Known disguises
Named for the colors of Lord Baltimore, the English nobleman awarded the Proprietorship of Maryland during the early colonization of the United States, the Baltimore Checkerspot ranges from southeastern Canada across the eastern and midwestern United States to as far south as the northern Gulf States. This boldly colored caterpillar is bright red-orange, banded in black, with black head and rear segments. The caterpillar’s coloration is meant to warn away would-be predators with signs of its unpalatable taste, derived from deterrent chemicals, called iridoids, in its food. Like many other members of the Brushfoot Family, it is covered in bristly black spines (scoli).

Special weaponry
While this caterpillar’s orange-and-black coloring advertises its toxicity, another defense is its spiny body, which presents a prickly profile that makes it look even less palatable to predators. The spines may also deter parasitic flies and wasps seeking to inject eggs into the soft caterpillar bodies. Adult female Baltimore Checkerspots lay large clusters of eggs (as many as 700) on the leaves of their favored caterpillar food plants. Hatchlings spin a silken web, within which they feed as a group on new leaves until the end of summer. The caterpillars gain a measure of protection from this gregarious feeding habit. Their tents provide some cover against predators, while feeding in large groups offers a sort of “safety in numbers” approach, so at least some are likely to survive an attack on their silken stronghold.

Winter hide-out
At summer’s end, fourth instar caterpillars stop feeding and drop to the ground, breaking into smaller groups, where they spend the winter in leaves tied together with their silk.

If capture is avoided
When spring arrives, the caterpillars emerge from their winter shelters and resume feeding individually or in small groups. They continue to develop throughout spring until May or early June, at which time each forms a beautiful, free-hanging chrysalis, gleaming white with black and orange bumps and black flecking.

Known food preference
The adult Baltimore Checkerspot’s home is near its caterpillar food, usually in wet meadows, fens, bogs, stream margins, marshes, and moist fields where its primary caterpillar food plant, turtlehead, can be found. Some Baltimore populations use false foxgloves in dry, upland forest as the initial host plant, and in Massachusetts the introduced weed Narrowleaf Plantain (which shares the same deterrent chemicals as White Turtlehead) has been widely adopted. Narrowleaf Plantain is usually found in dry meadows and fields. When caterpillars emerge in spring from their winter hide-out, their food preferences expand and they may now help themselves to false foxgloves, honeysuckles, Narrowleaf Plantain, louseworts, viburnums, and ashes.

Reward Offered
Though the Baltimore Checkerspot produces just a single brood per year and can be seen in flight for only a brief period from mid-June to early July, the species rewards butterfliers with an eye-catching appearance in all phases of its development. Fresh-laid eggs are yellow, but quickly turn red. Caterpillars sport bold contrasts in black and orange, then swath themselves in a shining shell of white, orange, and black as they pupate. The adult emerges with fashionable charisma in velvet black offset by the white and orange checkerspots that give the species its name. It cuts a dashing figure no matter when you spot it!

Casey Laine comes from a long line of talkative women. She works as an editor, and publishes an annual anthology of fiction and poetry. In her spare time, she chases butterflies with her camera.