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# Nature's most delightful insects provide 'Silent visions of loveliness'

Story by Sandra Phinney

Robert Frost compared butterflies "to flowers that fly and all but sing." For butterfly lovers, the creatures are so mesmerizing they don't need to make a sound. In fact, their perfect quietness is part of their charm. They simply flit and float about in soundless splendour.

Peter Payzant of Halifax remembers a childhood experience as a YMCA camper when a biologist gave a talk on natural history. "He showed us the moths which had gathered at the lights overnight, and took us on a walk through the fields to look at butterflies and plants. I was hooked."

Then Peter started to frequent the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, seeking out the butterfly displays. His favourites were the Morphos—iridescent blue butterflies bigger than his hands. Years later, he had a chance to see these giants slowly patrolling up and down a river in Costa Rica. "They were like blue handkerchiefs that shone in the sun, impossibly big and slow, flapping idly up the river and back again, each guarding his own territory. It brought me back to my childhood fascination with these amazing beauties, and I felt that somehow I had achieved a goal which had been there all my life, without my being aware of its presence."

But he notes that aesthetic appreciation isn't the only attraction. There is the challenge of identification, the thrill of encountering a new species, the satisfaction of learning more and more about the biology and behaviour of butterflies and, of course



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, the fun of taking that perfect photograph. And the names! "How can your resist *Malicious Swarthy Skipper?*"

For several years now, Peter and his wife have hosted an annual butterfly count in July, part of an international effort that takes place in Canada, the United States and parts of Mexico. Each "count" spans a circular area with a diameter of 15 miles. Last year, the group spent four hours around Halifax, Bedford, the Sackvilles and Mount Uniacke recording their sightings, which totaled 322 butterflies in 19 species. The most common was a little butterfly called the European Skipper. Bronze-gold in colour and the size of a thumbnail, it spends most of its time in grassy meadows. In North America, there are 695 species of butterflies of which 272 are found in Canada; 70 in this region.

Bob Bowles, regional coordinator of the butterfly count for Eastern Canada, explains that detailed data are recorded including the number of adults, pupa, caterpillars and eggs of each species within the count circle, and environmental conditions. "Development by logging, quarries, housing, and agriculture impacts on butterfly species so these counts provide a great yardstick to measure these changes."

Bob's own interest evolved out of his love for birding and mushrooming. When he first became interested in butterflies, he bought a large net with a long handle and started waving it about in pursuit of newly discovered beauties. "Many of my birding friends stood by laughing at the image of a grown man with a net running across a meadow. Today, those same people can be found almost any day during the summer with nets in hand chasing butterflies across the fields. They experience the same sense of wonder. It's very easy to catch the bug, so to speak!"

Lloyd Hollett caught the bug solidly years ago. He and a friend, Gary Holloway, founded the Newfoundland Insectarium in Humber Valley. It houses more than 100 displays of living and preserved insects, bees, spiders, and scorpions from around

## Rolling out the welcome mat for your own butterfly parade

Butterflies are delightful houseguests and easy to please. They love to bask in the sun, so large flat rocks can provide welcome warm spots. Butterflies also need mud baths, so set up "butterfly puddles" where they can get required salts and minerals. They also like rotten fruit. A dish of cut up overripe fruit is always a big attraction.

A few cross-piled logs can provide summer shelter and winter housing, along with an adaptation of a bird nesting box. Build the box with the rough side on the inside so the butterflies have something to grip (or put rough strips of bark on one of the inside walls). Instead of a circular hole, cut a vertical slit 10 cm x 2 cm at the bottom of one side. Place the box on a stake four to six feet high, in a protected area and close to late blooming flowers. A large tin can nailed upside down on a stake may also be effective.

### Butterfly aficionados recommend:

- Kaufman Focus Guide: *Butterflies of North America*
- *Butterflies Through Binoculars*, a series by Jeff Glassberg
- *Mindful of Butterflies*, by Bernard Jackson
- *Handbook for Butterfly Watchers*, by Robert Michael Pyle
- *The Butterflies of Canada* by Ross A. Layberry, Peter W. Hall, and J. Donald Lafontaine
- Payzant's web site with information about Nova Scotia butterflies: <http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/~aa095/NSLeps/>
- Butterflies of Canada. [www.cbif.gc.ca/spp\\_pages/butterflies/index\\_e.php](http://www.cbif.gc.ca/spp_pages/butterflies/index_e.php)
- North American Butterfly Association: [www.naba.org/](http://www.naba.org/)





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the world. Lloyd says the project developed from their great passion for insects; "the true rulers of the planet—there are approximately 200 million insects for each person on earth and the total weight of the insects far exceeds the total weight of the mammals!"

One of Lloyd's favourite projects was setting up the Butterfly Pavilion at the Insectarium. It opened last year and had a whopping 21,000 visitors. Many locals returned as many as six times. Butterflies in the Pavilion come from butterfly farms in Central America and Malaysia. They are shipped as in chrysalis form (the

stage between caterpillar and butterfly). After arrival, the chrysalis are hung in an emergence chamber to await the emergence of the butterfly. "This is a very magical event and some lucky visitors actually get to see this happen."

Once the newly-emerged butterflies have dried their wings—which takes about two hours—they are released into the Butterfly Pavilion, replete with a pond, fountain, and lots of beautiful flowers. Visitors sit on benches and let the butterflies land on their noses, arms or toes. "It appeals to all ages from two to 102 with, in my opinion, children and seniors enjoying

it the most." For three years, the Insectarium won the Attractions Canada Award for Best Indoor Site in Newfoundland & Labrador.

Bob's advice for people who want to attract butterflies to their backyards? "You should let a small part of your property grow wild in order to support the other stages of the butterfly's life cycle. You can't have a butterfly without first having an egg and a caterpillar! Our beautifully manicured lawns may look uniform and neat, but they cannot support the early stages of a butterfly, or much else.

Bernard Jackson concurs. He created Newfoundland's famous Memorial University

Botanical Garden. Now retired and living in Truro, he authored *Mindful of Butterflies*. He stresses how important it is for butterflies to have a habitat which provides a regular supply of nectar, host plants, shelter from wind, and as much sunshine as possible. In fact, if you have a fetish for neatness and general tidying up, he predicts that butterfly gardening may not be in your cards.

Butterflies love "wild", untidy sites but not dirty ones. They will not lay their eggs on dusty or mud splattered stems and branches, so it's important to place mulch around flowers and vegetables to keep them clean.

Protection from wind and driving rains can best be provided by a few trees and shrubs. Recommended varieties include the butterfly bush, dogberry, withrod, balsam, poplar, ash, native hawthorne, lilac and buddleia. Bernard adds that Butterflies are attracted to flowers that provide good sources of nectar. These can range from wildflowers like clover, daisies and dandelions to marigolds, straw flowers, phlox, and sedum, clematis, dahlias, petunias, and daylilies. Some vegetables are great hosts, including parsnips, carrots, parsley and celery. Flowering chives are a particular favourite for adult butterflies.

On many occasions, Bernard has crawled on his belly to stalk a skittish or shy butterfly. He once slithered up to a spot but since the butterfly blended into the surrounding habitat so well, he nearly touched it with his nose before locating it.

The following description of butterflies by famous lepidopterist Alfred Russell Wallace is apt: "Nature has used them like the pages of an illuminated text to illustrate all its powers of colour and variety, and perhaps to have us recognize some guiding power that directs the blind forces of nature to create such a vision of loveliness."<sup>o</sup> 