



MEDIA RELEASE

Rare Cobourg Butterflies

Three rare species of butterflies, some of which have not been seen for thirty years have been found in the NT at Garig Gunak Barlu National Park about 570 km northeast of Darwin on the Cobourg Peninsula.

Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts (NRETA) entomologist Dr Michael Braby said the White Albatross (*Appias albina*), Asian Tiger (*Danaus chrysippus cratippus*) and Northern Argus (*Junonia erigone*) had only been seen on rare occasions in Australia.

“In fact only single specimens of the Asian Tiger and the Northern Argus have ever been collected within Australia,” Dr Braby said.

“CSIRO entomologist Ted Edwards recorded the Northern Argus from the Wessel Islands, 500 km east of Cobourg Peninsular, and the Asian Tiger from Cobourg, both in 1977.

“The Asian Tiger is rich orange-brown with black margins and white subapical spots, while the male White Albatross is pure white without black markings.”

Dr Braby said the fact that at least two of these typically Indonesian species are established on Cobourg highlights how little we know about the invertebrates in the Territory and how many areas are still poorly surveyed.

“The Top End is a frontier for biological research and discovery, which makes it one of the most exciting places on Earth,” Dr Braby said.

“Because of the sparse information we were unsure if these species were established on the mainland, or if they were only rare visitors from South-East Asia.

“Now that we have discovered breeding populations and larval food plants of the White Albatross and Asian Tiger we can confirm their residency status.

“The White Albatross and Asian Tiger are clearly established on Cobourg, breeding in coastal monsoon vine-thicket and paperbark swampland, respectively.”

Dr Braby said the species were found while looking for the Atlas Moth (*Attacus wardi*).

“The Atlas moth is a large spectacular species with a wingspan of 20cm, and is currently classified as endangered,” Dr Braby said.

“The only known specimens of the moth were collected from around Darwin in 1908 and Cobourg in 1977; the last sighting was recorded at Cobourg in 1985.

“Almost nothing is known about the ecology of this magnificent rusty-brown coloured moth, except that the adults fly late at night.

“We knew the moths required monsoonal rain and suspected they would be found in a vine forest habitat after the first rains.

“Vine forests are rich in butterfly and moth species, so when we stumbled upon the other three species we were presented with the opportunity to answer several questions about their ecology.

“We are yet to find the Atlas moth, but will continue the search next year, with the aim to investigate its ecology so that larval and breeding sites can be identified and protected.

“The discovery of these butterfly species emphasise the conservation importance of Cobourg and its historical connection with the islands of eastern Indonesia.

“Many species of native plants and animals on Cobourg Peninsula and the Tiwi islands do not occur elsewhere in Australia but have their nearest affinities with the islands of eastern Indonesia.”

Dr Braby travelled to Garig Gunak Barlu National Park with volunteer and amateur lepidopterist David Lane, who is an authority on Australian moths and butterflies, especially emperor moths, which includes the Atlas moth.

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Media Note _ For more information contact Michael Braby on 89955012.

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