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# LIVING

# Since you asked...

*Readers wonder about monarchs, caterpillars, blobs and weird grouse behaviour*

As summer fades into fall, I have chosen to do a column this week in response to questions I have received over time from readers. I have selected these queries both because they relate to the season at hand and because they are interesting in their own right. I hope to use the question and answer format on occasion in future articles.



## OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

*Why are we seeing so many monarch butterflies this summer?*

It is true that monarchs have been unusually abundant across eastern North America this summer. In fact, I do not recall ever seeing as many as this year. Record numbers have been observed on butterfly counts from Peterborough to Florida. On the local count held July 15 between Stoney Lake and Apsley, Jerry Ball and his eight volunteers recorded 856 monarchs. Compare this number to 173 last year and only 19 in 2004.

The monarch's abundance this year is probably due to a variety of factors. First of all, the butterflies benefitted from relatively mild weather on their wintering grounds in the mountains of Mexico last winter. Consequently, a large percentage survived through to the spring. With favourable weather and a good crop of milkweed (the only plant the caterpillars will eat), the butterflies enjoyed high reproductive success as they headed north through Mexico and the southern United States. Large numbers began to arrive in Canada in late May and continued to experience high reproductive success thanks to the hot and fairly dry weather conditions.

However, reports from the midwest have not been as promising. Numbers there seem to be down. Typically, more than half of the monarchs that migrate to Mexico come from the Corn Belt of the Midwestern United States. It is possible that the drought there had a negative effect on their numbers. The increased use of pesticides to kill milkweed is also an important factor.

*I have a cottage on Stoney Lake. Over the last few days we have noticed these jelly-like "blobs" on the stems of plants floating in our bay. They are clear and quite dense and have a stem running completely through the middle of the blob. The outside of the blob has distinct, repetitive patterns and markings covering it. Inside, it is completely clear. They range in size from a few centimetres to about 16 centimetres in length and have diameters up to about 10 centimetres. Can you shed any light on these mysterious objects?*

I've been able to confirm through Don Sutherland, a zoologist at the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, that the blobs you are seeing are *Pectinatella magnifica*. It is one of the most common (or at least conspicuous) freshwater bryozoans in Ontario. Bryozoans are sometimes referred to as moss animals. In many ways, they are like a freshwater coral in that the mass they form is actually a colony of thousands of zooids — roughly analogous to polyps in corals. Each zooid is only about a millimetre in diameter and has whorls of ciliated feeding tentacles that sway back in forth to catch plankton in the water. The zooids live on the surface of the jelly, a substance that they secrete in order to support more copies of themselves. They reproduce over the summer by budding.

If you remove the blob from the water, you will probably find it smells bad. This is because of a chemical they use to repel predators such as fish. They do not harm the fish, however. The zooids die in the fall



Drew Monkman, special to The Examiner



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Tony Big, special to The Examiner



Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

Clockwise, from top left: monarch butterfly on purple coneflower; a fall webworm web; ruffed grouse in an aspen tree; and the jelly-like blob of *Pectinatella magnifica*, a freshwater bryozoan.

as the water gets colder. However, before doing so, they produce tiny black discs called statoblasts with hooks around the edge. The organism overwinters in the statoblast stage and then hooks on to a dock, log or plant stem in the spring to start a new colony.

*I discovered on the foundation of my house last week a big, fluffy yellow caterpillar with black spikes sticking out of him. What kind of caterpillar is it and what does it turn into? I haven't seen one of those for at least 15 years.*

I believe what you have found is an American dagger moth caterpillar. They are white or yellow in colour, measure up to 55 millimetres in length and have five pairs of long, black, dagger-like hairs projecting from the body. The larvae feed on the leaves of a variety of trees including maple and ash. Dagger moth caterpillars overwinter in the ground litter as cocoons. Large grey and black adult dagger moths will emerge from the cocoons in July.

*What are the large, ugly webs that seem so common this summer on tree branches along country roads?*

The webs you are describing house colonies of small, beige caterpillars known as fall webworms. The webs encase the ends of branches of many species of broad-leaved trees. They expand to enclose new leaves as required. The webs usually remain on the

tree throughout the fall and winter and are easy to mistake for tattered old oriole nests.

Fall webworms should not be confused with tent caterpillars. The latter are active only during the spring. Unlike tent caterpillars, webworm caterpillars leave the web only when they are ready to spin a cocoon and pupate into an adult moth. The insects overwinter in the pupal form. Small, white webworm moths emerge in May, mate and lay eggs on the underside of leaves, and the cycle begins again. The damage these native caterpillars do to trees is usually limited to the leaves within the web, and rarely threatens the overall health of the tree.

*About a year ago I was working in my woods, cutting firewood, when I noticed something moving out of the corner of my eye. It was a partridge (ruffed grouse) that was walking within a few feet of me. I was a bit concerned and left the area, figuring the bird was sick. The next day I went back to work in the same area and the bird reappeared again, drawn by the sound of the chainsaw. This went on throughout the winter and continues to this day. It is drawn by the sound of either my chainsaw or my tractor. It appears within a minute of my arriving at a certain spot in the woods and flies in to see me. I have tried to feed it but it appears not to be interested in eating. The partridge appears only to want some company. It has gotten to the point where it will jump on my legs when I am sitting down*

*and hop from one leg to my other leg. If I walk around it will follow me. If I spend 10 minutes with it and leave, it seems content. If I spend only a minute or so and go to leave, the partridge will walk in front of the tractor as if it is trying to stop me from leaving. It seems quite at ease with family members. I believe it is a female. What do you make of this behaviour?*

What you're describing is quite amazing but not altogether unheard of. Ruffed Grouse are famous for strange behaviour. I've come across them in the woods on at least two occasions when, rather than flying or scurrying away, they've simply stood there and let me walk right up to them. In this way, some individuals are not terribly different from spruce grouse or "fool hens." In the fall, their so-called "crazy season," grouse routinely fly into windows, garage doors, backyard badminton nets and even the sides of barns. These are mostly young-of-the-year birds dispersing from their parents' territory.

Birds, in general, will often react strangely to sounds. I know a woman with a pet blue jay that does a mating dance and puffs itself up whenever she uses her hair blower. Your story, however, really takes the cake.

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