

by Gil Quintanilla

Raising Purple Caterpillars

It is sometimes said that there are no mistaken encounters.

On a sultry south Texas September afternoon, I was checking out a butterfly hotspot, known to many as “the magic duranta hedge” (the hedge) and I noticed a small silvery shimmer just over my head. First thinking, “Ah, just another gray hairstreak,” I then did a second take and thought, “Nope, this one is different.” I reached for my camera, teetered up on my tiptoes and snapped a picture of what would later turn out to be the first of many Marius Hairstreaks that I would encounter.

A few days later, I received an afternoon email relaying that “Cat,” an individual from nearby Edinburg, Texas had found, on

a duranta shrub, some caterpillars that possibly may be that of the Marius Hairstreak. Hmm...if the caterpillars were on duranta in Edinburg, why not check out the hedge. That same evening, I headed for the hedge and after obtaining permission, quickly found and took home a bean shaped chrysalis (*Rekoa* chrysalis #1).

As chance would have it, Cynthia (Cat) Traylor was out in her backyard trying to photograph hummingbirds and butterflies. She thought it was her lucky day when she spotted a stunning Guava Skipper on her purple duranta! But there was more in store for her that day.

As she held her breath, Cat aimed her camera at the Guava and was ready to click



Opposite page: Many hairstreak caterpillars eat flowers and flower buds. Here a Marius Hairstreak caterpillar is eating a flower bud of a duranta. Sept. 14, 2005, Hidalgo Co., TX.

Above: Uneaten duranta flowers attract people and nectaring butterflies. Hidalgo Co., TX.

when at the corner of her eye she espied what appeared to be a prehistoric, plated looking critter! The Guava Skipper was forgotten, and she reached up for the branch to take a closer look at this rather unusual creature. When she got a good look, the unfamiliar oddity appeared to be a caterpillar. However, it was one heck of a weird looking one at that! It had chevron-like bumps and a striking mauve-purple color dashed with yellow trim. It also seemed to have a strong craving for the delicate clusters of dark purple flowers.

Cat took photos of the caterpillar, but then had to rush to work the odd shift at the U.S. - Mexican border crossing. Later that evening, she returned, anxious to see if the caterpillar was still on her duranta. At night with flashlight in hand, she searched for that strange caterpillar once again. Eureka! She got lucky and found three!

Cat sent her pictures to Texas Parks & Wildlife entomologist Mike Quinn, who together with Jim Brock, a co-author of *A Field Guide to Caterpillars*, recognized the significance of Cat's find. They surmised that the caterpillars might be Marius Hairstreaks, the same species that had recently been seen at the magic hedge. She then also emailed her pictures to me; we had met when she volunteered with the re-vegetation project at NABA Butterfly Park.

Cat was wondering what all the fuss was about because she was receiving emails and calls from people she had never met wanting her to raise the purple caterpillars. Despite her nickname, “Cat” had never raised a caterpillar before! She had a better idea . . . let Gil do it! She contacted me and I agreed to come over the next morning.