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NOTE

Return to Port St Johns

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Abstract: Changes in butterfly populations at Port St Johns between 2015 and 2021 are recorded and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

During March 2021 my wife and I did a short trip to Port St Johns, in order to carry out a survey of the butterflies of the Sileka Nature Reserve, which belongs to the Eastern Cape Parks Board. This is part of the Lepidopterists Society's obligations to them, in return for a permit for such research. Our family has had a long relationship with Port St Johns, which started in December 1969, and continued intensively until January 1976; during this period, the whole family would move to there for two weeks at the beginning of every January, prior to the opening of schools. In between, there were other expeditions to the area, notably during April and early December, in order to compare different times of the year. In those days, Port St Johns and Umtata were connected by a long and winding gravel road, as were Port St Johns and Lusikisiki This road was slow, though well maintained, and carried very little traffic.

As a result of these expeditions, material taken at Port St Johns formed the backbone of the Pringle collection for many years, prior to our excursions to KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape later during the 1970's. In 1976 history overtook Port St Johns, when it was handed over to the newly independent homeland of the Transkei. It overtook our family, too, because for the children their school days were over, and soon they had flown the nest. There was a brief return by my wife and myself to Mbotyi in January 2002, and Port St Johns in April 2005; the latter visit resulted from the occurrence of a vast emergence of *Coeliades libeon* Druce – a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a South African lepidopterist. Then there were no further visits until this one.

OBSERVATIONS

The advantage of such a long hiatus is that one is afforded the chance to answer a simple question: are there any observable changes to the butterfly populations over this fifty year period? Obviously, the destruction of the Afromontane forests in and around the town itself now means that the butterfly species that inhabited them have gone from there, though they can still be found elsewhere in the vicinity. One must also be careful not to cast generalisation over populations that could have been affected by drought, or seasonal events. Nonetheless, I noted four major changes in the butterfly population structure over this period. The first is that one species, *Zizina antanossa* (Mabille), has become very widespread and common in this area; it was always there, but comparatively scarce fifty years ago. The second is the arrival here of *Belenois thysa thysa* (Hopffer); specimens of this were recorded from the Sileka Reserve, as well as from the slopes of Mount Thesinger. Not a single one was taken from Port St Johns when we originally worked there, and only one (a worn male) was recorded from the forest at Mbotyi. In fact, we had to wait until an expedition to the mouth of the Tugela River in 1972 to take our first specimens of this insect. The third surprise was specimens of *Pentila tropicalis tropicalis* (De Boisduval) from the Sileka Reserve; we had never found this butterfly anywhere in Pondoland, and encountered it for the first time north of Durban at Umhlanga Rocks in 1972. Finally, *Anthene larydas* (Cramer) has also arrived, and is now reasonably widespread in this area. Again, we never encountered it here at all, and had to wait until 1974 to take our first examples in the Dukuduku Forest near Matubatuba.

What is the significance of these observations? This is difficult to answer, but it may be that the destruction of the tall Afromontane forests (vegetation type FOz5, Scarp Forest – Mucina & Rutherford, 2006) in this area are making way for elements of FOz7, Northern Coastal Forest (op. cit.), associated with the coastal areas of KwaZulu-Natal. Furthermore, according to long-time resident John Costello, who has been boating in these waters for decades, the Agulhas current (as well as its accompanying sardine shoals) has in very recent years suddenly shifted out to sea by at least a kilometre. This may also be playing an important role in altering the local climate. Only time will tell, but if this is the case, then well-known endemics such as *Charaxes pondensis* van Someren and *Neptis trigonophora trigonophora* Butler may well be in trouble.

Another interesting phenomenon noted during this expedition was the occurrence of huge numbers of *Sevenia boisduvali boisduvali* (Wallengren) at certain places within the forests. These were not migrating, and were confined to some patches of forest for short distances, but largely absent from other nearby areas. It struck me as being much the same phenomenon as what I had seen with *C. libeon* in 2005: a massive localised population explosion. Like

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libeon then, there was no evidence of any mass movement of individuals in this population, so it could not be called a migration. It is clear that such population explosions are normally the forerunners of mass migrations, so that the one leads to the other, but not necessarily. Incidentally, two single specimens of *C. libeon* were recorded on this trip, one at Sileka Reserve, and the other at Mount Thesinger; this backs up my theory, mooted in 2016, that *libeon* normally occurs in this region, but is thinly-scattered, widespread and easily overlooked. These sparse populations may, under favourable conditions, give rise to population explosions, which may in turn (but not always) result in mass migrations, such as the one observed by Sáfián in 2014 in western Uganda. But we must be very careful to distinguish between these phenomena.

Port St Johns remains a beautiful, lush, well-watered place, and there are still comfortable places to stay in there. However, it is now vastly overpopulated compared to the 1970's, and the tarred roads have attracted numerous new settlements. The town itself is chaotic, and devoid of any form of rational planning; all traffic is concentrated around the few shops, which are in the centre of the village, where chaos reigns. Informal settlements abound, and there is no control over where and how the town expands, so once decent houses have become ruins surrounded by squatter shacks. The town used to survive on a thriving tourism industry, with prosperous fruit farmers on its outskirts: little remains of either. What a great pity the idea mooted in the 1990's of creating a large National Park there did not survive the petty local concerns which opposed it, as this might have been its salvation today.

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