

Wisconsin's Year in Butterflies—2016

By Douglas J. Buege

Biographical note: Douglas Buege serves as President of the Southern Wisconsin Butterfly Association, a chapter of the North American Butterfly Association. NABA advocates for butterfly conservation through educational programs, field trips, and annual butterfly counts.

Warm weather, adequate moisture, and favorable winds made 2016 a particularly good year for butterflies throughout Wisconsin. In fact, their emergence in February proved a first for wisconsinbutterflies.org, the reporting site moderated by expert Mike Reese which welcomes submissions from any and all butterfly watchers. Even in the exceptionally warm spring of 2012, the first butterfly wasn't reported until March 11. But this year Deb Pritchard reported an Eastern comma sitting on her barn roof in Dodge County on February 20th. A week later, another was found in the Driftless Region. By the end of March, 74 individuals had been seen from five species—Mourning Cloaks, Red Admirals, Compton Tortoiseshells, Gray Commas, and Eastern Commas.

While the Red Admiral migrates to the state from the south, the other early species all tough out Wisconsin winters as adults, secreting themselves beneath tree bark, cracks in buildings, or wherever they can find protection. On April 15, I rescued two Compton Tortoiseshells in Oconto County trying to escape a garage through a closed window. Our early spring butterflies wait for those days warm enough to allow them to search for nectar. Some people place cut oranges and bananas out to feed these intrepid explorers.

In April, more southern immigrants found favorable winds to bring them to the Badger state. American Ladies and Red Admirals, once believed to overwinter in our state, are now believed to funnel in from warmer climes earlier than most butterflies. As the pasque flowers bloomed, the Olympia Marbles began their short flight mid-April. And the tiny Elfin butterflies began showing up in bogs and barrens throughout the state. Ann and Scott Swengel saw four Elfin species—Henry's, Brown, Hoary, and Eastern Pine, in Jackson County on April 23rd.

On June 11th, Sue Feyrer reported an infrequent southern visitor, the Cloudless Sulfur, at Scuppernong Prairie in Waukesha County. This rarity helped bring the species count for 2016 up to 114 by the end of June—remarkable numbers considering that the heat of summer had not yet arrived.

By July 4th, Dan Sonnenberg had found more than 100 species of butterflies in Wisconsin in his quest to see how many he could find in a year. Sonnenberg's been butterflying for several years and knows where to find many of the more than 160 species recorded in the state. Some of the really rare ones, like the Goatweed Leafwing or the Brazilian Skipper, have been seen only once in our recorded history and may never return. Others, though, like the Swamp Metalmark, can be found almost every year in particular environments where their caterpillar host plants thrive. If you are interested in attracting particular butterflies, growing their host plants may prove effective.

Each year, it seems that one or more butterflies show up more widespread and in greater numbers than anybody remembers. One of our skippers, the Mulberry Wing, seemed to pop up everywhere in July—from the NABA count in Columbia County where 38 were counted, to more than 40 seen in Burnett County and 35 in Oconto County. A butterfly only found in northernmost counties, the Green Comma, showed up in Langlade and Oconto Counties, expanding its known range. And Karl and Dorothy Legler reported that Common Ringlets made their way as far south as Sauk County for the first time.

In August, a few rare visitors showed up. In western Dane County's prairies, reports of the Southern Dogface, a butterfly of southern Texas, surfaced. Reakirt's Blue, a small southern butterfly that favors Culver's root, popped up in the central sands of Wood County, as well as Dane and Dunn Counties.

A candidate pushed by some to be named Wisconsin's State Butterfly, the Monarch, showed up in growing numbers through August and September. Scientists continue to speculate on the reasons for this favored flyer's apparent demise—dropping from populations of more than a billion to around 30 million in the last 20 years, according to the Endangered Species Coalition. Loss of habitat in its Mexican wintering grounds, agricultural and lawncare poisons, and loss of pollen and food sources as milkweed populations drop all have been suggested. Early in 2016, researchers at Cornell University published a paper in which they argued that Monarchs have insufficient sources of pollen to make their trips south successful.

And the Monarch still does well when compared to some of our other vanishing butterflies. Some prairie skippers, including the Bysus, Poweshiek, and Ottoe, were not reported in the state, worrying conservationists who fear the extirpation of these species. The Northern Blue, though evident on Minnesota's North Shore and in the UP, went undetected for the sixth consecutive year, despite researchers doing what they can to help dwarf bilberry populations. The small blueberry relative, the caterpillar food for Northern Blues, is often shaded out by ferns and other woodland plants.

Unlike butterfly fanatics of a generation ago, today's enthusiasts employ close-focusing binoculars and cameras to observe and record butterflies. They recognize that handling butterflies can reduce sensitive populations. Any observers can share their findings on the wisconsinbutterflies.org website, even submitting photos to verify their identifications. If you like butterflies, you can join the North American Butterfly Association which works to educate the public and to advocate for the insects. In Wisconsin, NABA's local chapter, the Southern Wisconsin Butterfly Association, leads field trips, educational presentations, and state-wide butterfly counts that anyone can join.

As of October 1, Sonnenberg had found 127 different butterfly species.