



Text and Photos by Jan Dixon



Giant Swallowtail Caterpillar

Known disguises: This caterpillar has two excellent disguises. The markings on the caterpillar's shiny skin resemble a very convincing fresh bird-dropping look. In later instars, when viewed head-on, some believe the caterpillar passes as a credible snake, with scale-like markings on the head and thorax; two front-facing, dark, eyelike spots; and the tongue-like red osmeterium that can be protruded like a forked tongue.

Known food preferences: Plants in the Citrus Family (Rutaceae), including Common Hoptree or Wafer-ash (*Ptelea trifoliata*), Common Pricklyash (*Zanthoxylum americanum*), Lime Pricklyash (*Zanthoxylum fagara*), Sea Torchwood (*Amyris elemifera*), Hercules' Club (*Zanthoxylum clava-herculis*), Common Rue (*Ruta graveolens*), and cultivated citrus.

Alias: Giant Swallowtail caterpillars are often called "orange dogs" by citrus growers, not for their color, but because their general shape resembles a dog's head, and because they are common on orange trees.

Special weaponry: This caterpillar deploys a bright red osmeterium when threatened. The osmeterium helps the caterpillar appear snakelike, a deception aimed at startling potential bird predators. The deterrent effect is enhanced by a foul-smelling odor that is projected from this organ, which also helps to repel insect and mammal predators.



Winter hide-out: As unsavory as this critter appears, it forms a beautiful chrysalis and spins a silk attachment thread. The chrysalis makes a perfect winter retreat, its mottled gray-and-brown surface blending with the plant twig to which it is usually attached. This camouflage helps prevent detection by birds and predatory insects.

If capture is avoided: A Giant Swallowtail butterfly will emerge from the chrysalis. Giant Swallowtails may have three or more broods in the far southeastern United States, and even more in southern Florida, where this species is active all year long. Farther north and west, Giant Swallowtails usually have two broods, with adults emerging in May through June, and again in July through early September.

Reward offered: The enjoyment of one of our most spectacular butterflies!

Jan Dixon enjoys observing caterpillars, almost as much as adult butterflies, and has raised ten species from her gardens. She volunteers as a butterfly monitor at the Nature Conservancy's Kitty Todd Preserve in Northwest Ohio and is on the board of the Oak Openings Region Wild Ones chapter. She also enjoys teaching about butterfly gardening.