

Milkweed: from Aphids to Zizotes

Article & photos by James “Drew” Bennie, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

As the plight of the Monarch Butterfly in North America is discussed, the conversation always includes their host plants in the Milkweed family. An excellent source of information on these plants and their impact on nature is a booklet that is, unfortunately, no longer in print *Milkweed, Monarchs and More* by Ba Rea, Karen Oberhauser, and Mike Quinn (formerly of the RGV).

This booklet was updated in 2010 and some used copies can still be found online. The original book was small enough to fit in your shirt pocket and was great to take into the field. The 2010 edition is the size of a regular book and perhaps more suited for teaching or for children to use.



Ladybug larvae eating aphids on *Zizotes*



Brightly colored milkweed bugs on *Zizotes*

Orange and black **milkweed bugs** were everywhere and huge **tarantula hawk wasps** sipped at the flowers as did **giant swallowtail** and **dusky blue hairstreak butterflies**.

This book inspired me to make a photographic record of the insects that inhabited a *Zizotes* milkweed patch which I had access to a few years ago. Here is what I observed.

Tiny yellow **oleander aphids** are not native but now inhabit almost all milkweeds and provide a meal for others such as ladybug larvae. Numerous **parasitic flies and wasps** checked out the plants for victims to lay their eggs on, various **spiders** were waiting to pounce, and I found a **click beetle** at night looking for a snack.



Tarantula hawk wasp on *Zizotes*

One sunset, a pair of insects flew in looking sort of like wasps. The book identified them as one of 3,322 North American species of **Ichneumons**, the largest family of insects! I had never heard of these parasitic insects before.

Besides the **queen and monarch caterpillars** that I expected, I also discovered several moth caterpillars chowing down on *Zizotes*. **Milkweed tussock moths** stripped some plants to bare bones and another caterpillar of a type of tiger moth named a **salt marsh moth** also was found hiding in the shadows. These vulnerable caterpillars are more active at night when there are less predators around.



Voracious milkweed tussock moth caterpillars



Salt marsh tiger moth caterpillar on *Zizotes*

Years ago before digital cameras, I also found and imprisoned a quarter-inch long, ugly, rusty caterpillar with a few long scary hairs. Soon after I caged it, the tiny creature rolled a leaf down over itself and turned into a small pinkish triangle shaped moth a few weeks later.

Who knows what other moths use our native *Zizotes* milkweed plant as a host plant?

I have not noticed such an assortment of insects on the tropical milkweed that I have grown, even though it is an excellent host plant for monarchs. It makes sense that local insects would prefer the local *Zizotes* milkweed they have evolved with. This is an illustration of why local native plants matter to our local environment. Plant *Zizotes* milkweed in your sunny garden for the monarchs and see who else shows up for dinner.