

Raising Orchard Swallowtail (*Papilio aegeus*) Caterpillars –

Paul Klicin

In a previous issue we explored raising the Common Crow caterpillar along with some of my own detailed findings regarding raising them on a new host plant. Another common and popular butterfly is the Orchard Swallowtail.



The Orchard Swallowtail's distribution is quite widespread and abundant across Australia.

The Orchard Swallowtail caterpillar is commonly found on citrus trees so if you have an orange, lemon, mandarin or lime tree or similar growing in your backyard you can almost be sure that, at some time or another, the Orchard Swallowtail butterfly has probably

visited your citrus plant to lay its eggs. If you don't yet have one, do yourself a favour and go and visit your local nursery and buy one. Unfortunately, sometimes people think of these caterpillars as pests as they are eating the leaves of their citrus and don't realise that they will turn into magnificent butterflies, so often they will kill or remove them. Unless you have a small citrus tree with only a few leaves on it, it is highly unlikely that a few caterpillars will defoliate your citrus tree or cause significant damage. Try leaving them or, better still, try hand raising them. Often when wandering through plant nurseries, I have come across Orchard Swallowtail caterpillars on citrus trees and often, unfortunately, these trees have been sprayed with poison which leads to almost certain death of the caterpillars. Eventually, this poison wears off and the tree will also sprout fresh new leaves, on which butterflies love to lay eggs. Unfortunately, a local nursery close to where I live goes as far as removing the caterpillars and feeding them to their resident water dragons! I think finding a caterpillar on your citrus is actually a bonus and I'd be more likely to buy a citrus tree if it had caterpillars on it, not the other way around, as I get to have fruit and butterflies.

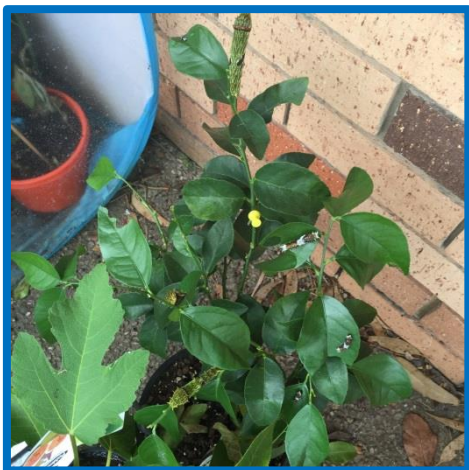
I never seem to find more than two or three eggs or caterpillars on a single citrus tree as the butterfly tends to lay only an egg or two at a time to spread the risk of losses due to parasites or other predators, such as spiders and wasps.

I found that hand raising these little beauties in a container was just as successful as raising them on a live plant in an enclosure. However, raising them on a live citrus plant is less maintenance as you don't have to keep cleaning the enclosure every day. Nor do you have to make sure they have a constant supply of fresh food. On the other hand, when raising them in a container you can keep a closer eye on them as you watch them grow, and grow fast they do. As they get big you will need to make sure you keep the food up to them more regularly, as often, overnight, they will run out of food.





These enclosures are ideal in which to keep live potted plants, along with your hungry caterpillars. These are available through club contacts.



Free range caterpillars feeding on a variety of lime tree. There are seven Orchard Swallowtail caterpillars in this photo. Can you find them all? Free ranging (as I call it) on a live plant is a great way to raise your caterpillars into spectacular butterflies.



How cool is this little guy just newly hatched from its egg? You might be able to see the hole in the egg where he chewed his way out. Can you see the black spot on the other egg? That is another caterpillar about to enter the world.

A camouflage characteristic of the Orchard Swallowtail is that it looks a little like a bird dropping (if you have ever taken a really close look at bird droppings that is!).



This caterpillar is having his first meal chowing down on some tasty egg shell.

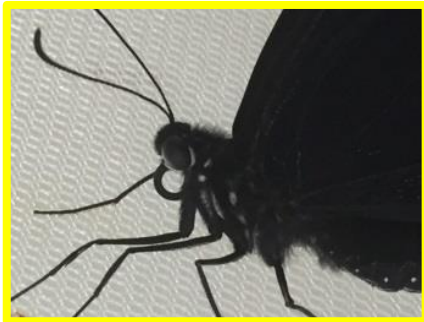




Various growth stages of caterpillars are called instars where the caterpillar outgrows its skin, then sheds it. It will often eat its own dead skin. These stages or instars often result in the caterpillar taking on a different look or colour like these two guys (or girls). Often the caterpillar will wander off and stop eating for a day or so away from the food plant (especially when hand-raised in a container). Try not to disturb them too much and don't worry, as they are usually only shedding their old skin.



The above is one of the largest Orchard Swallowtail caterpillars I have ever seen. Unfortunately, this guy failed to emerge from its chrysalis due to either being parasitised, or poisoned from eating contaminated leaves as previously mentioned. I was really looking forward to seeing the size of this butterfly, but it wasn't to be.

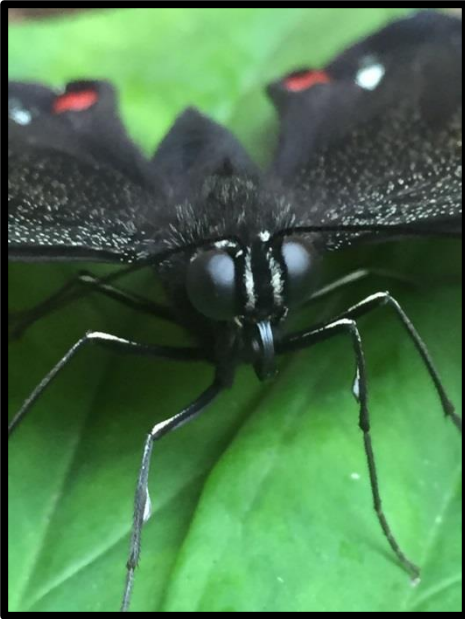


Close up of a curled up, or retracted, proboscis which is used for imbibing nectar from flowers.

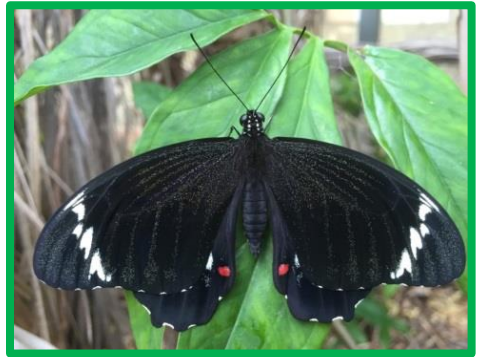


Orchard Swallowtail chrysalis. The colour may vary depending on the surface they decide to pupate on. If on a plant which is predominantly green, then the chrysalis often takes on a greener colour. This is a camouflage characteristic of the Orchard Swallowtail.





I'll be the first to admit that I think, up close, this Orchard Swallowtail butterfly takes on an almost alien appearance. Imagine if our sizes were reversed. I certainly wouldn't be hanging around to admire it for too long. Gives a new meaning to bug-eyed!



I managed to capture some nice photos after releasing this male Orchard Butterfly.

I thoroughly recommend raising these caterpillars as they are a lot of fun, and kids will just love them. They are a large butterfly, so I reckon they provide real bang for buck.

In a future issue: Raising Lesser Wanderers. If you have more questions or to see more, please go to <https://www.facebook.com/butterfliesandcaterpillars/> or <https://www.facebook.com/groups/187619097411/>

The Butterfly and Other Invertebrates Club (BOIC) tries to organize field trip outings for most months of the year and there is always a lot to see and learn, so come along if you can. Meanwhile.....happy bug-hunting.

Photos Paul Klicin

