

# Critters in Our Backyard: Schaus Swallowtail Butterfly

by Carol Ellis



In 2020, my friend and naturalist Bunny Bradov spotted a rare butterfly in my garden. She dashed to her car to get her GPS and notepad, and I kept track of its movements. It was a Bahamian Swallowtail butterfly, attracted to the wild lime and wild coffee plants in my yard.

A garden brings you closer to nature, as you breathe in fresh air and exhale that which no longer serves you. After my experience with Bunny, I found myself in the garden not only while contemplating my morning coffee, but also random times of day, checking on the birds, but-



terflies, and other critters residing or passing through. My definition of "weed" changed to "native nectar providing plant" for a White Peacock butterfly.

After seeing the Bahamian Swallowtail, I signed up for the annual Schaus Swallowtail butterfly survey which takes place in the refuges of N. Key Largo each Spring and Summer.

The Schaus Swallowtail (*Papilio aristodemus ponceanus*) is one of the rarest butterflies in the United States and has been listed as an endangered species by the State of Florida and the federal government since 1975. It once ranged from the Miami Hammocks to Lower Matecumbe Key, and there are some records that it had been seen on Key West. Today it is found only on northern Key Largo and several small Keys in Biscayne National Park.

In 1984, numbers sank to an all-time low, when an estimated 70 or fewer adults were left in the wild. Stud-

In 1984, numbers sank to an all-time low, when an estimated 70 or fewer adults were left in the wild.

The Schaus Swallowtail (*Papilio aristodemus ponceanus*) is one of the rarest butterflies in the United States and has been listed as an endangered species by the State of Florida and the federal government since 1975.

ies showed that Monroe County Mosquito Control District spraying pesticides was the chief factor contributing to the rapid decline of the species.

January 1991 Mosquito Control stopped spraying the hammocks of N. Key Largo. In 1991 and 1992 the populations rebounded. Unfortunately August 1992 Hurricane Andrew passed over the Upper Keys and Biscayne Bay and did great damage due to high winds and 4-10 ft storm surge covering Elliott Key for at least an hour. Luckily the National Park Service and the State had authorized the removal of 100 eggs from wild females on Elliott Key just 2 months prior, to start a captive breeding program at UF with the intention of reintroducing them into the wild.

Each Spring, volunteers begin entering the hammocks to record sitings of the butterfly, and report back to researchers. If it is dry, chances are low for seeing a

Schaus. Schaus' pupa can remain inside their hard shelled cocoon for up to three years, until the environmental conditions are right, before emerging.



My definition of "weed" changed to "native nectar providing plant" for a White Peacock butterfly.

North Key Largo generally receives more rainfall, than "downtown" Key Largo. Since I live in "uptown" northern Key Largo, close to the refuges and prime Schaus' habi-

## Schaus Swallowtail CONTINUED



Linda Evans started butterflying in 2004 after one of her dental hygiene patients asked her to put signs in front of the butterfly plants at Fairchild Tropical Gardens, where she was driving the tram. She's been involved ever since.

To survey in the summer heat with mosquitos, it takes some pretty hearty souls, with backgrounds as diverse as the plant community, yet all come with a passion and curiosity for nature. Linda Evans started butterflying in 2004 after one of her dental hygiene patients asked her to put signs in front of the butterfly plants at Fairchild Tropical Gardens, where she was driving the tram. She's been involved ever since.

tat, the group asked me to share daily rainfall totals, to better predict when the Schaus butterflies would emerge. Schaus are particularly dependent on precipitation. They lay their eggs on Torchwood (*Amyris elemifera*) and on Wild Lime (*Zanthoxylum fagara*). Abundant rainfall ensures there is enough new growth for the caterpillars to feed on.

Butterfly surveyors get all "aflutter" when they think they've spotted their prize. This year, Bunny and I were surveying at Crocodile Lake NWR, when we spied a swallowtail on a native plant, but this time it is a Giant Swallowtail butterfly, a common species. Only Schaus and Bahamian Swallowtails are logged with GPS and time spotted, but all butterfly species are counted in the survey report.



A Bahamian Swallowtail butterfly, attracted to the wild coffee plants in my yard. Its wings were slightly tattered.

To learn more about our butterflies, or provide support, check out the Miami Blue Chapter of the NABA. (<https://miamiblue.org/>)



Giant Swallowtail butterfly, a common species.

"It's a full-circle community conservation effort," Crocodile Lake NWR refuge manager Jeremy Dixon said. "We have volunteers going out collecting seeds, growing the plants (Pennekamp nursery) and then planting them for the very butterflies they're doing surveys for."

Planting native plants such as Torchwood and Wild Lime for the Schaus population is good management for the refuges, but it can also be a common sense approach for a home garden too, as we live in a world of dwindling natural spaces. The "right plant, in the right

CAROL ELLIS has lived in South Florida her entire life and Key Largo for 37 years.

Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.



place" will thrive in your garden without costly chemicals or special maintenance.

A garden is one of the few things in life you can control... somewhat... depending on the wind. In the last five years, a trend of concern involves companies promoting spraying services to create an "all kill" zone in people's yards. If you are trying to manage butterfly populations, and a butterfly cannot fly through someone's yard without getting killed, that's a problem.



Gardening with wildlife in mind, can be a common sense approach for a home garden, as we live in a world of dwindling natural spaces. Wildlife need access to food, water, cover and places to raise their young.