

Why Butterflies?

When I was a kid (a few years ago), I never understood those who would say “I’m bored, there’s nothing to do around here.” Nothing to do? They must have been kidding! Look around at the amazing beauty, diversity, and excitement of the natural world and of the man-made world (which, of course, is natural also) and you’ll see that the problem isn’t “nothing to do;” if anything, it’s too many tempting interests to pursue! — Fibonacci numbers, professional basketball, the Brooklyn Dodgers (did they move?), Mozart, Monet, the Marx Brothers, birds, and, of course, butterflies.

If one is interested in nature one could choose to look at everything — butterflies, birds, beetles, buttercups, boingos, babesia, bogs, etc — but choosing a particular focus has advantages. Naturally, people will warm to pursuits that kindle some internal flame, the origins of which are probably unknowable. And certainly there are many qualities of butterflies — their metamorphosis, the ephemeral nature of their lives, their brilliant and dramatic color patterns — that resonate with many people. But here I’d like to discuss some practical reasons why a focus on butterflies may be a good choice for many people.

If the set of organisms that you’ve chosen as your focus contains only a few species — foxes for example — in a short while you will have learned pretty much everything about this group. Not really, of course, because no matter how small the field, an infinite amount of knowledge is possible. One could easily spend one’s entire life studying a single species of fox — its varieties, its growth habits, its parasites, its metabolism, its DNA structure, etc. But, for most people, much of that type of knowledge may be beyond their ken. Rather, they want to know how to find it, how to recognize it, something about its lifestyle. So, there needs

to be enough recognizable species in the group to maintain interest over the long term.

On the other hand, too great a diversity can be overwhelming. There is a limit, varying among people, to the amount of information a person can keep in her or his head, or at least close at hand. For most, if not all, people, the recognition of the more than 25,000 species of North American beetles may be beyond their grasp.

So what is the range of species that will provide enough of a challenge to engross people but not so much as to overwhelm them? My (very unscientific) guess is perhaps one or two hundred to two thousand.

Which groups fit this number. Well, that depends upon the geographical boundaries we choose. If we choose a state, for example New Jersey, then the number of species seen in that state for various groups of organisms is: tiger beetles 25; butterflies 139; birds 460; wildflowers > 1500. So, if the state is your oyster, then butterflies, birds and wildflowers all might work for you.

But what if you’re the wandering sort? The type of person who enjoys traveling farther afield. If you choose to roam the United States, then here are some rough numbers for breeding species: tiger beetles 100; butterflies 600; birds 600; wildflowers ~ 15,000. So, if the United States is your sandbox, then both butterflies and birds look like good choices.

In the last century, many more people chose to focus on birds than on butterflies, largely, I believe, because of their approach with binoculars rather than with nets. It’s also true that in addition to just connecting with birds, some people may choose birds because they sing or because they are more similar to humans than are butterflies.

Continued on inside back cover

Readers Write

Thanks!

I was elated to see my picture on the cover of the Fall 2008 issue of *American Butterflies* as second place photo contest winner. I would like to donate my prize money to NABA for use in whatever way seems most beneficial to the organization. I enjoy the magazine very much and what you do for the appreciation of butterflies. Keep up the good work!

Jim Monroe, Beaver, PA

NABA News and Notes

Continued from Inside Front Cover

NABA Art Contest

Artists interested in entering the eighth NABA Art Contest should submit high quality digital images (submitted on a CD or DVD — attempted submission via email will result in disqualification)(maximum of 3 images) of original two-dimensional color “paintings,” in any medium. The digital file name should include the artist’s name. If realistic, the painting should depict species found in Mexico, the United States or Canada. In your cover letter, please indicate the dimensions of the original work, give a description of the medium of the work, and provide a release granting to NABA the one-time right to copy and publish the image in *American Butterflies* and at its website. Please include a telephone number where you can be reached. Submissions need to be **received** not later than May 1, 2009. Winning artist will receive a prize of \$150, 2nd place winner will receive \$50 and winners will have their works published in color in the Fall 2009 issue of *American Butterflies*. All decisions of the judges are final.

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Continued from page 2

Of course, butterflies have their own virtues. For example, they’re very approachable — with birds you’re on the outside looking in, with butterflies you’re part of the flock. But here is why I believe that butterflies are an ideal portal to the natural world: once one becomes interested in butterflies, one almost certainly becomes interested in plants, in other components of nature — in the whole web of life. To find adult butterflies one must soon learn the important nectar plants in one’s area and especially the caterpillar foodplants. And, the captivating transformation of caterpillars into adult butterflies brings a very high percentage of butterflies to a deeper appreciation of life histories and the larger ecological picture.

I’d like to end this discussion with a reprise of a something that I presented at the very first NABA Members Meeting in 1994 — the top five reasons to take up butterflying. Here they are!

Number 5.

Best place to find butterflies when the weather becomes snowy and cold — the tropics.

Number 4.

You can sing and socialize — the butterflies won’t care.

Number 3.

The peak of butterfly activity is at 11:00 in the morning rather than at dawn.

Number 2.

Both Winston Churchill and Dolly Parton — Big butterfly enthusiasts.

Number 1.

There are no pelagic butterflies.

