

Mass congregation behaviour of Milkweed (Danainae) butterflies in Sindhudurg District, Maharashtra

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It was December 25th, 2012 when I observed butterfly congregation at very first.

Thousands of butterflies gathered there in a niche of mountain. Hundreds of them were nimble out from the night cap, rambled from the canopy shelter to the fields of *Leucas aspera*, still there were thousands waiting for their turn. Few dried twigs and vines hanging from the canopy were laden with chandeliers of orange. It is a large amphitheater of mountain facing towards west with paddy fields snuggled at its base. This valley is a part of small village, 'Gothos' in Sindhudurg District (16°2'28" N, 73°49'57" E, 100 m MSL, 30 km at radial distance to coast). Bastion of Forest Department horizontally separates the lower private ownership on a hill. Upper reserve forest is under the jurisdiction of Kadawal range (Sawantwadi Forest Sub-Division) harbors a well-established eye catching plantation of teak. It also screwed up with variety of other formidable evergreen tree species and serpents lianas. But without any obligation it's a sacred estate of butterflies privileged for their annual get together since past. Crow and Tiger butterflies are often known to migrate and roost together during pre-monsoon and winter season. Such ideal micro climatic habitats take special care of the guests.

The observed congregation dominated with three species of butterflies viz. Striped Tigers *Danaus genutia* (Cramer), Common Crows *Euploea core* (Cramer) and Blue Tigers *Tirumala limniace* (Cramer) in the descending order of abundance. Visual estimates showed the total number around 2.5 lakh individuals congregated on a small



Mass congregation of Striped Tigers and Blue Tigers

area of 0.5 ha regularly observed between 25/12/2012 to 25/03/2013. Obviously the number started dwindling after the month of February. Here Tumba *Leucas aspera* along with Ghaneri *Lantana camara*, Ranmodi *Cromolaena odorata* and few trees of cashew nuts on bunds are

the chief sources of nectar and other alkaloids for them. *Leucas* has inflorescence typically at apical and axillary whorls. Butterflies

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displayed their flirtatious performances on these plants during proboscis. After gratified savoring of sap from the vicinity, once again they were ready to intermingle with the crowd. It was also amusing to see the aerobics of sunbirds and flycatchers towards such distasteful meal.

These milkweed butterflies are taxonomically classified in an order: Lepidoptera. True butterflies clubbed together in two super-families: Hesperioidea and Papilionoidea. Hesperioidea has only one sub family and Papilionoidea is further sub-divided into five families. Tigers and Crows belonging to family: Nymphalidae and sub-family: Danainae.



***Leucas aspera*, chief source of nectar and alkaloids**

They are also called as milkweed butterflies.

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Milkweed butterflies resting on *Leucas aspera*