

The Lure of Butterflies Along the Rio Grande

by Sue Sill

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Only in the Rio Grande Valley can so many butterflies be seen in such a small area. The reason lies in the richness and diversity of the habitats, and the Valley's proximity to northern Mexico. Here, along the moist riparian zone bordering the Rio Grande, a mosaic of microclimates emerges where the dry desert and moist coastal influences converge in the fringe of tropics that makes up the extreme south Texas borderlands.

Due to this flourish of nature, the "Valley" is a butterfly-lover's paradise. With over 300 butterfly species having

been recorded from the

Valley, a day trip during peak periods can yield more than 100 species, far more than any other place north of Mexico. Some of these Valley specialties are large, showy butterflies, which in other areas are raised and displayed in indoor butterfly zoos. Malachites, for instance, are grown as a captive butterfly in conservatories around the country. In woodland areas along the Rio Grande, however, they fly wild and free to the delight of thousands of ecotourists. When resting in dappled sunlight, the green spots and irregular brown borders allow it to disappear among the foliage, only to reappear when it flies off to disappear again in another spot.

Another exciting woodland butterfly of the riparian corridor, the Mexican Bluewing, can often be seen along the Resaca Trail at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, and at Anzalduas County Park. Cryptic in coloration

when resting on tree trunks with wings folded, iridescent blue flashes in the sunlight when the wings open. In flight, this beauty teases with glimpses of shimmering blue and black stripes and patches of white spots as it flits among the trees. When NABA International Butterfly Park first started, a Mexican Bluewing was seen flying through, but no one was able to come to the Butterfly Park and rely on seeing this exotic species we had chosen as our logo. This was our chance to test the theory that "if you plant it, they will come." By planting dozens of large shrubs of Vasey's adelia, the bluewing's native caterpillar host, NABA Butterfly Park was able to establish a breeding population. Now, throughout much of the year this species can dependably be seen at the Butterfly Park, where it frequents feeders it shares with a variety of emperors and leafwings. At this writing, in July 2007, a fresh crop of bluewings has just hatched, with their shimmering blue wings darting through the dappled shade of the woodlands. For a really good look, staking out one of the adelia plants works well. Females frequent these large shrubs to lay their eggs, one tiny white gem per leaf. This means they must hang out there a while, making them easy to observe.

While some of the butterflies that are native to the Valley can also be seen in other areas of the southern United States, a significant percentage of the Rio Grande Valley butterflies are really Mexican species with ranges that barely touch the U.S., only along the Rio Grande at Texas' southern tip. What remains, or has been restored, of the riparian forest of the Rio Grande River that serves as the international border between Texas and Mexico, is host to such sought after species as Banded Peacock, Silver Emperor, Common Banner, Band-celled Sister, Erato Heliconian, Many-banded Daggerwing, Two-barred Flasher, Blue-eyed Sailor, and many others.

On the chance they might spot a Mexican species that has never been seen in the U.S. before, butterfly enthusiasts scour the woodlands and butterfly gardens of the Valley.

These strays add spice to Valley butterfly watching, and help make the Valley an important nature tourism destination, and even encourage the purchase of airline tickets in distant locales. Some of the most sought after of these winged creatures include the Beautiful Beamer seen once at Bentsen State Park, Broad-tipped Clearwing seen once at NABA Butterfly Park, and the Thick-tipped Greta, another clear-winged butterfly seen once at Bentsen State Park.

Butterflies and the native habitat they depend on have made the Rio Grande Valley a magnet for butterfly enthusiasts from across North America, and beyond. Butterfly lovers travel to the Valley from as far away as England, just to enjoy wild butterflies. While not yet as large or as old a sport as birding, butterflying is growing rapidly. The accessibility of butterflies and the development of butterfly venues across the Rio Grande Valley are helping fuel the growth of butterflying as a popular pastime for nature lovers, which are often entire families. 🦋

Dave Hanson



One of the records of a Common Banner from the United States. Dec. 27, 2006. NABA Butterfly Park, Hidalgo Co., TX.

This page:
An electric
Mexican Bluewing
surveys
NABA Butterfly Park.
Oct. 21, 2003.