Butterflies Seek Sun, Flowers Between Downpours

LOST PINES NATURE NOTES

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A Monarch mimicking Viceroy, Limenitis archippus, *nectars on a buttonbush at the Biology Station pond.*

Last time I wrote that we had recorded more than 85% of our average annual rainfall but now that's an almost inconceivable, unbelievable 95%! As of Saturday, July 7, we've had some 37.5 inches of rain out here at the Biology Station, when our seven-year average is just 39.5 inches. That's more rain so far this year than we had in ALL of either of the past 2 years!

Who'da thunk it?

The upside is that all of that rain has left us a green world—plants are doing quite well, thank you very much. So well, in fact, that the downside is that identification of even common plants is more difficult—we rarely see them so large, so robust and with so many blooms (waterlogged though they may be) so we just don't recognize them. I'm not complaining, mind, just stating the facts.

But consider the poor sun-loving butterfly. All of this rain is both boon and bane. Big, juicy green leaves mean abundant food for caterpillars (assuming you don't get washed off by the next downpour) but many butterflies only live for a few days to a week or so—if it never stops raining and the sun doesn't shine then how does one find mates? And the rain washes out, or at least dilutes, the nectar in flowers so there isn't as much butterfly-as-flying-machine energy/fuel available even when it does stop pouring.

Butterflies generally seek shelter under leaves, branches or anything that will shield them during rains (the same kind of locations they use to bunk down at night) and will only venture out after the water stops dripping. For short-lived critters, rain everyday can put a rather severe crimp in your lifestyle. Imagine spending half of your reproductive years shut in (with no food!) and you'll get the merest inkling of the problem.

Thankfully, butterflies (and insects in general) are experts at taking advantage of even the briefest of openings. As long as it's warm (this is Texas, isn't it?), butterflies can fly. In some of the breaks between downpours the butterflies seek out fresh flowers (often side- or down-facing blooms) that still offer sugar-rich nectar.

This past week I lucked out and found a rather uncommon Viceroy, *Limenitis archippus*, a mimic of the Monarch, nectaring at Buttonbush, *Cephalanthus occidentalis*, blooms out at the pond. Of course, with the pond full to overflowing, I had to use the boat to get to the flowers. Have you ever tried to take photos from a jon boat? Not the most stable of photography platforms, eh?

And some of them do find mates (as I'm wont to say, a butterfly garden is just a singles bar for butterflies). While mated females may not have time to lay all of their eggs, the caterpillars that do result have ample resources, and the same conditions that keep butterflies from flying also keep caterpillar predators and parasites grounded. The end result is that, despite the abundant rains, butterfly populations have the capacity to stay pretty stable.

After the rain stops is a whole other story…remember last year?

Can you say "Snout"? I knew you could…

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