 7:00 pm**

Zilker Botanical Garden Center

A recap of the recent trip to the El Cielo Butterfly Festival in southern Tamaulipas will be presented at the next meeting. Trip participants Dan Hardy, Mariana Hobbs, Peggy Murphy, Mary Helen Quinn, Roxie Rochat, Jack Smith, Miriam and Robert Vaughn, will collaborate on a power point presentation. In addition to pictures and talks about the outstanding butterflies and caterpillars seen, the program will include discussions about the El Cielo Biosphere Reserve, the plants, birds, other wildlife of the area, the Mexican people and the Dia de los Muertos celebration that coincided with the tour.

## 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.



Blue-eyed Sailor at the LBJ Wildflower Center  
(D. Hardy)

## Blue-eyed Sailors, Noseburn and Acorns

by Dan Hardy

**T**here was a special year for a group of tropical butterflies that share Noseburn as a hostplant. These were the Blue-eyed Sailor, Red Rim and Common Mestra.

On September 15 I was startled to find a male Blue-eyed Sailor (*Dynamine dyonis*) sitting in the gravel path at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. Sailors were subsequently found in Williamson County and in the Barton Creek Greenbelt by Bill Dempwolf. The Sailors at Lady Bird were seen intermittently until November 12. I found greater than normal numbers of Blue-eyed Sailors in the Sierra de Picachos north of Monterrey, Mexico in early September, but Sailor records in the valley did not seem especially high.

It's been 39 years since the last appearance of Sailors in Austin. Chris Durden wrote the following to me:

“The last time (1968) they were common on Bull Creek below Oak Grove Cemetery, and in Northwest Hills along the small tributary of Shoal Creek that flows (when it flows) through what are now backyards just S of Spicewood Springs Road. In July and August they lurked in deep shade of Cedar Elm and Black Persimmon thickets - in October and early November they were out in the open at flowers (Shrubby Boneset) but mostly puddling along creek banks.”

1968 was a remarkable year. Raymond Neck reported sailors as “common” in Austin from July into the fall. He thought that breeding had occurred due to the fresh condition of the specimens. Sailors were even reported in Fort Worth that year.

Austin has even earlier records of Blue-eyed Sailors dating to 1899, when a breeding population was established along a creek in Austin. The same observer failed to see them during the next three seasons although he collected in the same area.

1899, 1968, and 2007 were years of strange periodic surges of appearances of Sailors in Austin. Neck speculated that the upsurge in 1968 occurred after higher than normal rains during May of that year (8.75 inches vs. normal 4.22 inches). (Red Rims also occurred in San Antonio in 1968.) He looked back at the weather from 1899 and found that summer precipitation was 131% above average. A massive rainstorm produced over thirty inches of rain in some areas of central Texas that year. So this could tie in with our above normal rainfall this year. However, this doesn't seem to me to be a very rigorous explanation given the many above-normal years of rain between 1899 and 2007 when Sailors did not appear.

Sailors lay their eggs on Noseburn, which is in the *Tragia* genus within the Euphorbiaceae family. This is an inconspicuous, low, sprawling vine with small simple, toothed lanceolate leaves, covered with fine whitish hairs. These hairs cause exquisite pain when you brush against them. Although the plant is insignificant, it can be widespread. But don't look for it in butterfly gardens because it is so nasty to handle. One way to find Noseburn is to follow a female Mestra as she hunts low through the underbrush. Mestras as well Red Rims lay their eggs on Noseburn, and these two butterflies, along with Sailors, had a BIG year in Texas. The caterpillars sequester noxious chemicals from the hostplant and pass this to the adults, who sport bright, aposematic coloration. Another trait of noxious, aposematically-colored butterflies is their slow, seemingly-fearless

flight (think of Monarchs and Zebra Longwings). Mestras and Red Rims show this flight pattern.

Sailors have a beautiful pattern of circles and stripes below. The males and females are dimorphic on the dorsal side. The male has an iridescent green whose tint varies continuously as they open and close their wings. Females have plainer white stripes. This year I spent more time admiring the coloration of Mestras. A fresh Mestra has a delicate combination white, gray and orange-brown. The underside of Mestras is harder to glimpse, but it shows much more of the orange-brown color.

Roxie Rochat and I looked in vain for Sailor caterpillars on *Tragia* around the Lady Bird garden. I would like to raise these caterpillars, but handling the hostplant is going to be a challenge.

The Sailors showed an interesting behavior at Lady Bird. They were landing on acorns and probing with their proboscis the point where the acorn and the cap joined. There were also lots of wasps around the acorns, too. Sap? Chuck Sexton suggested that they are probing the egg holes of weevils. These insects lay their eggs inside the acorn via small holes that they drill. The insect or the wound may be producing some sort of substance that the butterflies and wasps like.

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Neck, Raymond W., Climatic Regimes Resulting in Unusual Occurrences of *Rhopalocera* in Central Texas in 1968, *Journal Lepidopterist Society*, 32(2), 1978.



Common Mestra caterpillar on Noseburn  
(D. Hardy)

## Board Nominees for 2008

We have an outstanding line-up of nominees for the ABF board of 2008. We will vote on the new board at the December 6 Christmas Potluck.

President: **Mike Quinn**

V-P Programs and Events: **Dan Hardy**

Treasurer: **Doris Hill**

Garden Council representative: **Mary Holland**

V-P Membership and Volunteer Coordination:  
**Bob Beneski**

Secretary: **Miriam Vaughn**

Publicity: **Roxie Rochat**



Common Mestra (D. Hardy)

## Thank You!

The Austin Butterfly Forum thanks the outgoing board members **Marvin Lewis** (Garden Council Representative), **Julia Marsden** (VP Membership and Volunteer Coordination), **Jeff Taylor** (Secretary), and **Mary Helen Quinn** (Publicity). 2008 was a very successful year with both membership up and attendance at the meetings up. We owe Marvin Lewis particular thanks for his many years of service.

## Additional Butterfly Festival in El Cielo

**March 8 - 12, 2008**

El Cielo, Mexico

Because of many requests, Sonia Ortiz, of MexBirds, has just announced that an additional trip similar to last fall's El Cielo Butterfly Festival has been scheduled for March 8 to 12, 2008. Cost is \$720 for single and \$800 for double. The bus departs from McAllen, Texas.

For an itinerary, please see the upcoming events section of the web site [www.mexbirds.com](http://www.mexbirds.com). Another good source for information on the area can be found at [www.elcielobiosphere.org](http://www.elcielobiosphere.org).

## Butterfly Highlights of 2007

by Dan Hardy

**A**s we sat inside waiting for rain to stop, which was the case for most of 2007, we all thought: what would this mean for the butterflies? Would there be an explosion? Would the predators and parasitoids keep pace with the plants and butterflies? After all, there was not a patch of ground around Austin that didn't have a lush growth of grass and flowers. Oddly, after the spring and summer rains stopped there was a prolonged dry spell during September and October which produced a short fall blooming season. The fall flowers blooming was over quickly. I missed most of the Goldeneye blooms when I was out of town for 10 days. But in late October and November, the well-watered gardens at Zilker, Lady Bird and the Natural Gardener concentrated butterflies and produced a memorable fall. I am going to try to recap the year's highlights as I remember them, although I'm sure to leave out something.

In the mid to late spring, there was an explosion of species whose caterpillars use plants in weedy patches. These butterflies could take advantage of the unbelievable herbaceous plant growth in every field and every crack in the pavement. I especially remember visits to the Barton Creek Greenbelt in May when the following were exploding (hostplant in parenthesis): Checkered White (peppergrass), Orange Sulphur (legumes like clover), Dainty Sulphurs (Greenthread), Red Admirals (Pellitory), American Ladies (Rabbit Tobacco), Painted Ladies (thistle), Bordered Patches (ragweed), Phaon Crescents (frogfruit), and Funereal Duskwing (low legumes).

Woody plants and trees grow more slowly and the butterflies that use them were not as noticeable, but there were a few exceptions. It was a good year for Question Marks. I found numerous caterpillars on the new leaf growth of Cedar Elms. I also noticed that Red-spotted Purples were easy to find this summer. Their hostplants are Cherry and Willow.

My notes reminded me of an explosion of Vesta Crescents in the lower Barton Creek greenbelt in April, when they were be far and away the commonest crescent. However, this fall they were very infrequent in the same locale. They use Hairy Tube-tongue, another plants that flourishes with rain.

In the late summer there seemed to be a lull in numbers and diversity, and I wondered if the parasites were catching up. Rare things were turning up around Dallas and in South Texas, though. Then the fall came, especially September and October with rarities and rarely-seen species

The following species were present in higher than normal—sometimes historic—numbers:

- Cloudless Sulphur
- Mimosa Yellow
- Crimson patches
- Julia Longwing
- Blue-eyed Sailor
- Common Mestra
- Long-tailed Skipper
- White-striped Longtail
- Dorantes Longtail
- Coyote Cloudywing
- Two-barred Flasher
- Tropical Checkered-skipper
- Whirlabout

But some species were missing or down. Snout didn't have much of a year. I rarely saw Large Orange Sulphurs. These can be easily spotted from the car since the males are big and orange and the females are big and whitish, but not 2007. The big sulphur category was filled by an abundance of Cloudless Sulphurs and a scattering of Orange-barred Sulphurs. Theona Checkerspots had a breakout Fall of 2006—and a few turned up in early spring, probably the hatch from the fall—but they just didn't answer the bell this year. White Peacocks turned up in Austin in 2006, and bred, but not one was see this year. Neither did I see any Soldiers.

At the June club meeting, I said that Tropical Checkered Skippers were not seen that often in Austin, and that they could almost be ignored. After that talk I proceeded to find Tropical Checkered-skippers on almost every trip for the rest of the year! They often outnumbered the usually much-more-

common White/Common Checkered Skipper. I've never seen a year like this for that species. Whirlabouts, a tough find in Austin, gave the lie to me, too. I could find them on almost every outing this fall, although not in numbers.

This was a BIG year for Long-tailed and Dorantes Skippers. They were impossible to miss in most gardens. Both use *Desmodium paniculatum* as a hostplant. This legume thrived at the Austin Nature Center and at St. Edward's Park (it produces those triangular seeds that stick to your socks). Adults and caterpillars were easy to find in the second half of the year.

Chris Durden has only one record from the 70s and 80s when he studied butterflies on lower Barton Creek. White-striped Longtails have been increasing for the last 5 years, but this year they were a daily occurrence in almost every patch of flowers. If you didn't see one, you weren't looking. What a welcome addition to our fauna, and one that looks like is here to stay! A large skipper with tails and a brilliant white stripe that often sits on the tops of sticks in fields! Could we ask for anything more? Their hostplant (Least Snoutbean, a legume vine) was abundant around town. This is the first year I recognized that plant, but I suspect that its abundance is responsible for upward trend in White-stripes

Crimson Patches numbers were way up. This gaudy butterfly is also a dream-come-true. Flame Acanthus, their hostplant, is widely available. Winnie Spitz's yard in south Austin has extensive beds of Flame Acanthus, and she hosted a colony of Crimson Patches in 2006. This seemed to be rather isolated at that time. This year this species spread over much of the city south of the Colorado River. Adults were often found at LBJ and at Zilker Butterfly Garden. There have been huge swings in the abundance of Crimson Patches over the years in Austin. Chris Durden's Austin list from 1990 shows one record. They staged a large outbreak all over Austin about ten years ago, only to disappear until 2006-2007.

Everyone I talked to has commented on the abundance of Julia Longwings. I learned what the Julia caterpillars looked like when they were found on the passionvine in the Butterfly Garden, among Zebra Longwing and Gulf Fritillary caterpillars.

The Red Rim, Blue-eyed Sailor and Common Mestra are discussed in another article in this issue. The following species were new for Travis County (all normally found to our south, except the glassywing): Giant White, Little Glassywing, Erichson's White-Skipper, Red-bordered Metalmark, and Brown-banded Skipper. Two of these were in backyard gardens: a Red-bordered Metalmark in the garden of

Carl Schorlemmer and a Giant White seen by Barbara Ribble Good work!

I will be watching to see how many of these unusual species carry over to the spring. Will overwintering species survive this winter's temperatures. How many of these changes are permanent, and how many represent chance fluctuations as do Sailors and Theona Checkerspots?



Zebra Cross-Streak (*Panthiades bathildis*)  
(R. Rochat)

## El Cielo Festival Yields 299 Butterfly Species

by Mary Helen Quinn &  
Roxie Rochat

**B**lue Morphos, lime-green Malachites, and the stunningly thermodynamic Anna's 88's were only a tiny sampling of the 299 spectacular butterfly species seen by members of the Austin Butterfly Forum who took part in the El Cielo Butterfly Festival in southern Tamaulipas October 31 to November 4. Organized by MexBirds, a business founded in 2003 by Sonia Ortiz, and associates, the festival's purpose was to help local inhabitants of the El Cielo Biosphere Reserve make a living through bird and butterfly watching.

Eight Forum members joined 26 other butterfly enthusiasts from as far away as Maine and Massachusetts for the bus trip from McAllen to festival headquarters at Ciudad Mante, and the best butterfly hot spots closest to the US. The group got a sampling that day of the wonders to come when the first rest stop, the Mezcal Museum at Tinieblo, yielded

68 species which is more than are usually seen during a good day in Austin. A few hours down the road at La Morita Nursery the group was treated to another 44 species, plus some delicious mango pie and refreshing mango juice.

They were greeted with Margaritas at the tour headquarters, the modern and comfortable Hotel Mante, in time to accept the courteous invitation of the students of the Valle del Bravo University to partake of their Day of the Dead observation. This is a major Mexican religious holiday dating back to the Aztec era during which the faithful believe the souls of the departed return at this time to visit. Families and friends honor them by building altars filled with flowers, favorite foods of the departed, their pictures and other mementos of their lives. The students graciously explained the significance of the various elements on the large altar they had built in the university patio, and invited the group to sample any of the special treats they had prepared as a tribute to the deceased.

A handful of altars also had been set up in carports and outdoor patios across the street from the university, offering a glimpse into a more typical family observance. A stroll to the main plaza after supper found the streets filled with celebrants—adults of all ages, costumed children asking for “alloween” handouts, and street vendors selling Day of the Dead paraphernalia such as sugar skulls, miniature skeletons and coffins, costumes, banners and masks.

The serious butterflying got underway the next day with day-long excursions to near by parks, roadsides and other places where butterflies congregated. Tour destination, however, was UNESCO's 356,442-acre El Cielo Biosphere Reserve, the northernmost cloud forest in the Western Hemisphere, which was set aside to preserve the unique habitat of this portion of the Sierra Madre Oriental.

The richness of El Cielo's butterfly and bird populations is due to the area's fortuitous location in an ecological crossroads south of the Tropic of Cancer. Here North American and South American species mix, and within a relatively small area highlands erupt from lowlands, climate changes from tropical to temperate, humid to arid. The result is incredibly lush and varied habitats supporting a fantastically diverse butterfly population. Within a short drive of CD Mante are desert scrub in the lowlands, riparian vegetation along the rivers, and in the higher elevations forests of oak and pine culminating in a cloud forest.

Logging, the former major industry of the region, has now been forbidden, and groups such as

MexBirds are working to help the area's *campesinos* find ways to generate income without destroying the environment. Local residents, already familiar with the birds and butterflies of their home area, have been trained to learn the English names and to serve as guides to augment the services of the experts coming from the States. Selling locally produced handicrafts and jams and jellies prepared from fruits of indigenous plants are other sources of revenue.

A side trip to San Luis Potosi and El Naranjo found more butterflies, plus El Salto, a spectacular waterfall rivaling Monterrey's famed Horsetail Falls in beauty, as well as Mexican families enjoying a swim in the beautiful pools just above the cascades on its clear and sparkling river. Visits to a lovely park at La Florida and the charming Los Troncones Ecological Park outside Ciudad Victoria produced additional butterflies.

It was at Los Troncones that the blue-crowned Motmot was spotted. Other outstanding birds seen on the tour were the Squirrel Cuckoo, Bronze-winged Woodpecker, Wedge-tailed Sabrewing Hummingbird, Ornate Hawk Eagle, Bat Falcon and Blue Mockingbird. A sighting of a Baltimore Oriole reminded the group of the importance of this area to bird migration.

Two first-class hotels, Casa de Piedras, a seven-room bed and breakfast, and Cumbres Inn, a large luxury hotel, were recently built in the Gomez Farias area, and both provided delicious meals for the group

with patio views overlooking the mountain valley.

Roads throughout northeast Mexico were excellent and getting from one place to another was not difficult. The only exception was the trip up the mountain in the Biosphere where roads are deliberately unimproved to discourage vehicle traffic. All the parks were clean and well-appointed with shelters, tables, benches, and barbecue grills. The people encountered throughout the stay were invariably warm, helpful, and hospitable to the *Norte Americanos*.



Anna's Eighty-eight on participant's arm. (D.Hardy)

## Hornsby Ecological Literacy Days

**Last Saturday of every month**

9am - 1pm, Hornsby Bend

If you enjoy birding or walking along the Colorado River here, please join us in keeping the trails open to the public.

Combining volunteer work with learning about local ecology, the Ecological Literacy Day at Hornsby Bend begins with several hours of outdoor work - ranging from trail maintenance to habitat restoration to work in the native plant nursery - and ends with at least an hour of learning about local ecology - birds, bugs, and more! Wear boots and work clothing, and be sure to bring your binoculars.

Contact [Kevin.Anderson@ci.austin.tx.us](mailto:Kevin.Anderson@ci.austin.tx.us) or 512-972-1960 for more information.



A Day of the Dead Altar in Gomez Farias to honor departed relatives. (R. Rochat)

# 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](http://www.texasento.net/events.htm).

## DECEMBER '07

**Thu 6**

**ABF Christmas Potluck Dinner** – Zilker Botanical Garden Center, 6:30pm

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. We will also vote on the 2008 board nominees. See you there!

## JANUARY '08

**Mon 28**

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

Forum members will share the highlights of their trip to El Cielo, Mexico. See the box on the front page of this newsletter for more information.

**Suggestions Wanted.** We are looking for **program topics, speaker recommendations,** and **field trip ideas.** Please take a moment to brainstorm and send us your ideas with your membership renewal. Please also indicate which you yourself would be willing to arrange or lead. *Thank you!*

Topic, Speaker, & Field Trip Suggestions	Will you lead?

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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