

# Cave Butterflies at El Salto

by Ro and Betty Wauer

Ro Wauer



Betty Wauer

We had followed the dirt track to near the base of the great travertine cliff where the once proud Rio El Salto had poured into a blue-green pool below. The morning was still cool and overcast; we had seen very few butterflies along our quarter-mile route to the end of the track. From there we could look into the diminished pool below, and to our immediate right was an entrance to a small cave in the shrub-covered hillside. Knowing that some butterflies roost in such protected locations, Ro suggested that we check out the cave for what might be present.

So, without the aid of a flashlight, Ro, Joe Holman, and Betty walked into the cave, and almost immediately startled a number of butterflies that had been perched on the upper walls and ceiling. Once some of the individuals landed, Ro identified them as flats, but he was unable to determine the species. Ro and Joe did manage to take a number of photos, but focusing was difficult in the darkened cave. And, as we progressed deeper into the

cave, disturbing even more individuals, we discovered that the cave had been serving as the area latrine for some time. Walking in the cave required judicious care.

Our group consisted of six individuals: Cathy and Donn Cook, Joe Holman, Lee Zieger, and Betty and Ro Wauer. The cave ran only about 15 to 20 feet into the cliff and was about three to five feet in width, yet we were able to walk upright. The majority of the flats, estimated at "about 20" by Betty, from her vantage point at the entrance to the cave, had moved onto the back walls where it was even darker. When Cathy and Donn joined us at the cave and saw our situation, they hurried back to the vehicle and retrieved a small flashlight. We were then able to further explore the cave and to obtain additional photographs. After examining the images Ro was able to identify our flats as Fritzgaertner's Flats.

As Ro and Joe continued their attempts to get just the right pictures of the flats, Betty



Ro Wauer

Above: A Fritzgaertner's Flat hugs the cave wall. El Salto, SLP, Mexico. Opposite page: the author at El Salto cave.

remained just inside the entrance; she was thus in a position to hear and see what was going on in the cave and also to observe the growing activity on the outside. A local "family" group of ten to twelve people had arrived but were keeping a respectful distance while apparently waiting to use the cave. After some minutes passed, a few individuals went off into the adjacent bushes.

Betty decided to let them know that we were in the cave photographing butterflies and would soon be out of their way. So she walked over and tried to explain what we were doing. She used the name "mariposas" (Mexican for butterflies), and this caused the entire group to look toward the cave and back at her with barely suppressed giggles. So she tried again to explain. This time she added hand signals representing a butterfly in flight, a person taking a picture, and numerous other equally strange movements, all the time saying "mariposas" or something resembling that word. Meantime, in the cave, the excited voices of the four explorers could be heard, and the lights of the camera flashes and the flashlight could be seen. It was just too much for the polite group of Mexicans. They were reduced to laughter, as was Betty.

When Ro, Joe, Donn and Cathy finally emerged from the cave, they discovered Betty and all the locals watching them from near the entrance. Betty quickly asked Joe to explain to the group about photographing butterflies in the cave. He did so, and the mystery was finally solved for the Mexicans, although most of them seemed even more puzzled that we "gringos" would go into that cave for the purpose of taking pictures of butterflies. The mystery was also solved for Betty when Joe asked if she knew that "mariposas" was butterflies, but "mariposas" is the Mexican word for gays!

As we were starting to leave the area, one of the young Mexican men approached Betty and in broken English (much better than Betty's mutilated Mexican) said some nice things and ended with "Please come back." We most definitely will!

This was the first time in a dozen trips into northeastern Mexico that Ro had found so many flats at one site, suggesting that this crepuscular species might often roost in groups in such protected places.

