



# Heard it through the Pipevine



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Aug  
2005

Newsletter of the Austin Butterfly Forum Inc. • [www.austinbutterflies.org](http://www.austinbutterflies.org)

*Our annual "July 4th" count was absolutely fantastic this year, despite the drought. Read about the highlights in Dan Hardy's count report. Jim Brock makes another appearance for us, this time here in the newsletter, where he answers the question, "Why Caterpillars?" Finally, we so enjoyed our last article on the Mexican Silver-spot that we're instituting a new column, "Butterfly of the Month." Coby and Dan start us out.*

## Club Meeting

**Monday July 25, 7:00 pm**  
Zilker Botanical Garden Center

UT graduate student **Peg Wallace** will present a program titled, "**Urban Dung Beetles - Nature's Recyclers in our Parks and Backyards.**"

Come learn about the taxonomy, ecology and life history of dung beetles. Peg Wallace has been studying the dung beetles that recycle doggy doo and has been compiling a list of other kinds of dung beetles found in the Austin area. In this presentation she'll share what she has learned and tell us why she does this research.

## Membership Policy Change

Beginning this month, club membership has changed from rolling renewal to calendar year renewal. For the rest of 2005, the dues will be prorated quarterly. Join during July-Sept. and the dues are \$10. In Oct. they drop to \$5. Come Jan. 2006, members can renew for \$20.



Spicebush caterpillar (D. Hardy)

## Butterfly of the Month: Spicebush Swallowtail

*by Coby Dinges & Dan Hardy*

The marriage between butterfly and hostplant is the key to the biology of butterflies. This pair is a perfect illustration. Find one and expect the other. Plant spicebush and you may get the butterfly; find the butterfly, and the hostplant will be nearby.

Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) is the favorite host-plant of the Spicebush Swallowtail (*Papilio troilus*). In central Texas it grows in very specific habitats along spring-fed creeks and tributaries as an understory tree. You'll find it at WestCave Preserve, Hamilton Pool Preserve and at St. Edward's Park. Spicewood Springs Road is named for the plant that grows in the Bull Creek watershed.

For the individual interested in attracting the Spicebush Swallowtail, growing the tree is fairly easy as long as you give it plenty of water, make sure the soil isn't too heavy (such as too much clay), and provide some shade, especially in the afternoon. Setting the pot in a saucer of water works quite well to keep the tree hydrated.

[SPICEBUSH continued on page 3...]

# Why Caterpillars?

by Jim Brock

I really enjoyed giving my caterpillar presentation to the Austin Butterfly Forum last May. The audience was enthusiastic, knowledgeable and had excellent questions. I speak frequently but one question that never seems to get asked of me is "Why caterpillars?" Well, I like a good mystery. Let me explain.

In the world of Lepidoptera there are literally thousands of species whose caterpillars are still undescribed with the majority of these having never been yet seen by human eyes. In other words, there are a lot of mysteries to be solved out there. For many people mysteries are compelling. Indeed, some spend their lifetimes searching for answers, or trying to solve puzzles or crimes. For me, searching for caterpillars and identifying new host plants is a most rewarding pastime. I don't really feel that I know a butterfly very well until I have seen its caterpillar sitting on its host plant. Fortunately, most North American Lepidoptera can be found and their host plants identified with time, effort, and a keen set of eyes.

There are, however, a few species that can be difficult to find for various reasons. It may be their location on the host, the type of host, feeding habits, etc. Rarity can be a problem in some cases, which brings me to the Chisos Skipperling (*Piruna hafernicki*). This is one of the rarest resident skippers north of Mexico. A real Texas specialty! There aren't very many folks around that have seen the adults, and it's doubtful that any human has ever seen the caterpillar in the wild.

On my way to Austin in May I had a chance to meet up with Nick Grishin in Big Bend National Park. Nick, as some of you know, is studying the early stages of Big Bend's butterflies. Back in April of this year he reported finding a few adults of the elusive Chisos Skipperling. This tiny brown skipper has been on my "look for" list for years and in the back of my mind I had always thought it would be a tough find due to its rarity.

Nonetheless, we connected at the Chisos Basin campground Thursday night and spent two days getting acquainted, searching for caterpillars of various butterflies, talking bugs and the like. On Saturday afternoon we decided to go back down into Green Gulch. He, for host plant to feed hungry mouths and I, just to look at grasses to see if by a miracle I could find a young skipperling caterpillar. Most grass skipper caterpillars can be found three to four weeks following the adult flight.

Down at the bottom of the trail, I, with previous experience finding other skipperling caterpillars, began looking at potential grasses. It was dry but there was greenery amongst the dozen or so clumps of an unfamiliar grass (most grasses are unfamiliar!) growing in the shade of the numerous oak trees that crowd the gulch. I no sooner get on my knees when Nick (with less skipperling experience) kneels next to me and with eyes of an eagle spots a tiny aerial nest. In less than a half minute he finds two more on the same plant! This guy is good! With the search image of these tiny rolled nests we were able to find at least a dozen more within minutes, all about the same size and very concentrated into one area. It is hard to identify young skipper caterpillars to species at this small size since most are green with black heads. However, chances are good these are Chisos although there are potentially other grass-feeding skipper caterpillars here.

Then, not ten minutes later I found the nest of a larger-sized cat on the same grass. Nick comes over and there it is. For sure, a last instar Chisos Skipperling caterpillar sitting out on a leaf blade! Facial markings of skipperling caterpillars (genus *Piruna*) are very distinctive from other skipper genera so we knew what it was. Wow! Just like that we had confirmation of the caterpillar and a host plant for this cool little butterfly. I thought this species was going to be a real difficult one to find. For instance, it took nearly ten years to find Many-spotted Skipperling caterpillars in southeastern Arizona and in that case they were found following flights of extremely high abundance.

I can't tell you how elated I was at finding these caterpillars and getting the host. You just never know what you can find until you look. The grass is tentatively identified as a brome grass. What's especially gratifying is now under "Chisos Skipperling" in the Focus Guide, p. 300 we can cross out the word "unknown." Now I have a better feel for the bug and where the females choose to lay their eggs.

Mystery solved!

## In the next newsletter...

Last month's speakers David and Jan Dauphin have graciously written an article for us about their amazing yard in the Valley. Look forward to seeing the article in the Sep/Oct newsletter.

[... SPICEBUSH continued from page 1]

One thing worth mentioning is that the Spicebush Swallowtail can show up in areas where there are no wild Spicebush populations nearby. Coby planted the trees in far south Travis County and larvae have appeared 4 out of 6 years, so females appear to move from one area to another once suitable egg laying spots are used up. It may take a year or two for the butterfly to show up but it's worth the wait.

Multiple Spicebush plants have been planted at Zilker Botanical Garden and in the newly opened Dinosaur garden. For the first few years, there were no swallowtails. However, in 2004, some adult Spicebush Swallowtails wandered through, laid eggs, and there's now a thriving colony at the Garden.



Spicebush refugium (D. Hardy)

It's fun looking for the caterpillars. They build two types of nests, or refugia. The tiniest first stages fold the tip of the leaf into a triangle. They hide in the fold and come out at night and eat the basal-portion of the leaf. This process isolates a triangular fold at the leaf apex. Gently open the nest. There may be a small caterpillar inside (or a spider that has taken over an old refuge).

As the caterpillar grows, it folds a leaf lengthwise along the main vein. Once again it's easy to spot. Open it gently and one of the marvels of the caterpillar world appears: a green caterpillar with fake eyes mimicking a green snake.

## Thank you!

Thank you **Dan Hardy** for organizing and leading an amazing **4th of July Count!** The day was beautiful, the butterflies were numerous, and the turn out was fantastic — your arrangements were perfect on all fronts.

## 4th of July Count

*by Dan Hardy*

On Saturday, June 25, 13 members and friends of the Austin Butterfly Forum met in the parking lot of the Zilker Butterfly Garden for our annual attempt to count all the butterflies in a 15 mile diameter circle while avoiding heat stroke. The circle is centered on Mt. Bonnell and includes most of the hot spots in the city.

These counts are patterned on the famous Christmas Bird Counts. We had old and new faces. Everyone was eager, but I wondered what in the world we would be able to find on the heels of one of the driest Junes ever in Austin

Sally Breed had scouted the Garden the day before and she spent the entire morning counting there. The rest of us visited Zilker Botanical Garden; the Barton Creek Greenbelt at Barton Springs and 360; St. Edward's Park; Lower Bull Creek; and Wild Basin. We met for lunch at Schlotzsky's, and then a few of us continued until late afternoon.

We outdid ourselves by finding 52 species in Austin and 320 individuals. This is a record number of species for the count! Buttonbushes were the main nectar source at all of the sites. Polydamas Swallowtails were at the butterfly garden, undoubtedly releases from the batch that Marvin Lewis raises in the greenhouse. We found three adults and one caterpillar of the Laviana White-Skipper, a formerly rare butterfly this far north. Zebra Longwings were common along the creeks. Two California Sisters were found on the greenbelt. A gorgeous male Zabulon Skipper was right beside the path at St. Edward's Park.

Please see the web site for a full tally of the counters and the counted:

[www.austinbutterflies.org/Counts](http://www.austinbutterflies.org/Counts)

## Upcoming Events

*We keep a calendar of upcoming events on the [austinbutterflies.org](http://austinbutterflies.org) web site. Please visit the site to learn of changes and new additions.*

**Mon Jul 25 - Club Meeting.** See details in box at front of newsletter

**Mon Aug 22 - Club Meeting.** Krushnamegh Kunte will present on "Costa Rican Butterflies."

*Please submit newsletter events, corrections, and suggestions to the editor, Joe Lapp:*

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## Austin Butterfly Forum Membership Form

Become a member or renew your membership.

Your membership helps support our club activities, but members also receive bimonthly **newsletters** with upcoming events and informative articles, **butterfly plants** that we often give away, and **discounts** on books, T-shirts and more.

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Daytime phone:</b>
<b>Street:</b>	<b>Evening phone:</b>
<b>City:</b> <b>State:</b> <b>Zip:</b>	<b>Email:</b>

Membership is \$20 annually per household, due each January and prorated thereafter.  
Make check payable to the Austin Butterfly Forum and send to:

ABF c/o Doris Hill, 1605 Broadmoor Drive, Austin, TX 78723