Notes on the Grey Albatross (*Appias melania*) - *Garry Sankowsky*

Sometime in the 1970s I made a trip to Mt Spec (on the Paluma Range, north-west of Townsville) with a birding friend of mine and observed the Grey Albatross butterfly depositing eggs on what appeared to be a *Drypetes* plant. We were moving around quite a bit on that trip and I did not attempt to collect any eggs to breed them through.

In December of 1982 my wife (Nada) and I moved from Mt Tamborine to the Atherton Tablelands and purchased a block at Tolga. Logging operations were still in full swing in the rainforest and we visited a logging area on the Clohesy River, between Mareeba and Kuranda. Even though this is not a particularly high altitude site Grey Albatross butterflies were very common. Groups of males were observed gathering on the damp road near river crossings. We had seen huge numbers of butterflies doing this on previous occasions in the Good Night Scrub near Wallaville, south-west of Bundaberg, and had noticed that it was only males that do this.

My camera equipment was quite limited then but I managed to get a few pictures. At the Clohesy River there were several species on the damp road but mostly Grey Albatrosses. There were several kilometres of new logging roads to wander along and in one area I saw a female laying on a *Drypetes* plant that was different from the one at Mt Spec. I have always called this one *Drypetes* sp. Clohesy River and still consider it to be a separate species from any of the named ones. It occurs in low to mid altitude, well developed rainforest, from the Wet Tropics to Cape York.

Males of the Grey Albatross butterfly and other species "mud puddling".

Until we moved to north Queensland my main interest in collecting plants was to grow butterfly host plants but as we now had a two hectare property I expanded it to rainforest plants in general. Collecting propagating material from state forests was then very simple with a Minor Products licence and I started collecting a wide range of plants, including host plants, and planting up our block which is now a fully functional artificial rainforest.

Usually each summer there are migrations of Grey Albatross butterflies crossing over the Atherton Tableland, moving to and from the various mountain rainforests around us. For many years the butterflies just passed through but as our rainforest plantings became more mature many butterflies became permanent residents, spending the winter/dry season in our garden. I have observed that all Pieridae butterflies survive the winter/dry season as adults, resting most of the time but making short flights from time to time and taking nectar. It is only in very recent years that the Grey Albatross has done this.

Grey Albatross (*Appias melania*) male

The new growth of *Drypetes* develops very fast and the Albatross larvae do likewise. The whole larval stage only takes from seven to ten days.

Eggs of Grey Albatross

Grey Albatross larvae in various instars

As the larvae grow they gradually develop more defined markings.

Even though no eggs were laid on *Drypetes deplanchei*, the final instar larvae transferred to this plant when all the foliage of *Drypetes* sp. Clohesy River had been demolished.

I have only observed the Common Albatross pupating on the top side of leaves but the Grey Albatross larvae used both sides of the foliage.

The pupae showed a wide range of colour variation, unlike my observations with the Common Albatross.

Grey Albatross – pre-emergent pupa

After only about seven days the butterflies started to emerge from the pupae. This is similar to the Common Albatross situation.

◄ Grey Albatross – adult female

Grey Albatross - ► recently emerged male drying wings

How does one tell the difference between the two Albatross butterflies in the early stages?

From my observations one can't! I don't have a good series of images for the Common Albatross, just some old slide pictures so this is something to work on.

Common Albatross
Prepupal larva and pupa

Grey Albatross
Prepupal larva and pupae

Allowing for the variation in the Grey Albatross pupal colours, I don't think it is possible to distinguish between the two species.

Photos Garry Sankowsky

PLANT PROFILE

Drypetes sp. Clohesy River - Host plant for Grey Albatross -

Garry Sankowsky

Drypetes sp. Clohesy River is not recognised by botanists but when I first visited the Clohesy River logging area in 1983 I saw a Grey Albatross female laying on it and observed that this plant looked very different from the usual *Drypetes deplanchei* which occurs in 'dry rainforest' (vine thickets or hoop pine scrubs).

This is the plant most used by the Grey Albatross butterflies in our garden. The main reason is that the normal high altitude host plant *Drypetes acuminata* is difficult to grow and in our garden they do not flush with new growth as often or as well as the Clohesy River species.

It is a small to medium tree with some serrations on the juvenile leaves but these almost disappear on mature growth. It is found in rainforests of the Wet Tropics at low and mid altitudes as well as on Cape York Peninsula in very well developed rainforest.

Cluster of buds and flowers of *Drypetes* sp. Clohesy River

Drypetes sp. Clohesy River

Drypetes deplanchei in fruit

Drypetes deplanchei juvenile foliage

Drypetes acuminata – the most common host plant of the Grey Albatross, restricted to high altitude rainforest
Photos Garry Sankowsky

ITEMS OF INTEREST

Tale of a Tailed Spider – *Densey Clyne*

It was just a string of debris caught on a bit of spider web on an azalea bush in my garden. Or was it? There was something about it that warranted a closer look.

We've all had the experience in nature where something of no significance suddenly takes on a meaningful shape as a living thing. A twig among twigs becomes a stick-insect; a waterlily bud becomes the head of a tortoise taking a breath; a pattern of light and shade above us becomes a brightly plumaged bird. You wonder how you could have failed to see the obvious.

My double-take was prompted by a hint of symmetry in what my eyes had simply passed over. Now a close look showed that the 'debris', caught on a strand of spider silk, was too regularly spaced to be accidental. It formed a series of eight elongated bulges or bumps, light brown in colour, strung along an upper radial thread or spoke of a small, finely woven orb web. I recognised the bulges then as a spider's eggsacs, disguised with fragments of dead leaf. So where and what was the spider?

The upper segments of the web immediately to the right and left of the eggsacs were free of the spiralling thread except at the hub where it was complete for a few rounds.