

NOTE

Blue-spotted Charaxes (*Charaxes cithaeron* Felder & Felder, 1859) (Lepidoptera: Nymphalidae) – an addition to the butterfly fauna of Mauritius and the Malagasy Islands

Published online: 14 January 2018

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/met.v29i1.2>

Antony Moore¹ & Szabolcs Sáfián²

¹ 13 Brunswick Terrace, Stafford, ST16 1BB, United Kingdom.

² Institute of Silviculture and Forest Protection, University of West Hungary. E-mail: safian@bcghana.org

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INTRODUCTION

Charaxes cithaeron Felder & Felder, 1859 is widely distributed in coastal East and Southern Africa between Kenya and the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa, with disjunct populations further inland (Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia), belonging to four further subspecies (Pringle *et al.* 1994; Williams 2017,. The habitat in which the species occurs is mainly coastal forest and other forest types (including riverine forest and dense woodland) and its larvae can develop on a wide range of forest trees, including those in the genera *Albizia*, *Azalia*, *Celtis*, *Cola*, and *Gymnosporia*. (Williams, 2017). As with other species of *Charaxes*, the butterfly has a very strong and rapid flight and specimens sometimes disperse out of their usual habitat. However, the species has not been observed to migrate and is not known to be a good colonizer.

OBSERVATIONS

It was therefore most surprising that a female specimen, most probably belonging to *C. cithaeron*, was photographed in La Vallée de Ferney (north of the town Vieux Grand Port), eastern Mauritius (Coordinates: -20.341143; 57.702345), approximately 2000 km from the African coastline, at 1.30 pm (local time) on 7 September 2017, by the first author. The specimen (Fig. 1) first appeared flying across the eyeline of the first author and settled on a branch of a *Poinsettia* shrub. It was approached by utilising cover from an adjacent bush and three photographs were taken before it flew off at high speed. The weather was overcast but warm. The habitat was regularly mown lawns and grassland with ornamental shrubs, with regenerating and secondary forest on the surrounding hills (Fig. 2).

Received: 23 November 2017

Published: 14 January 2018

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Antony Moore

Figure 1 – The first observed specimen of *C. cithaeron* Felder & Felder, 1859 in Mauritius.



Irina Moore

Figure 2 – Antony Moore photographing the first *C. cithaeron* in La Vallée de Ferney, Mauritius.

Although images of the upperside of the butterfly are not available, the underside features, particularly the irregular median cross-line, together with the well developed tails, rule out both *C. xiphares* (Stoll, 1781) and *C. violetta* Grose-Smith, 1885 (the two other closely related *Charaxes* species, which also occur along the east African coastline). Confirmation of the identity of the species from captured specimens would, of course, be desirable.

DISCUSSION

This record is of high biogeographic significance, as until now, no *Charaxes* in the large blue *C. tiridates* species-group has been recorded from Mauritius or the Malagasy Islands, and not even from Madagascar, where a number of endemic species occur (Lees *et al.*, 2003). It thus seems rather unlikely that *C. cithaeron* has established a colony on Mauritius naturally, by flying over 2000 km through the Mozambique Channel, but skipping Madagascar. Instead, pre-imaginal stages could have been accidentally imported from mainland Africa with ornamental plants or not carefully cleaned fruit products. Alternatively, the species could have been introduced deliberately or might have escaped from a local breeding, as chrysalids of various *Charaxes* species, including *C. cithaeron*, are actually available from East African butterfly farms and they distribute pupae worldwide. Given the wide range of known host-plants, the species seems to have the ability to adapt to new plants easily, especially since quite a few of the recorded host-plant genera also occur on Mauritius (Baker, 1877; Gurib-Fakim, 2009).

If it was a deliberate introduction, it was probably relatively recent as such a large and attractive butterfly would not likely have been overlooked, given that the butterfly fauna summarised by Williams (2007) is based on a good series of collections and surveys. Still, it should be noted that even recent visits have revealed new country records of butterflies for Mauritius and have provided useful information on breeding populations of previously rarely observed species (Pyrz, 2017).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to Dr. Irina Moore, University of Wolverhampton, UK for providing the photo of the locality (and the action) of the first record of *C. cithaeron* in Mauritius.

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