



Exploring the World of Butterflies

by Nancy Weiss

Over the past three years, I have been leading “butterfly walks” at the MBG site. When the temperatures get at least above 65° we begin to see these colorful insects flying around and we go to find them. A butterfly walk is a chance to see different butterflies and learn about them.

First, some science. Scientists study the interactions among all living things to better understand them. They group them by similarities and separate them by differences. Moths and butterflies are similar to each other by being insects (6 jointed legs and an exoskeleton) that fly with 4 wings; 2 on each side. However, they differ from all other flying insects because they have scales on their wings. The group is named for this characteristic: Lepidoptera. Lepid means scale and ptera means wing. Butterflies and also some moths fly only during the day so we may see some moths too on our “butterfly walk“

What we call a butterfly is actually their adult form. Butterflies start out as an egg which ultimately hatches into a tiny worm-like form we call a caterpillar. The caterpillar grows to its proper size and then encases itself in some way (the pupa). While in the pupal stage all of its body parts are rearranged to form wings, antennae, compound eyes, new colors etc. A few weeks later the adult butterfly bursts out. This is a complete metamorphosis.

The adult butterfly may live from 2 to 4 weeks up to 11 months depending on the species. The female always has to lay eggs so that the cycle can start again. The tricky part for her is that she can't lay her eggs on any old plant but only on the right species of plant that her caterpillar can eat. Many know that Monarch butterflies must lay their eggs on milkweed plants in order for a Monarch butterfly to develop but all butterflies have their own special plant or group of plants on which they must lay their eggs. Such a plant is called the “host plant“. This particular plant hosts all the meals for the growing caterpillar.

Adult butterflies need a very different food; one with lots of sugars which we call nectar. Most butterflies can feast on nectar from many different plants. The size of the nectar plant flower often determines if the butterfly will be able to obtain nectar from it. In general, little butterflies need little flowers and big butterflies tend to use bigger flowers. So butterflies need 2 types of plants; host plants and nectar plants.

Next time I'll tell you about the different butterflies that we see on our walks. There are many fascinating things to learn about these insects. Please join us on one of the walks if you can.

Photo Credit: Betty Truax, Jefferson Chapter, VNPS

