

Profile

Brazilian Skipper

Calpododes ethlius

The Brazilian Skipper butterfly is a brownish medium size skipper. Females are from 1-3/4 to 2-1/4 inches in length while the male is smaller.

Forewings are narrow and pointed in a rich warm brown except for five translucent spots. Hind wings are a little darker than the forewings and have three translucent spots arranged in almost a straight line. Their heads are broad and have the large eyes typical of most skipper species.

Adult Brazilian Skipper butterflies are strong, fast fliers that dart around and can usually only be studied while they pause to nectar at flowering plants.

In South Florida, adults are usually present throughout the year but most noticeably in the fall. They can have three broods during the season.

Because Alligator Flag is the primary larval host plant in Corkscrew, they will almost always be found where Alligator Flag is growing.

The life cycle of the butterflies, especially in their caterpillar stages, is what draws most visitor questions.

The female Brazilian Skipper lays eggs singly or in widely spaced groups of five to seven eggs on the upper and lower surfaces of the Thalia leaves. The eggs are pale green in color when first deposited and become pinkish-white in about a day. Eggs hatch quickly.

The egg shell is the first meal for the newly emerged caterpillar and provides vital nutrients for the first instar caterpillar. The nutrients in the shell meal are essential for the caterpillar's survival and it might die if deprived of them.

The first instar larva emerges after four or five days in Florida summer conditions and is approximately 4 mm in length and yellowish in color. Its head is very large, black, and glossy.

After consuming most of its egg shell, the larva moves to the margin of the leaf where it eats two narrow strips from the margin of the leaf towards the

center, producing a leaf flap. The larva then fastens silken strands between the outer edge of the leaf flap and the main portion of the leaf.

As the silk shrinks or condenses as it dries, the leaf flap is drawn over the caterpillar, making a flattened tubular shelter with exits at either end.

These are the cuts and pockets in the leaves that visitors ask about.

The larva keeps the majority of its body within the leaf roll, only extending its head to feed. The leaf roll is protection from predators and protection from direct sun.

The first instar molts to the next stage after about three days.

The caterpillars grow huge and plump quickly. The last of the next four instars can measure 2-1/2 to 3 inches in length.

The second through fourth instars have a dark brown, almost black head and a dark green body that is semi-transparent. The larvae appear dark green because of the leaf material within their guts. There is a white stripe on each side of the body that runs the length of the body.

The fifth and final instar has an orange head. It consumes most of the leaf around its leaf roll. As it outgrows the previous roll, it moves on to another

area of the leaf where it creates a new and bigger leaf roll.

Larvae have an interesting behavior of flicking away frass so that their leaf roll remains free of pellets; the frass accumulates far below on the ground or in the water.

One theory about the frass removal is that it may reduce discovery by parasites and predators, which often use the odor and sight of frass as clues to the potential presence of prey. However, cardinals, titmice, and Prothonotary Warblers are on to the trick and will rip the leaf rolls apart looking for meals.

The larva feeds voraciously during the final, fifth instar stage. As it prepares for pupation, the larva ceases feeding and empties its gut of leaf material. It shortens in length and becomes bright bluish green. This stage lasts from one to eight days in Corkscrew, depending on the ambient temperature.

The larva pupates within its leaf roll after first having spun a thin silken mat covering the "floor" of its shelter.

The chrysalis is blue to start but fades to a less noticeable

shade. It has a pronounced black spine at the anterior end.

The pupal stage lasts seven to eight days in warm Florida temperatures before the butterfly emerges.

