

NABA Butterfly Park

The original idea for a butterfly park arose in 1994 on a butterflying trip I was leading to the Lower Rio Grande Valley. We visited a site owned by the Oblate Order of the Catholic Church in Mission, Texas, not far from the Rio Grande. A very beautiful and graceful old building, in disrepair, stood on the site, which was not being used. The grounds, although mainly lawns, had many butterflies. I thought, wow, this could be a butterfly park. We drove to the Mission Chamber of Commerce and introduced ourselves to the woman who greeted us there. Her name was Viola Espinosa (see photo on page 53) and miraculously, she was interested in the idea of a butterfly park!

Over the next six months, we explored using the property as a butterfly park. For a number of reasons we were unable to move forward to acquire the land and, in fact, the Church still owns this property. But Viola kept the idea alive. A few years later, Texas Parks and Wildlife began a project it calls the “World Birding Center.” The project was originally conceived as a big project at one site (it eventually evolved into a project encompassing many sites throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley), and the cities of the Lower Rio Grande Valley put forth proposals as to why Texas Parks and Wildlife should locate the facility in their city. At the same time, a developer was putting in place a major housing development in the City of Mission and, as part of the development plan, offered to donate a site for the World Birding Center. Viola, now CEO of the Mission Chamber of Commerce, suggested to the developer that he consider also helping to create NABA Butterfly Park. He was interested and so I flew down to the Valley the next day. I took him out butterflying and, luckily, butterflies were everywhere. He was sold.

Because the developers wanted to ensure that the Butterfly Park was actually created,
2 *American Butterflies*, Spring/Summer 2007

they agreed to donate 82 acres of land to us if we were able to raise \$500,000. This was difficult, but we were able to succeed, in no small part because of the generous donations of hundreds of NABA members. We took title to the land, in use as agricultural fields for 100 years, in July 2002. We soon hired Dr. Sue Sill as Executive Director and over the past five years have created a two acre demonstration garden replete with palapas and now, a comfort station.

NABA International Butterfly Park is already a wonderful place to see and learn about butterflies. Because the gardens at the Butterfly Park are intensively cultivated, with native plant beds that are weeded, watered and cut back when appropriate, the native plant species in the Butterfly Park, chosen for their importance to butterflies as caterpillar foodplants or as nectar sources, grow vigorously, flower frequently and produce more nectar than do the same species of plants growing elsewhere in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The result is a paradise for butterflies. I, and others, think it is fair to say that over the past few years, NABA International Butterfly Park has become the premier spot to see butterflies in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. On October 28, 2006 ninety-six species of butterflies were seen at the Park. I believe that this is a one day high count for a single location within the United States.

However, despite the welcoming clouds of butterflies present throughout most of the year at NABA Butterfly Park, we are still a long way from reaching our dream – making NABA Butterfly Park the world’s premier center for education, conservation and scientific research on wild butterflies — but, we are poised to clear the next hurdles.

continued on inside back cover