

The Florida Leafwing and Frass

by Mark Salvato

During the past several years, I, along with my wife Holly, have been surveying and researching the remaining Florida Leafwing populations within the pine rocklands of southern Florida and the lower Florida Keys. So we read Phil Schappert's recent wonderfully written article on the Lifestyles of Goatweed and Tropical Leafwings with great interest (*American Butterflies* 15: 1/2).

About a year ago Phil contacted me while he was preparing to write his article to inquire if we had ever observed Florida Leafwing caterpillars either making frass chains or leaf rolling, in a fashion similar to what has been noted for other leafwing species. I said that we had not. However, after seeing the photo of an early instar Tropical Leafwing caterpillar with a frass chain is his article, I immediately realized that we had indeed observed this behavior in Florida Leafwing caterpillars at several of our survey sites, although not commonly.

In my previous writings on this species, I've simply noted that early instar Florida Leafwing caterpillars chew the leaf of the pineland croton, *Croton linearis* (their sole hostplant species) to the mid-vein and that these younger instars dangle from the chewed leaf in a cryptic looking manner. In retrospect, I may not have looked as closely as I should have at those dangling early instar Florida Leafwing caterpillars, as they were likely, at least in some instances, hanging



Florida Leafwing caterpillars go out on a frass chain.

Sept. 13, 2007. Long Pine Key, Everglade National Park, Miami-Dade Co., FL.

on frass chains and not merely disguising themselves on a shriveled leaf.

Recently, the careful eyes of Paulette Haywood and Sara Bright located and photographed a few 1st instar caterpillars making frass chains on croton within the pine rocklands of the Everglades and they have

graciously shared their insights with us. In reviewing our archives of Florida Leafwing caterpillar photos, with a keener eye toward what we've been overlooking through the years, we can clearly observe frass chains in many pictures. We believe the use of frass chains by the early instars of the Florida

Leafwing is a trait that can be (and has been) easily overlooked and therefore requires ongoing observation. We will discuss this aspect of Florida Leafwing natural history in greater detail in a scientific paper planned for release later this year. 🦋