

Too Many Snouts... & Other Grass-Feeding Butterflies



Left: Queen, *Danaus gilippus*, at KR Bluestem, 29/X/2006; Top right: Buckeye, *Junonia coenia*, at KR Bluestem, 13/XI/2006; Bottom right: Mestra, *Mestra amymone*, at Green Sprangletop, 22/XI/2006

A couple of year ago I wrote a short piece for the News of the Lepidopterists' Society to fill some empty space. The piece was about some observations of a Mestra and some Danaid butterflies seeming to feed at ripe fruits of the nasty coastal sandbur grass. Since I could find little literature about this phenomenon, I hypothesized that the butter-

flies were visiting the grass looking for chemicals from a rust fungus infecting the seedheads.

Since then I've heard from a number of people who have seen a variety of butterflies visiting many different species of grasses. Recently, Larry Gilbert told me of seeing Snouts and other species visiting grasses at Chaparral Wildlife Management Area north of Laredo and he suggested that when other nectar resources become scarce, as in an outbreak of Snouts, grass flowers/fruits become the only nectar sources available.

When I returned from the Texas Butterfly Festival this year, I was amazed at how many Snouts—and other “tag-alongs”—had inundated the Lost Pines in my absence. Almost immediately I noticed that the vast bulk of the numbers of Snouts had settled into the North Meadow at the Biology Station, an area of “clay pan” with typical characteristics of Blackland Prairie despite the presence of an alien invasive grass.

In fact, the Snouts, and a few other species, were visiting the flowers/fruits of the invader, KR (King Ranch) Bluestem, *Bothriochloa ischaemum*, in large numbers. “At last,” I thought, “a use for the KR...what could be more appropriate than an invader feeding on another invader!” On October 28 and 29, I photographed Snouts, a few Buckeyes and a Queen feeding at the grass heads. On November 18, almost a month after their arrival (!), I estimated (crudely but, I think, effectively) that there were some 66,000 Snouts in the roughly 3 acres of KR Bluestem.

Extending the estimate, with the assumption that the density of Snouts on other grasses was only one-half of that on the bluestem, to the entire meadow system (approx. 19 acres) here at the Station, yields a rough estimate of about 190,000 Snouts (and this doesn't take into account the thousands of Snouts associated with the co-dominant Post Oaks occupying about two-thirds of the other 185 or so acres!). Finally, on November 22, I photographed a Mestra—the species that had started these “grass-feeder” observations in 2003—visiting and probing the spikes of Green Sprangletop, *Leptochloa dubia*.

What goes around, comes around, eh?