Mating of the Tawny Coster, *Acraea terpsicore* (Linnaeus, 1758) with a Glasswing, *A. andromacha* (Fabricius, 1775), (Lepidoptera: Nymphalidae: Heliconiinae) observed at Boondall Wetlands, Boondall, Brisbane, Qld

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Following on from Russel’s account of the now widely-known sighting of the Tawny Coster, *Acraea terpsicore* in the Boondall Wetlands, Brisbane, Queensland, I would like to share my story and also a little more of Russel’s story and some earlier history about its sighting in the Northern Territory. The Boondall Wetlands are part of the network of environmental parks administered by the Brisbane City Council (BCC).

At the outset I would like to establish that this story is not meant to be a scientific reference or in any way take the place of the previous article on the Tawny Coster, published in *Metamorphosis Australia*, 100: March 2021. I had heard about the Tawny Coster quite a few times since its confirmed sighting in Darwin in 2012 from Chris Sanderson. Chris was holidaying on the Cox Peninsula near Darwin in 2012 and set out for a bush walk at a place called Wagait beach tracks in Darwin. Along the way he spotted a small orange butterfly that looked rather like an orange Glasswing butterfly (*A. andromacha*). Knowing that he hadn’t seen this butterfly recorded in any of the published books on the subject, he couldn’t wait to get back to his accommodation and run some checks. His suspicion of stumbling upon something significant was easily verified as his sighting fitted the description of a number of overseas *Acraea* butterflies, including the Tawny Coster.

He sent photos to Professor Michael Braby and outlined his story and the sighting. When he heard back from Michael, he was informed that another sighting has been reported 150 km south of Darwin a few weeks after Chris’s sighting. This was the beginning of a rewarding scientific collaboration between these two scientists. It has resulted in the formation of the Butterflies Australia Project and the accompanying App.

I remember checking the Butterfly & Other Invertebrates Club Inc. (BOIC) Facebook group on the afternoon of the 4 November 2020 whereupon I read a post from our member Mark Korner which contained some photos of the Tawny Coster. He had sighted it on his sister’s property, at Glen Cairn near Gatton in Queensland. There was great excitement within the BOIC community as the butterfly had been working its way down the coast of Queensland and was it now within our reach. Other unconfirmed sightings were coming to the fore, some of which John Moss and Peter Hendry have touched upon in their article in the March edition of Metamorphosis Australia.

Russel Denton is also a member and a regular contributor to the BOIC Facebook
group. He also noted the post with much interest. A few days later, he called me and we had a long conversation about the possibility of us ever being able to sight one in Brisbane with his belief that he may see it at Boondall Wetlands.

He shared with me his hypothesis and it went something like this: Russel was working on the fact that the Tawny Coster is a tropical butterfly which likes a savannah/wetlands type of environment. Perhaps, this is why it made its way across the top of Australia to Cape York, Cairns and Townsville. His main thought was that the Tawny Coster and the Glasswing butterfly both shared the same *Passiflora* host plant. It was in abundance in the Boondall Wetlands and he felt very strongly that it was only a matter of time before it would reach the wetlands. The environment is similar to the savannah and wetlands of the topics. I considered this from a common-sense viewpoint and thought why not!!!

I should add that Russel Denton is a valued member of BOIC and a volunteer for the Brisbane City Council working at their environmental centres around Brisbane. He is highly sought after to give guided walks around the centres and he especially loves the many tracks that make up the Boondall Wetlands.

Fast forward to Friday 19 February when Russel was guiding a group from the Brisbane’s Big Butterfly Count to conduct a survey to record butterflies from Boondall Wetlands. As previously described by Russel in his account it wasn’t too long before they sighted the Tawny Coster.

I feel very privileged that he then called me to relay the news and in quick succession made a couple of more calls. I could hear in his voice his excitement as he said, “Dawn I am at Boondall and guess what, the Tawny Coster, it is here”.

A few days later I spoke with Russel and he offered to meet my husband Bernie and a couple of friends and myself at the wetlands and escort us to the location where had spotted it the week before. As arranged, we met Russel on Saturday 27 February and commenced our walk down the track. This was to be a private visit and not considered an official BOIC excursion. Russel was able to guide us, a small group, through the thick undergrowth. The chance of the Tawny Coster still being in the same area was considered slim by some people but being the ultimate optimist, I wasn’t going to let these comments dampen my enthusiasm.

Upon, reaching the location, it was only a matter of minutes before we witnessed the Tawny Coster in flight and it seemed to be daring us to follow it around the twist and turns of the thick undergrowth, which was mainly *Polymeria calycina*. Russel patiently followed it, with us trailing behind in awe of this beautiful butterfly. Eventually, it landed and low and behold it was not one but two butterflies (Fig. 1). Bernie picked them up very gently in his hands and what we were witnessing was a male Tawny Coaster and a female Glasswing mating. We had seen three Tawny
Costers in that location. Our astonishment and amazement as to what we were witnessing was reflected in our childlike excitement and exclamations. It didn’t take us long to realise that what we were witnessing was indeed rare, two butterflies of different species mating (Figs 2 and 3) and to be able to capture the event on video and digital photography. As an older person, did I ever think I would be able to experience this feeling of awe and childlike wonder ever again.

Russel and I were the only ones in the group to have cameras. So, we clicked our devices many times over to obtain the best shots possible and also managed to record the mating on a few video clips. I might add, the clicking of our cameras was accompanied by a chorus of “did you get it; did you get it?”. Once again, a couple of excited phone calls were made to interested persons to tell of this very rare occurrence. It took the five of us a little while to regain our composure and formulate the plan to visit again the next morning. On Sunday 28 February Chris Sanderson accompanied us to the same spot. We were lucky in that we sighted four on this morning. We noted that there were three types of vines on the trees in this area, *Passiflora subpelata*, *P. foetida* and *Parsonia straminea*.

As I write this story, the realisation that this beautiful butterfly may prove to be a detrimental immigrant into Australia comes into my mind. I ask myself the question will it be blessing or a curse? It may prove to be a pest of passionfruit. It may outcompete related species such as the Glasswing for food resources. It may prove to be a beneficial bio-control agent for introduced *Passiflora* weed species.

I would like to dedicate my part of this story to Russel Denton, BOIC member and volunteer at the BCC Environmental Centres for his persistence, patience and belief that it was only a matter of time before we saw the Tawny Coster within the boundary of Brisbane. Thank you, Russel, for including us in this most historical and exciting event.

**Figs 1-3.** Male *Acraea terpsicore* observed mating with female *A. andromacha* at Boondall Wetlands, Brisbane.