

## Lifestyles of the Scaled and Beautiful: Variegated and Mexican Fritillaries

*text and photos by Phil Schappert*

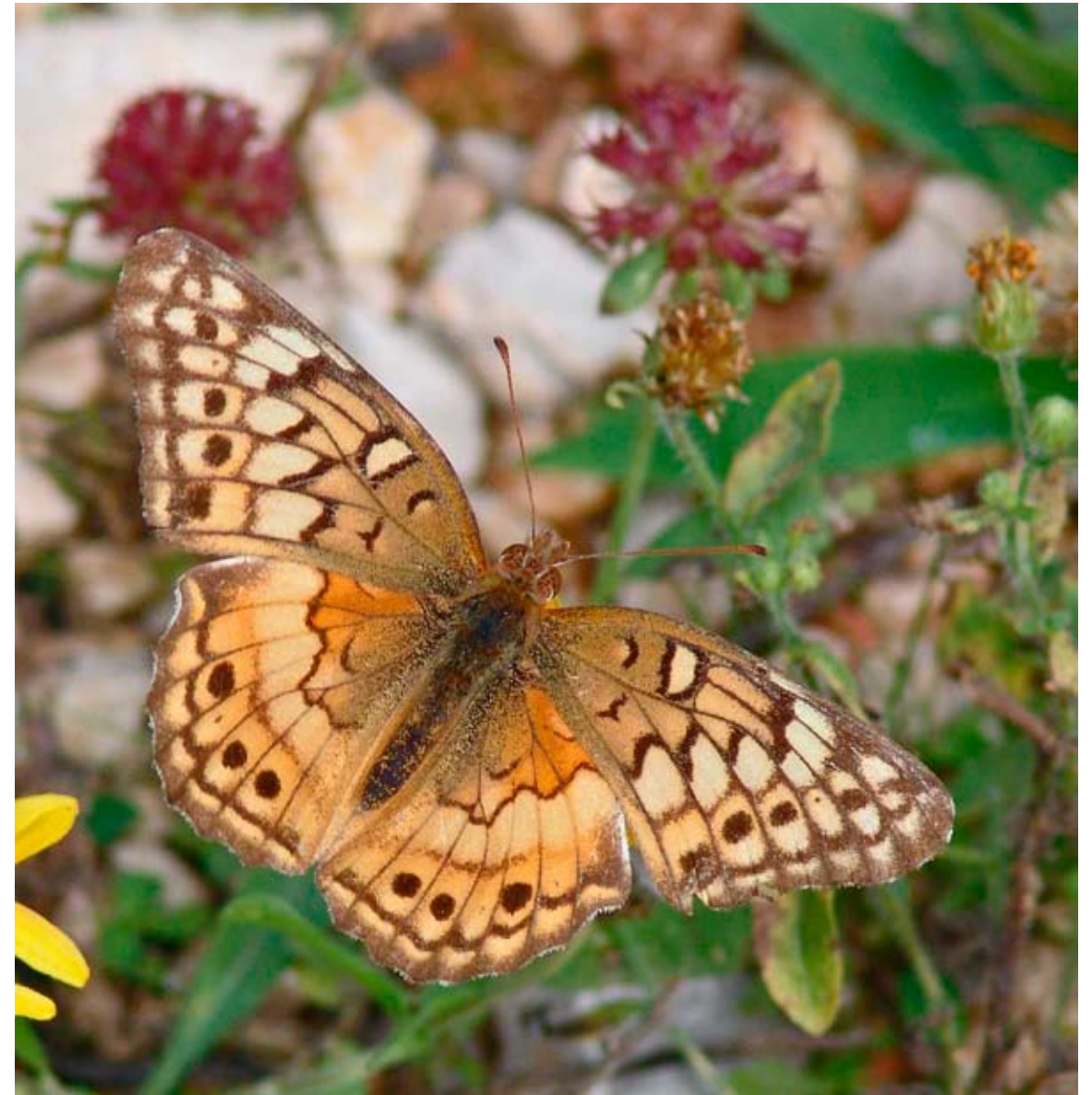
It may seem odd to many but I had seen about a thousand or so Mexican Fritillaries before I ever saw my first Variegated one. Neither of these species was common in central Ontario where I grew up. The sad truth is that I never really cared much about butterflies of any sort until my late 20s and the beginning of my undergraduate biology studies at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, in my early 30s.

But I jumped in with both feet and my eyes wide open—I wanted to study butterflies and had years of neglect to make up!

The beginning of dissertation studies in 1990 was my watershed year—my project was going to be an investigation of defense chemistry variation in the woody shrub *Turnera ulmifolia*, which is common in coastal scrub habitats throughout the Neotropics. Not



*A Variegated Fritillary perched on a Yaupon (Ilex vomitoria).  
May 2005. Stengl "Lost Pines" Biological Station, Smithville, TX.*



*A Variegated Fritillary showing off its handsome topside.  
November 2006. Stengl "Lost Pines" Biological Station, Smithville, TX.*

entirely coincidentally—there was a method to my madness—this species is a major caterpillar foodplant of Mexican Fritillaries through much of its range. The plant's chemical defense system, cyanogenesis (the release of hydrogen cyanide), common also in the passion-vine hosts of heliconians, reached its widest variation on the island of Jamaica. So I would get to spend many winter holidays on Jamaica chasing butterflies—madness, ha! You should be so insane.

My first encounters with Mexican Fritillaries on Jamaica in May 1990 are forever etched into my mind. Watching that very first female fly around, under and over a *Turnera* plant, intent on assessing, then finally accepting the plant and laying that first egg, was wonderful. Once I had a search image, I found eggs and caterpillars just about everywhere I looked, including on 3 species of passion-vines. The butterflies were common enough that it was relatively easy to see much of their