

A New Butterfly for Hawaii and the United States

by Jim Snyder



Almost all species of blues have black eyes. The gray eyes of this Hawaiian immigrant was a clue to its identification as a lesser grass-blue.

March 16, 2008. Waikiki, Oahu, HI.

The Hawaiian Islands are the most isolated chain of islands in the world. With that distinction, it is no surprise that fewer species of butterflies are found in Hawaii than are found in any of the other forty-nine states of the United States. Hawaii has only two native species of butterflies, both of which are endemic to the Hawaiian Islands. Another 14 butterfly species have been introduced, some accidentally and some intentionally, into the Hawaiian Islands. I have lived in Hawaii (Big Island and Oahu) for seven years and it took me five of those years exploring many habitats on all six of the major Hawaiian Islands to find and photograph the sixteen Hawaiian butterflies.

Probably because it is so difficult to find numbers of butterflies in Hawaii, I have developed a “keen” eye over the years and am always on the lookout for butterflies. One thing I never expected, though, was to ever discover a new butterfly. This all changed on March 15, 2008. On that day I was walking across a grassy field in Waikiki adjacent to the entrance of the Ala Wai Golf Course. The trade winds were blowing fairly strongly that day so the butterfly activity was minimal. Something compelled me to look at the ground as I was walking across this field. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I noticed an erratic movement a few inches above the grass. There were brief flashes of blue and I knew it was a butterfly.

Luckily I was able to follow the fleeting flashes with my eyes and when it landed I focused my binoculars. What I saw was actually a mating pair of very small brown butterflies. Because there are so few butterflies to be found in Hawaii, I immediately knew this was something different. Thoughts that came to my mind were “Am I dreaming?” “Am I in South Texas?” “This looks like a pair of Cyna Blues.” Luckily I had my camera and macro lens with me and I was able to obtain a good photographic record of this find. I sent photos to several butterflyers around the world (Jeff Glassberg and others) who all confirmed that this was indeed a new butterfly for Hawaii and the United States. What I had found were lesser grass-blues (*Zizina otis*).

Lesser grass-blues are very small, about the size of your finger nail (somewhere between a Cyna Blue and a Western Pygmy-Blue). They are common butterflies in India, Japan and Southeast Asia. They always fly



A view of the Ala Wai Golf Course, where lesser grass-blues have been found for the first United States records. March 22, 2008. Waikiki, Oahu, HI.

close to the ground in open sunlit grassy patches. The male upperside is pale violet-blue with a broad brown edging and white fringe. The brown edging is broadest at the apex and is bounded by an ancillary darker line. The female upperside is brown with a little violet-blue along the basal hindwing. The male and female appear to be about the same size and are very similar on the ventral side. The underside of both sexes is brownish gray with a series of ten dusky spots surrounded by white on the hindwing. The antennal club is black with brown at the terminus and



Right: A mating pair of lesser grass-blues is doing its best to ensure the species survival in new territory. March 15, 2008. Waikiki, Oahu, HI.