



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

### Fish and Wildlife Service

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#### INTERIOR SECRETARY BRUCE BABBITT HELPS REINTRODUCE 250 ENDANGERED BUTTERFLIES

Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt helped release more than 250 endangered Schaus swallowtail butterflies into their historic Florida habitat in Miami today, the second phase of a Schaus reintroduction program undertaken by the University of Florida and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The butterfly, which occurs only in Florida, was on the verge of extinction in 1991 and has since made an impressive recovery.

The release was made at the 400-acre Deering Estate at Cutler, 16701 S.W. 72d Avenue, which contains the largest original coastal tropical hardwood hammock and pine rockland forest ecosystems remaining on the mainland of the United States. The hardwood hammock is the favored habitat of the Schaus butterfly; disappearance of large stands of the trees in Florida in the early 20th Century was one factor that led to the species' decline.

Accompanying the Secretary were Sam Hamilton, Assistant Director for Ecological Services, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southeast Region; Dr. Thomas C. Emmel, director of Lepidoptera Research and the Boender Endangered Species Laboratory at the University of Florida-Gainesville; and Thomas Grahl, supervisor of the Service's Vero Beach, Florida, Field Office.

"The story of the Schaus butterfly is a classic tale involving what we call an 'indicator species,'" Babbitt said. "It is also a classic example of how the Endangered Species Act, by conserving one species, can benefit many others. Like the canary in the coal mine, the disappearance of the Schaus led us on a trail to more serious problems, which with a great deal of cooperation from local folks, we were able to reverse."

The butterfly disappeared from the Florida mainland by 1924 and its remaining populations were almost completely obliterated over the ensuing decades. It was formally declared a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1977 and reclassified as endangered in 1984, when the Service financed status surveys of the remaining Schaus populations by the University of Florida. Those surveys eventually determined that spraying for mosquitos had not only further reduced what remained of the butterfly population, by then restricted to an area of Biscayne National Park and the northern part of Key Largo, but

was also killing off enormous numbers of insects that constituted food for birds, as well as affecting plants and shrimp and fish nurseries in shallow mangrove areas.

In 1991, a conference at the University of Florida brought together the heads of all the mosquito control districts in the state as well as representatives of the Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and a number of state agencies and private conservation organizations. As a result of the conference, the mosquito control agent Baytex, was removed from use in Florida and another agent, Dimbrom, was applied with greater care. In addition, spraying was halted on northern Key Largo during the Schaus breeding season. The butterfly and the insect population began a comeback the same year.

The butterfly is large and colorful--it has yellow and brown uppersides and magenta-splashed undersides trimmed with iridescent blue scaling--with a long tail. The Schaus is one of a group of tropical swallowtail butterflies and is found nowhere else in the world except Florida. It flies slowly and close to the ground and is now credited with drawing thousands of tourists each year to south Florida's national and state parks in the Biscayne Bay region and on Key Largo. Like all butterflies, the Schaus is a valuable pollinator. It helps recycle minerals in vegetation in the larval stage and is part of the food chain for numerous insect-eating birds.

The Schaus swallowtail butterfly captive propagation and reintroduction project is a joint effort by the Division of Lepidoptera Research, the Boender Endangered Species Laboratory, and the Departments of Zoology and Entomology at the University of Florida in Gainesville and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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