



NOTE

***Coeliades libeon* Druce, 1875 (Lepidoptera: Hesperiiidae) – A rare migrant?**

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OBSERVATIONS

On 5 March 2016, the author and his wife Anne were working in tall forest along a track at the Haven, on the Transkei Wild Coast, when a large black Skipper settled on a nearby leaf. It was initially assumed to be a *Borbo fatuellus fatuellus* (Hopffer, 1955), but as it was in good condition, the specimen was caught for the record. The author was taken aback when he found that it was a recently-emerged male of *Coeliades libeon* Druce, 1875. This is the southernmost record for the species to date.

The author had struggled for many years to find this insect. His first two specimens were taken on the flowers of a large bramble bush in the forest at Mariepskop in Mpumalanga in April 1975. After remaining there for the next two days, hoping to find others, he briefly saw another before it disappeared into the forest. Another 26 years were to pass before he caught the next specimen, a worn male in Dlinza Forest at Eshowe in April 2001. Then, in April 2005, came the astonishing news that the butterfly was out in numbers at Port St Johns. The author and his wife rushed there, and were greeted by the breath-taking sight of tens of thousands of these butterflies everywhere, and in all the adjacent forests the whole way to Embotyi. There appeared to be no general drift of specimens in any particular direction, although at times groups would appear to move together for a short period. Phone calls to collectors living on the KwaZulu-Natal coastline revealed that there was no evidence of the species anywhere north of Pondoland.

DISCUSSION

It would appear that, throughout its range, this species is known to be widespread but rare, though occasionally found in great numbers – as is the case in South Africa. Swanepoel (1953) found it in great numbers one year at the end of January in the streets of Pietersburg (now Polokwane). Pennington, in Pringle, *et al.* (1994) referred to “migrations”, and in

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September 1957 saw hundreds “moving in a westerly direction” along the banks of the Buzi River in Zimbabwe. Kroon, in Pringle, *et al.* (1994) noted that the butterfly was plentiful at Mount Selinda in May 1971. Similarly, Larsen (1991) noted that it is widespread in Kenya, but not at all common, and “often decidedly rare”. He notes that local abundance occurs there from time to time and states that this “may be linked to the fact that it is migratory”.

Larsen (2005) also noted a similar situation for West Africa, where it is also widespread but rare, and that “during the current research programme the species was met with only twice, when C. Olory caught dozens at two localities in Okwangwo in late January and early February 1996, indicating an outbreak and a possible migration.” This thought was also reflected by Jan Kielland (1990) for Tanzania, where he stated that the “species is migratory.” Henning *et al.* (1997) agreed, stating that “*C. libeon* is well-known as a migrant having been recorded migrating regularly in eastern and central Africa and in Zimbabwe by Pennington in 1957”. Heath *et al.* (2002) record it as “widespread in wooded habitats across the northern half of Zambia”, although Heath informed the author (pers. comm.) that, having found it in vast numbers near the Lisombu River in June 1974, he himself never saw it again anywhere else in Zambia during the entire period that he worked there.

During the three days spent observing *libeon* at Port St Johns, for quite long periods most individuals would move in the same direction, giving the appearance of a migratory movement. However, on the following day, or sometimes later even on the same day, the direction of movement would change, and quite often they would move in the opposite direction. Enquiries made at the time with collectors living on the KwaZulu-Natal coast revealed no evidence of the species anywhere north of Pondoland, and the author failed to find it further to the south, towards East London. It was therefore evident that the population had remained static within the forest belt in Pondoland, where repeated records have over time shown it to be a resident species (for example, see Quickleberge's records in Pringle *et al.* [1994]). In this instance there was a large population explosion, but though the population undoubtedly drifted rather aimlessly between the forests of this region, it never moved beyond them.

On the basis of these observations, the author believes that the assumptions that this species is an occasional migrant need to be re-examined. Truly migratory species move in a concerted manner in a single direction for considerable distances, in an attempt to avoid adverse climatic conditions, or to colonise new areas. In all the observations made concerning the movements of this species, no evidence has been given of any such population shift. Instead, all records indicate that this species follows the same pattern throughout its range: thinly-scattered, widespread populations with periodic localised population explosions, accompanied by limited population drift around these explosions. One suspects that other *Coeliades* species, such as *C. anchises anchises* (Gernstaecker, 1871), follow the same pattern, though not as dramatically.

It is known that odd individuals of *Coeliades* move great distances at times, to turn up in unlikely places, such as the single specimen of *Coeliades sejuncta* (Mabille & Vuillot, 1891) that was recorded at Mount Darwin in Zimbabwe in May 1985 (Pringle *et al.* 1994: 310), or the male specimen of *Coeliades forestan forestan* (Stoll, 1782) which the author found in his garden at Huntly Glen. But this should not be taken to indicate migratory habits, which involve concerted movements of virtually entire populations.

Throughout its considerable range, *C. libeon* rather maintains small, widely scattered populations, which will not be readily observed in their forest habitats. The species is not conspicuous, and is easily misidentified as one of the commoner *Borbo* species. If the specimen at the Haven had not been captured, it would definitely have been overlooked. These rare individuals can build up into the sporadic large-scale population explosions of the species which are observed from time to time. When normality is restored, probably as a result of larval deaths, and the species becomes largely invisible again. This underscores the importance of single records for assessing the actual distribution of the species, because it probably indicates the southern limit of its distribution. Nevertheless, further records are needed to confirm this hypothesis, in order to eliminate the possibility of single stray specimens, as discussed above.

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