

# Caterpillars Wandering Everywhere...

The first flush of spring is over—despite (or maybe because of?) this past weekend's late reminder that winter wasn't yet truly over either—and many of the early spring wildflowers are already fading. The ephemerals like the Curve-Pod *Corydalis* and even the Sandyland Bluebonnets are giving way to the late spring/early summer species.

In the past week I've been overwhelmed by the number of flowers on the Yaupons. Does anyone else remember when the branches were so heavy with flowers that the shrubs had a hard time holding them up? Take a close look at the flowers on different yaupons and you can easily distinguish the male plants from the females that will have berries later in the season.

I noticed some Englemann's Daisy in bloom this week and the farkleberry (or huckleberry if you're from someplace other than Texas), *Vaccinium arboreum*, is now just coming into bloom, too. Shortly, the Annual Sundews, *Drosera brevifolia*, and the spring *Herbertia* irises, *Herbertia lahue*, will start blooming, as will some of the mainstays of summer like the Gaillardias and Black-Eyed Susans. Before you know it, it'll



*A final stage caterpillar of a Variegated Fritillary, Euptoieta claudia, wandering across the sand in search of a place to pupate.*

be hotter than you thought possible (at least last weekend!).

The sundews, especially, are going to put on a major show this year—there are hundreds of thousands of them this year (compared to last year when I couldn't find

even one). I've also noticed large numbers of the distinctive basal rosettes of American Aloe, *Manfreda maculosa*, here at the Biology Station, certainly more than I recall seeing before.

Looking down for basal rosettes is a good way to note that we also

have a bumper spring crop of wandering caterpillars this year. In the past week I've seen cats (butterfly-speak for caterpillars) of Pipevine Swallowtails, Buckeyes, and more Variegated Fritillaries than I recall seeing before (of course, there also seems to be more flax in bloom than I've seen too).

Some of the cats are pretty small, like some of the black/red/orange fleshy, slug-like, caterpillars of the Pipevine Swallowtail. Wandering small cats, as a general rule, have eaten themselves out of house and home and are searching for more food. Since Pipevine Swallowtails frequently lay multiple eggs on plants that are barely large enough for one cat, this end result is pretty easy to predict.

The larger cats, however, are almost certainly looking for places to hang themselves up and pupate. The Pipevines will need something nearly vertical to strap themselves onto but the Buckeye and Fritillaries will need a twig end or something similar so they can hang, head down, and begin their final transformation. Summer butterflies, of course, come from spring caterpillars.

Ain't nature grand?