

WANTED
ALIVE IN YOUR GARDEN
 Goatweed Leafwing Caterpillar

Text and Photos by Lenora Larson



Known Food Preferences: A likely hangout is near their preferred caterpillar food, members of the Croton genus in the Spurge (Euphorbiaceae) Family, including Hogwort (*Croton capitatus*), Texas Croton (*C. texensis*), and Prairie Tea (*C. monanthogynus*). Goatweed is another common name for some of the Crotons.

Known disguises: This caterpillar's greenish-gray mottled color is an effective camouflage against the leaves and especially the stems of its preferred food plants.



When they aren't actively feeding, the caterpillars use their food plants' foliage as a disguise, spinning silk to roll or fold a leaf to form a shelter that hides them from predators. And if a hungry bird peers down into the entrance of the leaf shelter, it will see the caterpillar's face-like markings "looking" back. The array of orange horns and small raised protuberances on the back of the cat's head look fearsome enough to deter many predators.



Special weaponry: Very young caterpillars sit on the midrib of their food-plant leaves, often depositing fecal pellets along the midrib and on their own backs. This tactic most likely helps to confuse and repel predators, especially ants.



If capture is avoided: Continues to disguise itself as it pupates in a leaf-like chrysalis, usually attached to its food plant. As an adult, this butterfly often perches in trees, hiding in plain view disguised as dead leaves. This appearance and behavior explain the butterfly's common name, Goatweed Leafwing.

These butterflies frequent dry, open woods, scrub, and other open or disturbed habitats. They are in flight from March through October in much of their range, and are easily identified by the flutter of brilliant orange, three-inch wings. Because they overwinter as adults, Goatweed Leafwings may occasionally be seen flying on warm winter days. They do not search for flowers; instead their beverage choices include oozing tree sap, moisture from fresh scat, and other rotting material. They will readily come to overripe fruit.

Winter hide-out: Spends the winter as an adult hidden in crevices such as under the loose bark of trees.



Lenora Larson is a Marais des Cygnes Extension Master Gardener and a member of the Idalia Butterfly and Kansas Native Plant Societies. She loves to garden and host butterflies in the cruel winds and clay soils of Paola, Kansas. She may be contacted at lenora.longlips@gmail.com