

On The Wing

Newsletter of the Tennessee Valley Chapter,
North American Butterfly Association

November 2009

Volume 2, Number 7

Editor: Bill Haley, wgh@tnaqua.org



NO NOVEMBER MEETING!

REMEMBER THAT OUR CHAPTER DOES NOT MEET IN NOVEMBER, DECEMBER OR JANUARY.

OUR NEXT MEETING WILL BE FEBRUARY 23, 2010.

*Happy Thanksgiving
Everyone!*

.....
Butterflies still flying in early November!

Several species are still being regularly seen by butterfly watchers. Following are a few photos of species you can look for in late fall as long as warm temperatures continue.



Mike O'Brien snapped this photo of mating **Cloudless Sulphurs** on October 22nd. Obviously THEY don't think it is too late in the season! Mike's photo illustrates the difference in markings of male (top) and female (bottom).



This **Common Checkered Skipper** was photographed on Oct. 19 in Alabama. Bill Haley spotted one in western Kentucky on Nov. 5.

The **Common Buckeye** in the photo at top left, and the **Fiery Skipper** below were also photographed by Mike O'Brien on October 19.



TRIVIA QUESTION: Three of the four photos on this page show a flower that is obviously a favored late season nectar source. Can anyone name the plant? **Hint:** It is appropriately named for this time of year and is not Daisy Fleabane, which blooms much earlier in the year. Answer on pg. 3.

Around The Puddle

by Bill Haley

Railroad Butterflyin'

Like most folks who enjoy watching butterflies I have many other interests. I am lucky to be able to combine other passions with butterfly watching or birding. Such was the case recently in western Kentucky on a warm, sunny early November day.

One of my very favorite activities in the world is collecting old glass insulators. At one time there were thousands of miles of poles and wires running across the countryside or along railroads. The wires were held off crossarms by millions of insulators to prevent the electric current "leaking" to the ground or other nearby objects. Insulators were designed as a purely utilitarian object, meant to do a job and discarded when no longer needed.

The majority were made of glass. Old glass factories often lacked quality control, which resulted in some insulators with definite "character". In addition, they often used leftovers from batches of glass used for other jobs (lamp bases, jars, etc.) to pour insulators at the end of the day. This resulted in many interesting colors. 75 years ago, nobody would have dreamed that one day they would become a valued collectible to thousands of people.

Starting about 40-45 years ago, phone companies began switching to cables and many of the phone wires were dismantled and the old glass insulators discarded, often in the woods nearby.

Railroads have also upgraded their communications technology, abandoning their old pole lines. Because copper wire was valuable, it was often salvaged, but the "worthless" glass insulators and poles were left to the elements.

Enter collectors, like me, who delight in walking miles of railroads to gather up these discarded bits of history, some over 100 years old.

What does all this have to do with butterflies? It turns out that railroad right-of-ways are very productive for butterflies. As my friend John and I walked along the railroad on this fine November day, I noticed quite a bit of butterfly activity. Painted Lady, including a mating pair, was the most common species. Several Cloudless Sulphurs were spotted, and a very fresh-looking Eastern Comma was a nice surprise as it landed nearby and basked in the sunshine. A couple of Monarchs, bound for Mexico, floated past. Orange Sulphur, Sleepy Orange, Pearl Crescent, Sachem, Common Checkered Skipper and a Fiery Skipper also made the list.



Photo by Mike O'Brien

Migrating **Monarchs** are a common sight in September and October, but some can still be found winging southward into November. This photo was taken on October 13. Your editor didn't note nearly as many Monarchs this fall as we see some years. Earlier reports from up north claimed they were not as numerous this year either. Butterfly populations can fluctuate extremely from year to year. We'll keep our fingers crossed for a better Monarch year in 2010!



Photo by Mike O'Brien

Here is another butterfly species on this month's "mystery plant" (see bottom right, pg. 1). Mike took this photo of a **Pearl Crescent** on October 14.



WANTED:

Send in your late fall and winter butterfly sightings to WGH@tnaqua.org

This newsletter will continue to be published, even on months when we don't have a regular NABA chapter meeting. Also of interest would be photos taken on a trip southward where butterflies are more active in the winter months. Send me what you've got.

- Editor

2010 Butterfly Counts, tentative dates

Sat., April 3: Tennessee River Gorge (spring seasonal)

Sat., June 12: Tennessee River Gorge, TN

Sat., June 26: Soddy-Daisy, TN

Sat., July 10: Lookout Mountain, GA

Sat., July 17: Catoosa/Whitfield, GA

Sat., July 31: Stevenson, AL

Sat., Sept. 11: Tennessee River Gorge (fall seasonal)

Yes, it is true. Bill Haley really does schedule this far in advance. There is always a chance these dates could change as we draw closer on the calendar, or need to be rescheduled in case of bad weather, but in all probability they will happen on the date they are currently scheduled. Mark your 2010 calendar and plan to join in the fun.

We'll be glad to publicize any count done in the Tennessee, Alabama or Georgia area. Send Bill details!

Join NABA, the North American Butterfly Association

The North American Butterfly Association was started in 1994 to popularize the study of butterflies through observation and identification through use of field marks rather than collecting.

The Tennessee Valley NABA chapter was formed in 2008. The chapter's territory is centered around southeastern Tennessee, but also encompasses parts of northwestern Georgia and north-eastern Alabama. Anyone who joins the national organization within a zip code area beginning with 374, 373 (with the exception of 37355 which is allocated to the Middle Tennessee NABA chapter), 307, 357 or 359 will automatically become a member of the chapter.

It is also possible for persons living outside this zip code area to become a member of the Tennessee Valley chapter. When you join or renew your NABA membership, be sure to specify that you'd like to be affiliated with the Tennessee Valley chapter. Joining online is easy. Go to their website at <http://www.naba.org> and click on Membership. Individual membership is \$30. Family membership is \$40 and an institution/library can join for \$50. How about NABA membership for a Christmas gift?

How do they do that?

The Strange Case of the Diana Fritillary Caterpillar

In the book *Butterflies of the East Coast*, by Rich Cech and Guy Tudor, there is a very interesting one page article titled "Violets & Fritillaries: A Close Association". In this article, the authors state, "for one group of temperate zone butterflies, the fritillaries, violets are the cornerstone of a distinctive lifestyle, a host genus with which they have evolved a dedicated and finely tailored relationship."

Researchers have discovered that in late summer female Dianas disperse their eggs near the ground, on leaf litter, low foliage or twigs. The interesting thing is that they don't lay their eggs directly on a hostplant. Instead they scatter their eggs near a stand of violets.

When tiny caterpillars emerge from the eggs this creates an immediate challenge. They must crawl about to find a nearby hostplant or the hostplant's rootstock. Once they find a violet, you'd expect they would immediately begin feeding on the plant so they could store up nutrients to help them make it through the cold winter months. Instead, they nestle into the leaf litter and enter diapause, a resting state somewhat like hibernation. And they do this without ever feeding!

Cech and Tudor state, "For northern butterflies, this peculiar behavior is actually quite adaptive, since undigested food in the gut of a diapausing caterpillar can become "nucleators" on which ice crystals can form in a cold winter, killing the larva."

A close relative, the Great Spangled Fritillary also shares this interesting adaptation, overwintering as caterpillars that have never eaten.

With the coming of warmer weather in the spring, the Fritillary caterpillars awake from diapause and begin feeding on fresh violet shoots. It is thought that they receive some protection from predators by ingesting a variety of powerful chemicals found in the leaves of violets, making them distasteful. The rootstock or bulb, from which the leaves sprout, is not edible.



Diana Fritillaries overwinter as tiny caterpillars