

TWO SPECIMENS OF *HYPOLIMNAS MISIPPUS* (LINNAEUS, 1764) (LEPIDOPTERA: NYMPHALIDAE) IN THE MALTESE ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT

Two specimens of *Hypolimnas misippus* (Linnaeus, 1764) are reported in the Maltese islands.

KEYWORDS: *Hypolimnas misippus*, Lepidoptera, Nymphalidae, Malta.

INTRODUCTION

Hypolimnas misippus is a widespread species of nymphalid, throughout its distribution range in Africa, Asia and Australia. This species is well known for its degree of polymorphism and mimicry. Males are blackish with distinctive white spots that are fringed in blue. Females are polymorphic and come in multiple varieties that include male-like forms while others mimic the toxic *Danaus chrysippus* (Linnaeus, 1758) and *Danaus plexippus* (Linnaeus, 1758).

Local reports and observations

On 31 October 2010, one of the authors (JS) was walking on a hill (known as il-Hotba) at Mellieħa, overlooking Wied il-Mizieb. On the way he disturbed an unfamiliar Lepidoptera specimen which was resting on a rock; it then flew away a few meters ahead of him on the same pathway, eventually landing on an inflorescence of male flowers of *Ceratonia siliqua*.

It started feeding immediately. One way to identify the specimen was to collect it, but prior to this, the author chose to take two pictures with his mobile phone at 3.15p.m, just in case it flew away. The specimen was approachable enough that it was collected by hand leaving an iridescent blue colouration on his hand as it was being handled. It was later taken to Mr Ray Vella (a keen ornithologist) to examine the specimen for further identification. During handling, the specimen managed to escape.

On 12 November 2010, Mr. Marco Bugeja (gardener and an amateur naturalist) phoned one of the authors (AS) and recounted a sighting of an unfamiliar lepidopteran specimen that came flying a few meters in front of him at Ġnejna Bay on the same day at 4.15 pm. The description matched the specimen collected and photographed by (JS). Identification was made by (AS) and Mr. Aldo Catania, based on the detailed description and images (Fig. 1).



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Figure 1. *Hypolimnna misippus* taken at Mellicha on the 31 October 2010. Photographs by Jeffrey Sciberras.

The specimen's upper-side matched Bingham's description of a male of this species (Bingham, 1905). The male has dark velvety brownish-black upper-wings. The forewing has a broad white oval spot between the veins 3 and 7 (or between the 3rd and 7th vein). A smaller spot near the apex is also present. These spots are crossed by the black veins and bordered in iridescent blue that is visible only at certain angles. The hind wing has a larger white spot but the veins crossing it are yellowish and not as prominent as those on the forewing. There are some white specks along the tornus and the margin is edged with white and black.

CONCLUSION

It is beyond doubt that both these specimens are a result of introductions by man. The Maltese Islands are quite out of its natural range. The closest occurrence of this species to our islands is Saudi Arabia, which is still too far away. It naturally occurs in: Angola; Lokoli Swamp Forest - Benin; Botswana; Burkina Faso; Burundi; Cameroon; Central African Republic; Chad; Comoros; Congo; Democratic Republic of the Congo; Equatorial Guinea; Ethiopia; Gabon; Gambia; Ghana; Guinea; Guinea-Bissau; Ivory Coast; Kakamega forest - Kenya; Lesotho; Liberia; Madagascar; Malawi; Mali; Rodrigues - Mauritius; Mozambique; Namibia; Niger; Nigeria; Oman; Reunion; Rwanda; Saudi Arabia; Senegal; Seychelles; Sierra Leone; Somalia; South Africa; Sudan; Swaziland; Tanzania; Togo; Uganda; United Arab Emirates; Yemen; Zambia; Zimbabwe (Vane-Wright & Ackery, 1984). To back this assumption both AS and Catania were informed that there have been local sales for pet trade of both *Hypolimnna misippus* and *H. bolina* (Linnaeus, 1758) for captive breeding, the latter species being more readily available for purchase. These sightings are somewhat troubling because the main food plants for this species are *Asystasia lawiana* and *Portulaca oleracea* (Kunte, 2006), the latter being a common summer ruderal species in the Maltese Islands. It may thus become an adequate food source for this species. Although *Hypolimnna misippus*, being a tropical species, may not thrive under present climatic conditions in Malta, the trend towards increasing temperatures may, in the future, favour this and other such species. It is therefore imperative that a close watch be kept for these potentially invasive aliens.

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