

Zebra Longwing, *Heliconius charithonia* (Linnaeus) (Insecta: Lepidoptera: Nymphalidae)¹

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Introduction

The zebra longwing, *Heliconius charithonia* (Linnaeus), was designated the state butterfly of Florida in 1996. A denizen of more forested settings, it frequents subtropical hammocks, forest margins, shrubby thickets, and adjacent open areas. It is a regular sight in many butterfly gardens and suburban yards and parks.

Distribution

The zebra longwing is a neotropical butterfly that occurs in extreme southern portions of the United States southward through Mexico, Central America, and the West Indies to South America. Adults occasionally wander northward. It is locally common throughout peninsular Florida.

Description

Adults: Zebra longwings are medium-sized butterflies with elongated wings. They cannot be confused with any other Florida butterfly. Adults have a wingspan range of 72 to 100 mm. The sexes are similar. The upper surface of the wings is black with several bold, narrow yellow stripes. The wings below have a similar pattern, but are paler in color and have several small red spots near the body.



Figure 1. Adult zebra longwing butterfly, *Heliconius charithonia* (Linnaeus), with dorsal view of the wings.
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Figure 2. Adult zebra longwing butterfly, *Heliconius charithonia* (Linnaeus), with ventral view of the wings.
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Eggs: The yellow eggs are laid singly or in small clusters on new growth of the host plant.



Figure 3. Eggs of the zebra longwing butterfly, *Heliconius charithonia* (Linnaeus), on maypop (purple passionflower), *Passiflora incarnata* L. (Passifloraceae).

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Larvae: The mature larvae are white with black spots and numerous black branched spines.



Figure 4. Mature larva of the zebra longwing butterfly, *Heliconius charithonia* (Linnaeus), on corkystem passionflower, *Passiflora suberosa* L. (Passifloraceae).

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Pupae: The pupae are brown and have two long flanges off the head.

Life Cycle

The zebra longwing produces multiple generations each year. Adults may be found in all months of the year

throughout much of central and southern portions of Florida. Adults have slow, relaxed flight. Females lay the small yellow eggs singly or in small clusters on terminal leaves and tendrils of the host plants.

Adult zebra longwing butterflies feed on both flower nectar and pollen. The additional nutrients from the pollen enable individuals to survive for several months, far exceeding the normal two- to four-week adult life span of most other butterflies. Adult individuals often form small communal roosts at night.

Hosts

Common hosts are purple passionflower, *Passiflora incarnata* L.; corkystem passionflower, *Passiflora suberosa* L.; yellow passionflower *Passiflora lutea* L.; and several other passionflower vines.



Figure 5. Purple passionflower, *Passiflora incarnata* L. (Passifloraceae), a host of the zebra longwing butterfly, *Heliconius charithonia* (Linnaeus).

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