



## Butterflying with Margot Waltz

*Making small discoveries in a butterfly riddle forever out of reach.*

**BY IDA RÖDÉN**

EVERYONE IN THE butterfly tribe knew about Margot Waltz. As an orderly, redheaded, distinct woman in her late sixties, Margot was one of the regulars who one would be sure to run into while on a weekend stroll around the weed garden. She remained an important link to the past. A native of Coconut Creek, Florida, it was not until she moved to the upper East Coast in the mid 1970s that butterflies, and the people surrounding them, solidly ensnared her. As she made her way, rambling through the state parks, she consistently kept two inventories; one listing all butterflies she saw on that day and the other, of the butterfly- and bird-watchers she ran into. Margot Waltz became the common link between animal lovers.









**W**E WALKED AROUND a small lake, and then headed up a narrow path leading up a hill. Here the trees grew dense and after an additional mile—making our way through brushy, almost impenetrable areas—I was growing more and more uncertain of our course as we now entered a second grove of trees. My sense of orientation was lost and I felt embarrassed to keep asking her for directions. Suddenly she stopped dead in her tracks, “Listen to the squirrel whining. It probably means

there’s a hawk or an owl nearby.” I stopped and listened attentively, and surely I could hear the whining of a squirrel. There, no more than sixty feet away, a hawk was circling the sky. I began to realize that the art of finding what one is looking for has as much to do with listening to the sounds of other animals, as of just keeping ones eyes open.

Margot Waltz was a lady fiercely devoted to facts and as we passed an outcropping of rocks she pointed

to a small butterfly. "This one is an eastern comma," she told me. "It's a woodland butterfly that loves glades with some sun breaking through. Like this one." The butterfly landed on the rock and Margot took out a magnifying glass and showed me a tiny silvery mark on its lower side. The mark did indeed resemble a comma, though I would probably not have noticed it unless she had showed it to me.

We were sitting down, drinking coffee from a thermos and Margot told me about the "raped" butterflies. Since most males are looking for virgin females, some do not even wait for an invitation to start a new family. In some of the *Heliconius* butterfly families, it goes so far as to the point where the male sits on the pupa. "He'll sit on that pupa as it darkens and the butterfly inside starts to wiggle and split the skin. Then he'll get excited enough and will actually puncture the pupal skin with his external claspers at the end of the male abdomen and mate with the female butterfly inside." Because the female butterfly does not have any say in the matter, the behavior has been termed "pupal rape."

One of the things I quickly understood during my walks with Margot Waltz was how much about butterflies remains unknown. The unsolved riddle of the metamorphosis would be the most striking example. The magic of its life cycle cannot help but fascinate; a tiny egg hatches into a worm-like insect that wraps itself in a self-made container, and out comes a beautiful butterfly. All across the world, and across centuries, people seem to read the butterfly as a symbol of life and death. When the Hindu god Brahma watched the caterpillars in his garden change into pupa and then into butterflies, he no longer doubted the idea of reincarnation. The Greeks used the word *psyche* for butterfly, as well as for soul. In the fifth century, pope Gelasius made a political declaration comparing the life of Christ to that of a caterpillar: *Vermis quia resurrexit!*—the worm has risen again. In sixteenth-century Mexico, smelling bouquets of flowers was impolite, since that was reserved for butterflies—the returned souls of warriors and sacrificed victims. In Ireland, in 1680, white butterflies were seen as the souls of children and a law forbade killing them. And in Java, in 1883, a migration of butterflies was seen as the incarnation of 30,000 people killed by the eruption at Krakatau.

After finishing our coffee I decided to hear what Margot Waltz had to say about a different historical butterfly analogy. In China, in 400 BC, philosopher Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He did not know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakably Zhuang Zhou. But he did not know if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Indeed,

Margot had heard about it. "The story annoyed me at first," she said.

"There is one thing in his story that sticks out and makes me doubt its sincerity," she tells me. "The story is written from the point of view of the philosopher, not the butterfly. It is the philosopher who wonders whether he might be a man who dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly that dreamed he was a man. If the question would have been asked genuinely, there would have been a parallel story of a butterfly who fell asleep, dreamed that he was a philosopher, and then woke up wondering whether he was a butterfly who had dreamed of being a philosopher or a philosopher who dreamt he was a butterfly." I sat in silence for a while, thinking over what she had said and I realized that she was right. I told her that the story indeed seemed to be incomplete. Margot continued, "This unequal treatment is even evident in historical writing because the story will always be attributed to the philosopher, and not to the butterfly. And thinking about this it seems like history, at least, is confident about which part was reality and which part was a dream."

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E HAD BY NOW resumed our walk through the park. Continuing on her story she told me that even if she found the butterfly case to be lacking some fundamental ingredients, she nevertheless found this story important because it exemplifies what happens when philosophers put our most essential assumptions into question. Convincingly, she informed me that "the story about the butterfly dream is not to be ignored because of this lack of consistency. It is possible, even probable, that we have gotten some things fundamentally wrong. History has continually demonstrated the unreliability of the most robust common sense."

Our walk had by now led us to a sunny meadow and to my bewilderment Margot grabbed a butterfly and handed it to me. "Feel how strong this one is!" I had been taught never to touch a butterfly. It was said that if the powder of its wings would be removed, it would no longer be able to fly. So I stood there, almost paralyzed, holding the body of the butterfly. But after the moment of surprise had passed I actually felt the strength of its body. It lay firm against my fingers. "They're stronger than they look," she said. After holding it for a while, I set it free and it fluttered away. "See? There's no harm done to it," said Margot. □