

A Fallout of Black Witches (*Ascalapha odorata*) Associated with Hurricane Claudette.

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A weak category two hurricane came onshore on the Texas coast near the small coastal town of Port O'Connor on July 15, 2003. Petra and Ladd Hockey, along with myself, weathered the storm in their home which is located directly on the front beach over-looking west Matagorda Bay. We believe that we



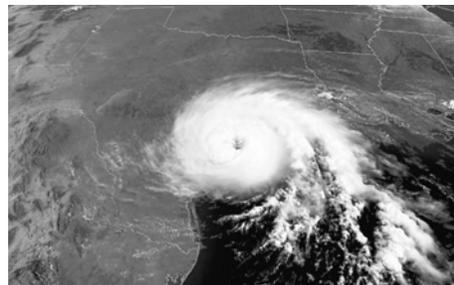
The track of Hurricane Claudette (www.nhc.noaa.gov/ftp/graphics/AT04/refresh/AL0403S+GIF/160443S.gif) through the western Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. Note the close contact with the south coast of Jamaica and the northern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico.

experienced sustained winds of 110-120 mph (177-193 km/hr), though further back in town sustained winds of 97 (156) with gusts of 113 mph (182 km/hr) were recorded. As this hurricane came ashore it had a very well defined eye. Winds were directly from the north on the lead side of the storm switching to the south on the back side. We were in the eye for 45 minutes to an hour.

We went directly through the eye where winds dropped from ~110 mph to near 0 in just a matter of a few minutes. Within the eye the skies cleared and it became very still and hot. The Hockey's and I are serious birders and during the calm we went out on the Hockey's second story balcony to scan the bay

with scopes for any possible pelagic species that are usually only seen near shore during such storm events.

As we began scanning the bay we quickly became aware of large numbers of Black Witches flying over the very rough waters. We soon realized that these moths were literally everywhere, many had made landfall and were flying around the homes on the beach. More than 10 were seeking shelter in the rafters under the Hockey's balcony alone. All in all we estimated that there must have been hundreds along the front beach or over the bay and every scope view of the bay produced one to several individuals.



A view of the hurricane (www.srh.noaa.gov/hgx/projects/claurette03/images/claurette071503-1615z2.jpg) as it crosses onto the Texas coast at Port O'Connor.

We soon saw the other wall of the hurricane approaching so retreated back into the house where we once again experienced terrific winds. After the storm's passage we were busy with clean up and repairs but not so busy that we did not have the time to see these moths in virtually every nook and cranny where they had sought shelter. I saw Great-tailed Grackles *Quiscalus mexicanus* and a Loggerhead Shrike *Lanius ludovicianus*, pick up moths from the wet grass. The grackles beat them

against the ground on two occasions but for some reason did not eat them. We worked around the moths for the remainder of the day and also noted large numbers of dragonflies cursing over the nearby yards and beach front.

Electricity had been knocked out by the storm and at twilight Ladd and I went outside to enjoy the cool evening. Immediately 7 of these moths began flying around me, often landing on me. We had cold beer and I poured a small amount into my cupped palm and within seconds 2-3 of these moths landed on my hand and began drinking the beer. A most unusual experience for us.

It should be noted that prior to this storm we had not noticed any Black Witches in town, and in a typical year I might see only 3-4 of these moths on the coast and maybe 1-2 inland to Bastrop County east of the Austin area. None of us had ever seen such a large concentration of these moths before.

Acknowledgements

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