

localnews

www.peterboroughexaminer.com

Editor JIM HENDRY life@peterboroughexaminer.com 745-4641 ext. 242

63428060
BEST OF HEAR-
ING CENTRE

LIVING

Where the butterflies hang out

Annual counts confirm this area is among most popular habitats

Viceroy, pearly-eye, white admiral, hobomok, question mark and American lady. No, this is not a list of famous race horses but rather the names of six of the 96 species of butterflies that have been recorded in Peterborough County. Thanks to the wide range of habitat types found here, our diversity of butterflies is one of the highest in the province. This is a direct result of being located on the edge of the Canadian Shield, which means we have species that are typical of both more southern and more northern regions of Ontario.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Much of our recent knowledge of Peterborough County's butterflies can be attributed to observations made by Jerry Ball. A Peterborough native, Jerry has been scouring the county every summer now for 15 years in search of butterflies. He has also kept very detailed records. Until Jerry started making regular observations, we had no idea that mulberry wing skippers were in the county. He has found them to actually be quite common. He also found the first variegated fritillary, satyr comma, and common buckeye in the county. Jerry has also seen changes in populations. For example, at least one previously unknown species to our area, the Delaware skipper, has become quite common. He also expects the little glasswing and possibly the giant swallowtail to expand their range into Peterborough County. The swallowtail has already shown up in both 2007 and 2008. Usually a denizen of southwestern Ontario, it is Canada's largest butterfly. This species is slowly expanding its range north and east, possibly as a result of climate change.

Unlike birding, which has been popular for years, the number of people interested in butterflies was, until recently, quite small. That changed in the 1990s with the publication of several excellent field guides and the development of close-focusing binoculars that has nearly done away with the need to actually capture the butterflies in a net.

This growing interest has had spinoff effects. Every summer, butterfly enthusiasts from across North America spend a day in the field monitoring local population levels. Like the Christmas Bird Counts that take place every year, butterfly counts help us understand how butterfly populations across the continent are changing over time. In 2007, 483 counts took place across North America, 25 of which were in Ontario.

In a butterfly count, observers attempt to identify and count every butterfly encountered within a circle of 15 miles (24 kilometres) in diameter. Our count, organized by Ball, is centered in Petroglyph Provincial Park and includes areas such as Jack Lake, Kashabog Lake, and Oak Lake. It takes place the third Saturday in July. The date is important because most species can only be seen at certain times of the year and don't live long. Early summer is usually when the greatest number of species are flying. Still, a July count means that most spring butterflies such as the Olympia marble and the pine elfin have already disappeared. Similarly, other species are missed because they don't appear



TERRY CARPENTER photos

The Atlantis fritillary (centre) is difficult to distinguish from other members of the fritillary family. Other butterflies identified during the annual local count include the viceroy (top left), eastern comma (top right) and northern crescent (bottom right).



until late summer.

Over the Petroglyph Count's 10-year history, 65 different species have been found. The all-time high for a single count is 58 species, only one less than the provincial record of 59. The three most abundant species are usually the Dun skipper, broad-winged skipper, and Aphrodite fritillary. Among other interesting species, the count boasts six species of hairstreaks, five fritillaries, three coppers, and 15 species of skippers.

Skippers are the nemesis of beginning butterfly watchers. Often less than three centimetres in wingspan, these small butterflies are usually coloured in dull tones of orange, brown, and black, making them look like a cross between a butterfly and a moth. To complicate matters, males are often different from females. Their perching posture is unique among butterflies in that the hindwings are opened at a wider angle than the forewings. This gives them a sort of "jet plane" look.

Fritillaries present a similar identification challenge, especially when it comes to distinguishing between the Atlantis and Aphrodite fritillary. As with many butterflies, knowing what fritillary species you're looking at depends on getting a good view of features on the

underside of the wings when the insect is perched.

The Petroglyph Count's crown jewel is Sandy Lake Road, located just south of Lasswade on County Road 46. Thanks to its varied habitat types, including 1,000 acres of sedge marsh, it is one of the very best roads for butterfly watching in all of Ontario. All of the many butterfly species that lay their eggs on sedges can be found there. Other specialties include the bog copper, the brown elfin, and the harvester butterfly. Harvester caterpillars are actually carnivorous, something that is unique among Ontario's butterflies.

This year's count took place on July 18. Our group was responsible for the Jack Lake area. Our first stop on this cool, sometimes cloudy morning was Long Lake Road. At a large patch of milkweed, we got our first butterflies of the day - 35 European skippers. These tiny butterflies with brassy, burnt-orange wings can often be seen basking in the sun as they hold their wings at an angle. With some effort, we also managed to find a monarch, a pink-edged sulphur, and two American ladies.

Carrying on to Jack Lake Road, it became increasingly evident that but-

terfly activity was quite slow. At one point, despite 30 minutes of looking, our only butterflies were a single Dun skipper and a mourning cloak. The lack of butterflies was probably a result of the wet, cool spring we had this year and the continuing cool temperatures throughout July. Abundant spring rains flooded many areas such as sedge marshes where butterflies had laid their eggs last summer. If the eggs remain submerged in water too long, they do not hatch. In addition, there were many episodes of thawing and refreezing this spring that may have killed some eggs and caterpillars. Some fairly regular species such as red admirals and painted ladies failed to turn up at all. Both of these butterflies migrate north from the United States into Ontario each spring but are usually unable to successfully overwinter here. Monarch numbers, too, have been much lower this summer than in recent years.

At least a rudimentary knowledge of plants comes in handy when looking for butterflies. This is because each species has a limited number of plants on which it will lay its eggs. For example, many of the skippers require sedges, fritillaries search out violets, and mon-

The Tally for 2009

Eastern tiger swallow-tail (1), Canadian tiger swallow-tail (2), mustard white (8), cabbage white (22), clouded sulphur (31), pink-edged sulphur (7), bronze copper (2), bog copper (28), Acadian hairstreak (7), coral hairstreak (18), banded hairstreak (2), hickory hairstreak (1), striped hairstreak (1), summer azure (12), great spangled fritillary (32), Aphrodite fritillary (10), Atlantis fritillary (7), pearl crescent (5), northern crescent (145), eastern comma (5), green comma (1), grey comma (4), Compton tortoiseshell (1), mourning cloak (3), American lady (13), white admiral (15), viceroy (1), northern pearly-eye (43), eyed brown (105), Appalachian brown (5), little wood-satyr (1), common wood-nymph (5), monarch (29), silver-spotted skipper (3), columbine duskywing (12), Delaware skipper (14), least skipper (36), European skipper (1888), Peck's skipper (15), tawny-edged skipper (4), crossline skipper (4), long dash (11), northern broken-dash (8), little glasswing (1), Hobomok skipper (2), mulberry wing (20), broad-winged skipper (78), Dion skipper (1), Dun skipper (216).

archs need milkweed. In addition, milkweed flowers provide copious amounts of nectar and probably attract more butterfly species than any other plant. So, when we came across a hydro corridor full of flowering milkweeds, we hoped it would be very productive. In fact, the quantity of milkweed flowers was possibly the greatest I've ever seen. Their sweet smell permeated the air. However, despite walking for over a kilometre, we only recorded seven species of butterflies of which only two, the long dash and the northern broken dash, were new for the day.

Our next stop was at a roadside marsh. These damp areas where sedges are present usually produce good numbers of eyed browns, a mid-sized species with beautiful, eye-like circles on the underside of the hindwing. Because the relatively cool weather was keeping nectaring activity to a minimum, we decided to walk through the long grass. In this way, we were able to scare up some butterflies, mostly skippers that were simply resting. We quickly added both the broad-winged skipper and the mulberry wing skipper to our list. Because these two species are very similar in appearance, Jerry captured one individual with a net and put it in a viewing jar. He then pointed out the key differences between the two, both of which have an airplane-shape figure on the hindwing.

By 2:15 p.m. we were up to 24 species with the addition of eastern comma, Atlantis fritillary, and mustard white, among others. We then headed down to a large complex of mostly abandoned gravel pits. With light rain falling, Jerry found one of our most attractive butterflies of the day, the Delaware skipper. It stands out among skippers in being bright yellow on the underside of the hindwings.

At the end of the afternoon, all of the groups taking part in the count got together at a local doughnut shop to compile the results. A total of 49 species were recorded, which is about average. However, the number of individual butterflies was quite low at only 2,885. Last year, almost double the number of individuals was recorded.

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarths*. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drew-monkman.com.