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The Gentle Art of Watching Butterflies

One of the most pleasurable nature activities of summer is butterfly-watching. Not only are butterflies easy to observe, but they turn up almost everywhere from suburban backyards to country roadsides and woodland trails. Unlike birding which often requires getting up at the crack of dawn and dealing with less than perfect weather, watching butterflies is a much more civilized affair. These gentle insects are rarely on the wing before eight o'clock and fly only on warm, sunny days. In fact, more species are active right now during the beautiful weather of late June and early July than at any other time of year.

Peterborough County is home to 90 species of butterflies, which represents about half of all butterflies occurring in Ontario. The rich diversity we enjoy is a direct result of being located on the edge of the Canadian Shield. The County therefore has species which are typical of both more southern and more northern regions of Ontario.

Butterfly-watching has much in common with birding. Both activities involve the pursuit of colourful, flying animals and require knowledge of where and when to look. To find a given species, it is necessary to know the time of year it flies and the kind of habitat it prefers. Knowing the habitat should also include knowledge of the plants that entice butterflies to visit their flowers or lay eggs on their stems and leaves.

As July approaches, our roadsides, fields and wetland borders become increasingly lush with fragrant, colourful flowers. Many of these are important sources of nectar and therefore attract large numbers of butterflies. Among the most popular nectar plants are common milkweed, swamp milkweed, spreading dogbane, viper's-bugloss, purple vetch, wild bergamot and orange hawkweed. Later in the summer, thistles, Joe-Pye-weed, goldenrods and asters also attract a lot of butterflies. Many common garden annuals and perennials, which have been bred for large, colourful flowers, do not produce nectar in sufficient quantity to be of interest to butterflies. However, there are exceptions to this rule. I have had particularly good luck in my own garden with purple coneflower, globe thistle and butterfly bush. I have also heard from a number of people that Korean lilac is very popular with butterflies.

It's also remarkable how many butterflies sit on paved and gravel roads on warm, sunny days. Some even congregate in large groups on mud puddles. This behaviour, known as "puddling", is especially common with swallowtails and sulphurs. A number of species such as the anglewing group will also feed on animal dung and even roadkill. It is believed that in all of the above cases these are male butterflies feeding on minerals such as sodium present in solution. Apparently, male butterflies need to replace important minerals lost during mating activities. Basking, too, is an important reason why many butterflies land on road surfaces. Because butterflies need to attain a certain body temperature in order to be able to fly, they extend their broad wings in order to absorb the sun's warmth.

A third place to look for butterflies is on tree trunks. In fact, one species, the northern pearly-eye, is actually shade-loving and frequents wooded areas. It often lands and roosts on the bark of trees, usually within two metres of the ground. The pearly-eye is another species that prefers sap, dung and mud to the nectar of flowers. Trees that are actually oozing sap can sometimes attract large numbers of these butterflies along with mourning cloaks and commas.

The equipment required for butterfly-watching is quite basic. If you own a pair of binoculars, you're practically set, especially if they are close-focussing. The only other thing that is absolutely essential is a butterfly guide, many of which are available in local book stores. However, until you become more familiar with the common species, or if you are trying to identify a butterfly belonging

to a confusing group like the skippers, a butterfly net and viewing jar are very useful. By transferring the insect directly from the net to the jar, you can often avoid having to actually handle the butterfly and inadvertently injuring it. With a little practice, you'll soon be able to identify the vast majority of the butterflies you see just with your binoculars and many, just by their flight patterns alone.

The best way to approach a butterfly is from behind, being careful not to make any sudden movements. You should also try to avoid casting a shadow on the insect because, being sun-loving creatures, this will usually cause it to fly away. As with birds, you need to pay attention to the butterfly's size, shape, colour and patterning. The pattern on the underside of the wing, easily visible as the butterfly feeds, is often particularly useful in identifying the species.

The Canadian tiger swallowtail and the white admiral are two species that are especially common right now. The swallowtail is the largest of our butterflies and is hard to miss with its yellow wings striped in black. The term "swallowtail" comes from the small extension at the bottom of each of the hindwings, suggesting a barn swallow's tail. The white admiral, on the other hand, is black with a large white band across each of the four wings. A band of blue, and sometimes red, spots is located at the base of the hind wings. Admirals are common along country roads, where they often sun themselves on the gravel. They are another species that is attracted to animal dung. Some other common species to watch for in the coming days include cabbage white, mustard white, clouded sulphur, northern crescent, common ringlet, black swallowtail, summer azure, great-spangled fritillary and the often-abundant European skipper, a tiny, orange moth-like butterfly.

Although butterflies can turn up anywhere, the following locations deserve special attention. For species with a more southern affinity, try the marshy sections of Jackson Park, the rail-trail between Trent University and Lakefield and the old C.N. railroad bed between the Drummond and Cameron Lines near Keene. In the north, be sure to visit Petroglyphs Provincial Park, especially along the margins of lakes and wetlands and the open areas near the glyph site itself. The Sandy Lake Road, located on County Road 46 near Twin Lakes, and the Jack Lake Road, which extends south from Apsley, are also excellent. A number of unique skippers such as the mulberry wing skipper can be found in sedge marshes along these latter two roads.

On a final note, there is concern as to how many monarch butterflies will turn up this summer. The overwintering population in Mexico was at an all time low this past winter and initial reports from Texas of northward-bound monarchs are not encouraging. One of the reasons being cited for the decline is ongoing illegal logging in the Mexican overwintering sites. These same sites, which total only 11 in number and are very small, also suffered catastrophic winter storms in 2004 and 2002. Other factors may be the poor breeding season over much of eastern North America last summer and the elimination of milkweed in many croplands. According to Monarch Watch at the University of Kansas, herbicide resistant transgenic corn and soybeans allows farmers to spray herbicides such as glyphosate which eventually kills all milkweed. Without milkweed, monarchs cannot reproduce because the larvae eat nothing else. Croplands represent 30% of the total monarch summering area whereas roadsides represent only two to four percent.

What to watch for this week:

Baby loons usually hatch in the last week of June or the first week of July and almost immediately leave the nest. Remember to slow down if you're out boating and see loons. Boat waves can cause chicks to become separated from their parents and possibly fall prey to predators. Human disturbance also means that the parents are forced to spend more time keeping track of their chicks which allows less time to hunt for food.

Drew Monkman is a local naturalist, teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*.