

The Dangerous World of Butterflies: The Startling Subculture of Criminals, Collectors, and Conservationists

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Source: Florida Entomologist, 93(1) : 141-142

Published By: Florida Entomological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1653/024.093.0126>

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LAUFER, P. 2009. *The Dangerous World of Butterflies: The Startling Subculture of Criminals, Collectors, and Conservationists*. The Lyons Press, New York, NY. 288 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1-59921-555-6, hardcover, \$24.95.

In his latest book, seasoned journalist and radio broadcaster Peter Laufer takes an accidental journey into the realm of Lepidoptera. The award-winning author has previously written on subjects ranging from the war in Iraq, to Mexican-American border issues, to the recent rise of neo-Nazis in Germany. Now he proves to be an able tour guide on a colorful trail of corruption and intrigue that follows the bright winged insects—and the cash and conflict they generate.

Though the book is nonfiction, the human cast of characters and their exploits are as intriguing and varied as those from a novel or miniseries. Laufer flits from Nicaragua to California to Florida to Mexico searching for his stories like a monarch seeks milkweed. He weaves in several different storylines over the course of the book, all relating to butterflies.

We learn that a well-timed email from Jane Foulds of the Nicaragua Butterfly Reserva inspired Laufer to follow his butterfly muse: “The world needs a good butterfly book,” Jane wrote. Jane’s rustic *mariposario* outside Granada, Nicaragua, is Laufer’s first stop. Here expats Jane and her husband Gerry Foulds are living their dream of running a butterfly farm and tourist attraction. The Fouldses waste no time introducing Laufer to the concepts of “drunken butterflies” feeding on fermented fruit, “butterfly rape and pedophilia,” and butterflies that generate audible noises.

A careful journalist, Laufer makes sure to check the facts he learns from the self-taught amateurs with butterfly authorities. Dr. Thomas Emmel, zoology professor at the University of Florida, is happy to provide “some graphic details about (pupal) rapes, and explain how this behavior can be beneficial to the species.” It’s a fascinating lesson that serves to illustrate how little the average person knows about butterflies, those bright winged creatures we often see but too rarely observe. Laufer brings plenty of experts and their lessons; Dr. Robert Dudley, professor of integrative biology at UC Berkeley, finds fault with the drunken butterfly story, but “agrees the idea of drunken butterflies adds to the fun of studying them.” And Laufer learns about butterfly audible communications from UF/IFAS research scientist Dr. Mirian Hay-Roe.

It’s not all sweetness and light though, as Laufer makes a point of playing up the many conflicts he uncovers on his journey. He pits butterfly breeder vs. butterfly “hugger”; butterfly smuggler vs. U.S. Fish and Wildlife; creationism vs. evolution; mosquito control vs. butterfly conservation, and it goes on. Laufer has a knack for finding a conflict and reporting it in a balanced way. Through it all the butterflies flutter on, oblivious

to the intrigue they engender. We learn about a rainbow of different species, among them the Miami blue, Schaus swallowtail, Sonoran blue, Queen Alexandra’s birdwing, white Morpho, Lange’s metalmark, orange sulphur, and several moths and skippers.

We learn much about monarchs and their overwintering grounds high in the Michoacán mountains of Mexico in a chapter titled “The Flight and Plight of the Monarch.” Laufer’s balanced and thorough reporting shines here as he considers the monarchs, the endangered forests they visit each year, and various stakeholders’ points of view. As always, Laufer layers in fascinating facts about butterfly biology and behavior.

Farther north at the Rio Grande, Laufer lights in an area he covered in an earlier book, *Wetback Nation*. In his new book, the chapter “Butterflies Versus National Security” addresses the conflict surrounding the fence/wall erected along the United States-Mexico border under the George W. Bush Administration post 9/11. Butterfly conservationists such as Sue Sill, retired director of the North America Butterfly Association (NABA) International Butterfly Park, view the structure as a threat to delicate ecosystems that provide butterfly habitat. Sill says, “They’re going to destroy big swaths of habitat right smack through all of our national wildlife refuges and parks.” But Mike Quinn, Texas Parks and Wildlife invertebrate biologist, is more optimistic and sees the butterflies thriving: “I’d rather not see [the wall] . . . But it’s not going to be any kind of flipping of a switch and all of a sudden the butterflies are going to be gone.” Then Laufer flutters off to the subject of Mexican entomophagy.

In an unexpected turn in another chapter we learn that, contrary to popular belief, butterflies are not free. In fact, the endangered Queen Alexandra’s birdwing can command \$10,000 a pair on the black market. Special Agent Ed Newcomer of U.S. Fish and Wildlife devises an elaborate sting operation in an attempt to capture Yoshi Kojima, the self-proclaimed “world’s most wanted butterfly smuggler.” At one point Yoshi offers a deal to sell the agent \$294,000 worth of endangered and threatened butterflies. No spoiler here; just suffice it to say Laufer seems to relish telling the tale of the gumshoe detective and his prey. This is Laufer’s storytelling at its best.

Florida entomologists and their associates will recognize many names in the book; many will find their own names. Every few pages there’s a little thrill of recognition that’s similar to spotting a butterfly in the backyard. Shady Oak Butterfly Farm in Brooker, Butterfly Rain Forest in Gainesville, and Butterfly World in Coconut Creek (“the

Butterfly Capital of the World”), are some Florida butterfly settings that serve to further Laufer’s tales.

This is the No. 1 butterfly book on Amazon, and it’s no surprise. Laufer is an entomology neophyte at the beginning, but his fascination with the enigmatic insects grows throughout the book. As he gains an informal education in entomology, he shares with his readers his newfound knowl-

edge of butterflies in an appealing way. His enchantment with all things lepidopteran is infectious, and it’s easy to imagine his audience will be inspired to learn more.

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