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The fluffy white waxy herbivore giant red-eye *Gangara thyrsis* (Fabricius) in an urban garden

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In my previous article I wrote about a hungry nocturnal herbivore, the caterpillar of the palmfly- *Elymnias hypermnestra* that was feeding on the fronds of my ornamental palm. I was constantly on the lookout for the adult butterflies which appeared now and then and I would carefully search the underside of the leaves while watering to check for any larval forms. I don't know how I missed this new pest. The pots were kept out for some sunlight and brought into the living room, early one morning I noticed some leaves missing and was upset and looked for the caterpillar of the palmfly, but to my surprise I spotted two huge caterpillars. The caterpillars were white and fluffy with numerous thread like projections (Fig. 1) and I could not make out its real structure. I moved the caterpillar a bit to the side and to my surprise the fluffy white thread like projections began to fall off and the caterpillar's true form was clear (Fig. 2). The caterpillar is the larval form of the common giant red-eye butterfly *Gangara thyrsis*, belonging to the family Hesperidae. It breeds on a number of palm species including my indoor ornamental palm. The butterflies of the family- Hesperidae are commonly called

'skippers'. Due to their rapid bounding flight. There are 3,500 species of skippers in the world and 321 species are found in India. They can be easily mistaken for moths. The skippers have a stout body, angular wings, and at the club end of the antennae is a extension or hook called apiculus.

The adult red-eye butterflies are distributed in South of India, West Bengal, Sikkim to Northeast, Andamans, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The adults are dark chocolate brown in colour. They have large wine red eyes. The wing expanse is about 75-83mm. On the fore wings, there are bright yellow semi-transparent quadrate spots and three smaller apical spots. Under the hind wings there are grey scales forming indistinct bands.

Sexes are similar in appearance, but males have pale yellow hairs on Vein1 on the under the fore wing. The female lays her eggs on the leaves of palms. The eggs are large and hatch into white caterpillars that feed on the palm leaves and stay unnoticed under the leaf. The caterpillar is greyish white in colour and

have dark yellowish brown (ochre) spots on its dorsal side. The body has several uneven thread like covering reportedly made of wax. When the larvae are disturbed the filaments fall off. The last instar larva turns into a pupa and it settles in a tunnel like ‘home’ formed by

weaving or joining the leaves. Though my leaves were damaged, and the pests were removed, the giant red-eye butterflies play an important role as pollinators and their presence is important in a garden.

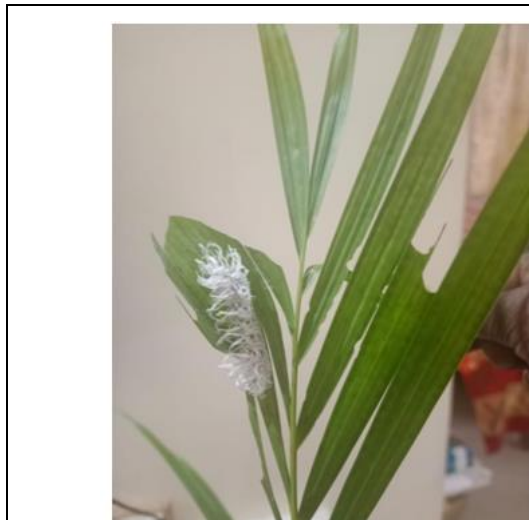


Fig. 1 Fluffy white waxy predator



Fig. 2 The “nude” caterpillar

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