

Lifestyles of the Scaled and Beautiful: Goatweed and Tropical Leafwings

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Perhaps the title of this installment would be better as “Lifestyles of the Weird and Wonderful” but I’ll let you decide. After reading this I’m sure that you’ll agree that, even compared to some of their close relatives, the life histories of these two butterflies include some rather odd and unique characteristics that truly do make them both weird and wonderful.

The Goatweed and Tropical Leafwings, are sister species that are very similar in many aspects. They both use only species of the largely tropical plant genus *Croton* (Euphorbiaceae or Spurge Family) as caterpillar hosts. You may have a typically multi-colored leafy *Croton* in your houseplant collection. They also share unusual caterpillar anti-predator defenses including building and resting on frass chains when small and resting inside rolled leaf shelters when larger. They also have very similar adult behavior patterns that include being strongly territorial; rarely visiting flowers, preferring instead such delicacies as tree sap, over-ripe or rotting fruit and dung.

The Goatweed Leafwing is the more

widely distributed of the two species, commonly occurring from southeast Arizona, east to Georgia and northern Florida, north to Illinois, and west to southern Nebraska and eastern Colorado. In some years, however, their range may expand on both their western and eastern boundaries and they can venture as far north as southern Ontario, South Dakota



*Above: A Tropical Leafwing chrysalis.
Dec. 6, 2006. NABA Park.*

*Left: The Head of late-instar Tropical Leafwing caterpillar inside its rolled leaf shelter.
Dec. 4, 2005. NABA Park.*



The beautiful topside of a Tropical Leafwing. Note that tails appear to be useful anti-predator devices! Dec. 4, 2006. Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, Hidalgo Co., TX.

and Wyoming. In contrast, the range of the Tropical Leafwing, as the name might suggest, is more restricted. It is found commonly only in south Texas though it is not unusual to encounter one in southeastern Arizona, southern New Mexico and west Texas.

The butterflies of these two species are quite similar in appearance. Typically, the Tropical Leafwing has a supplementary “tail” between the obvious tail and the outer angle of the wing, with two prominent black spots—one at the tail and the second between the tail and the supplementary tail. They may be mostly orange, brown, tan or grey on the undersides but never stray very far from similar cryptic patterns. Goatweed Leafwings lack the supplementary “tail” and usually have

only a single black spot, typically above the obvious tail, or, at most, two weakly expressed spots. Both species are brilliant orange-red on the upperside with varying amounts of black and both pairs of wings are often edged with purple-white in the Tropical, more commonly purple-black in the Goatweed.

As you might expect, the most common hostplant of the Goatweed Leafwing, often called goatweed though it is perhaps better known as woolly croton, *Croton capitatus*, is the most widely distributed species of its genus in the temperate regions of North America. Other crotons that I have seen caterpillars on in central Texas include bush croton or encinilla, *C. fruticulosus*, skunkweed or Texas croton, *C. texensis*, and doveweed or