Zebra Longwing, *Heliconius charitonia* (Linnaeus) (Insecta: Lepidoptera: Nymphalidae) ¹

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Introduction

The zebra longwing, *Heliconius charitonia* (Linnaeus), was designated the state butterfly of Florida in 1996. A denizen of more forested settings, it frequents subtropical hammocks, forest margins, shrubby thickets, and adjacent open areas. It is a regular sight in many butterfly gardens and suburban yards and parks.

Distribution

The zebra longwing is a neotropical butterfly that occurs in extreme southern portions of the United States southward through Mexico, Central America and the West Indies to South America. Adults occasionally wander northward. It is locally common throughout peninsular Florida.

Description

Adults: Zebra longwings are medium-sized butterflies with elongated wings. They cannot be confused with any other Florida butterfly. Adults have a wingspan range of 72 to 100 mm. The sexes

are similar. The upper surface of the wings is black with several bold, narrow yellow stripes. The wings below have a similar pattern, but are paler in color and have several small red spots near the body.

Figure 1. Adult zebra longwing butterfly, *Heliconius charitonia* (Linnaeus), with dorsal view of the wings.
Credits: Jaret C. Daniels, University of Florida

Eggs: The yellow eggs are laid singly or in small clusters on new growth of the host plant.

Larvae: The mature larvae are white with black spots and numerous black branched spines.

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Figure 2. Adult zebra longwing butterfly, *Heliconius charitonius* (Linnaeus), with ventral view of the wings. Credits: Jaret C. Daniels, University of Florida

Figure 3. Eggs of the zebra longwing butterfly, *Heliconius charitonius* (Linnaeus), on maypop (purple passionflower), *Passiflora incarnata* L. (Passifloraceae). Credits: Jaret C. Daniels, University of Florida

Figure 4. Mature larva of the zebra longwing butterfly, *Heliconius charitonius* (Linnaeus), on corkystem passionflower, *Passiflora suberosa* L. (Passifloraceae). Credits: Jaret C. Daniels, University of Florida

Pupae: The pupae are brown and have two long flanges off the head.

Life Cycle

The zebra longwing produces multiple generations each year. Adults may be found in all months of the year throughout much of central and southern portions of Florida. Adults have slow, relaxed flight. Females lay the small yellow eggs singly or in small clusters on terminal leaves and tendrils of the host plants.

Adult zebra longwing butterflies feed on both flower nectar and pollen. The additional nutrients from the pollen enable individuals to survive for several months, far exceeding the normal two to four week adult life span of most other butterflies. Adult individuals often form small communal roosts at night.

Hosts

Common hosts are purple passionflower, *Passiflora incarnata* L.; corkystem passionflower, *Passiflora suberosa* L.; yellow passionflower *Passiflora lutea* L.; and several other passionflower vines.

Figure 5. Purple passionflower, *Passiflora incarnata* L. (Passifloraceae), a host of the zebra longwing butterfly, *Heliconius charitonius* (Linnaeus). Credits: Jaret C. Daniels, University of Florida

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