

Counting Our Blessings

This issue of *American Butterflies* contains an article about the NABA Butterfly Count Program by Jane Hurwitz. The NABA Butterfly Count Program has three main goals.

First, it provides long-term data that is increasingly being used by scientists to answer questions about butterfly distributions, abundances and biology (see box at bottom of page 20).

Second, the Counts provide venues for social interactions among butterflies, including allowing newly interested people the opportunity of meeting more experienced butterflies.

Third, the Counts, by focusing media attention on butterflies, heighten public awareness of butterflies and the need to conserve them.

The first counts were held in 1975 under the aegis of the Xerces Society. There were 28 “counts” that year involving about 60 people. Many of these were counts performed by a solitary observer covering only a small area. For example, four of the first year counts were held within the count circle of the current Northern Westchester County, New York count.

In 1993, Xerces Society transferred the Count Program and it was incorporated into NABA. One of the important changes that NABA introduced was printing the Count Report with English names of butterflies rather than scientific names — thus making the Report accessible to a much greater number of people.

Due to the changes introduced by NABA, from scientific to English names and from an emphasis on nets to an emphasis on binoculars and cameras, the number of people seriously interested in butterflies has increased dramatically since 1993. For example, in 2008 there were almost 500 counts, involving more than 4000 people.

Last year, NABA was able to take a major step forward by allowing compilers to enter Count data online. Some compilers have been avidly awaiting this development for years! Not only does this streamline the work of compilers and of regional editors, it also allows the Count data to flow directly into a searchable database, thus greatly enhancing the usefulness of the Count data to scientists. The creation of an online data entry system was made possible by a \$25,000 grant from the National Biological Information Infrastructure a program of the United States Geological Survey and especially by RedShift Technologies of New York, New York, who created the software for NABA’s online data entry system, largely on a pro bono basis.

Over the next few years, we hope to make further improvements to NABA’s butterfly monitoring programs. For example, we hope to merge the database of the Butterflies I’ve Seen program with the database for the NABA Butterfly Count Program, essentially doubling the size of the database. In addition, we will look to provide maps where users can view, for example, all locations where a particular species has been seen, or just the locations where they themselves have seen the species.

Of course, making these improvements requires the financial resources that will enable us to hire software developers, managers and safely house and maintain the data. Your contributions toward these improvements would be greatly appreciated. You can donate online by going to www.naba.org; clicking on “donate” and indicating that your donation is for the NABA Butterfly Count Program.

