

# Ruddy Daggerwing

*Marpesia petreus*

The Ruddy Daggerwing is one of Corkscrew's most common and most colorful summer butterflies. Also called the Southern Daggertail, and in the West Indies the Tailed Flambeau, its range is from Brazil north through Central America and Mexico, and from the West Indies north to southern Florida. Occasionally some stray north to a few states in the Southwest and the Great Plains.

The Ruddy Daggerwing flies in Florida for most of the year but is most commonly seen from May through July. It is in the brush-footed family and its closest relatives are the Admirals.

Although in flight it might be mistaken for a Julia, the Ruddy Daggerwing is easily identifiable: its wingspread is about three inches, the tip of its forewing is elongated, the hindwing has long dagger-like tails, its topside is bright orange with three thin black lines, and its underside is mottled brown and black. When perched with wings closed, it closely resembles a dead leaf.

It inhabits tropical lowland forests and edges and hardwood hammocks. Its larval (caterpillar) host plant in Corkscrew is the Strangler Fig (*Ficus aurea*), so from the boardwalk it is most frequently seen in the cypress forest. Elsewhere, it will also use the Common Fig

(*F. carica*) and wild Banyan tree (*F. citrifolia*).

Although the caterpillars feed almost exclusively on

fig leaves, adult butterflies are more generalist feeders, nectaring at milkweed, Climbing Hempweed, and Cabbage Palm and feeding on rotting figs and other fruits.

When it's time for mating, male Ruddy Daggerwings perch in sunlit trees about 15-30 feet above ground level and watch for passing females. During this time, males are territorial and frequently fly down from their perches to investigate anything that is bright orange.

After mating, females search for suitable Strangler Figs on which to lay eggs. The initial contact is usually visual, based on leaf shape or other clues such as the presence of figs.

The female lands on the plant and tastes or smells it with the chemical sensors on her feet. If she finds the plant suitable, she will lay single eggs on stems near emerging leaves or on young fruit. Eggs typically hatch within a few days after being laid and the small larva



begin to feed. In South Florida, there are usually three broods a year.

New Ruddy Daggerwing caterpillars lack the bright triangular patches of older caterpillars and are well camouflaged on leaf stems and twigs. They have enormous appetites and grow rapidly. To accommodate their rapid growth, each larva sheds its skin several times, and the appearance of the larva changes slightly after each molt.

When fully grown, larva seek a sheltered place on a Strangler Fig, attach to a leaf or twig, and molt into the pupa. When the butterfly emerges, it unfolds and dries its wings and is ready to begin the cycle anew.



## Life Cycle of the Ruddy Daggerwing Butterfly

- (1) egg laid on young Strangler Fig fruit, (2) emergent caterpillar, (3) caterpillar after intermediate molt, (4) final stage of caterpillar, (5) pupa on underside of Thalia leaf, (6) butterfly emerging from cocoon

