

A NEW LARVAL HOST PLANT, *FICUS RACEMOSA*, OF THE COPPER FLASH BUTTERFLY *RAPALA PHERETIMA* (HEWITSON, 1863) FROM ASSAM, INDIA

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Introduction

Rapala pheretima (Hewitson, 1863), the Copper Flash, is a common Asian Lycaenid with a known distribution from Uttarakhand along the Himalaya to N.E. India and southwards to Sumatra and Borneo. The flat woodlouse-like caterpillars of many species have specialized secretory organs to attract and reward ants of various species in return for the protection that they receive from the ants (Kehimkar, 2016). *Rapala pheretima* is known to have a similar relation with adults of the weaver ant *Oecophylla smaragdina* (Fabricius, 1775) (Formicidae) during its larval stage. *R. pheretima* is also known to be polyphagous, with the caterpillars having been bred on a variety of host plants belonging to different families. Some of the known host plants are *Mangifera indica*, *Pithecellobium jiringa*, *Aganopethysiflora*, *Vigna unguiculata*, *Eugenia aquea*, *Syzygium fruticosum*, *Syzygium zeylanicum*, *Averrhoa carambola*, *Macadamia integrifolia*, *Dimocarpus longan*, *Lepisanthes rubiginosa*, *Litchi chinensis*, *Nephelium lappaceum* and *Shorea sumatrana* in different parts of its range (Robinson et al., 2001).

Material and methods

An opportunistic observation was carried out on 27 January 2019 at the author's address in Gangmouthan of

Biswanath district of Assam, India (26° 46.243'N, 093° 18.778'E) following the discovery of a single final instar Lycaenid caterpillar (fig. 1) attached to a fallen leaf of *Ficus racemosa* Linn. (Moraceae) (fig. 2). The caterpillar was brought to my attention by my father, Mr. Kishor Kafley, and it was immediately put inside a glass container with a plastic lid for further observation. The caterpillar was provided with more green leaves from the same tree. Two weaver ants were also captured from the same tree and introduced into the container keeping in mind their association with the caterpillar. Eventually the final instar caterpillar pupated (fig. 3), and on 23-02-2019 emerged as a butterfly (fig. 4) which was then curated as a voucher specimen.

Observations

The caterpillar which was brought to my attention (fig. 1) had a thin, dark dorsal stripe on a pinkish-orange background. It also had broad lateral dark green stripes on each side with faint creamish-yellow above. The caterpillar was feeding restlessly on the green leaves of *Ficus racemosa* which were provided in plenty. It stopped feeding once it entered the pre-pupal stage. The pupal stage lasted for around 22 days, which ended with the eclosion of a female *Rapala pheretima* on 23-02-2019.

Discussion

Rapala pheretima which was not known to feed on any of the *Ficus* species is now known to feed on *Ficus racemosa*, a large deciduous tree distributed throughout the Indian subcontinent.

Conclusion

The above discussion has made it clear that *Rapala pheretima* is dependent on *Ficus racemosa* for food and a combination of both the tree and colonies of weaver ants provide a suitable habitat for the Lycaenidae butterfly to breed. The current record adds Moraceae to the known families of larval hostplants of this butterfly.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my family members, neighbors, colleagues and teachers for their constant support in continuing my research on the local biodiversity and its conservation. This note was the result of joint effort, as I was out of station often and my family members have been very helpful in maintaining and rearing the insects left in their care.

References

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