

Lifestyles of the Scaled and Beautiful: Pearl and Northern Crescents

by Ernest H. Williams

Which are the commonest butterflies in North America?

You might think Monarchs, but my guess is that the answer is actually Pearl Crescents, which are among the most widespread and best known butterflies throughout most of

the United States. To show you how common they are, Pearl Crescents were seen on 295 of the 442 Fourth of July counts in 2006. Only Monarchs and Cabbage Whites were seen in



Above: Pearl Crescents through a butterfly milkweed. July 23, 1993. Chappaqua, Westchester Co., NY.

Opposite page: A Pearl Crescent adds color to an ox-eye daisy. July 5, 2006. Lexington, Greene Co., NY.

more count circles that year. If you add the 55 counts reporting Northern Crescents but not Pearl Crescents, then the 350 counts on which either were seen tops all species.

The record high number of Pearl Crescents seen on a single count is 3352, a number that shows how abundant they can be. I'm always happy to find one of these little butterflies and think of them as friends. Because of the close relationship between Pearl and Northern Crescents and confusion between them (discussed later), I'd like to consider both of these taxa in this article.

The English name Pearl Crescent tells you something right away about them. At the underside edge of their hindwings, standing out against a patterned background, lies a brown blotch with a light-colored crescent in the middle. The crescent sometimes appears

pearly in color. Why they have a crescent is one of those difficult questions in nature to answer, but a similar pattern is found in all closely related species.

Pearl Crescents are small butterflies with weak flight, usually skimming within a couple of feet of the top of the vegetation. One sees Pearl Crescents more easily by looking down, not up, and you can learn to distinguish the two sexes on the wing. Males fly a lot, fluttering from here to there, and they are small butterflies with a conspicuously open orange area in both their upper hind and forewings that contrasts with the dark outer margins. Females are a little larger than males, and they display a bolder pattern of lines through the orange patches. The orange may appear two-toned; also, they're less active and settle down in the vegetation for longer