

What is good for butterflies is also good for you

By Grazyna Tonkiel

Do you pay attention to the sounds of spring? To the songs of the birds or the choruses of the frogs? For me, the sound of rushing creek water propelled by melting snow is the first cue that prompts nature to wake up after its winter sleep.

Have you ever heard somebody on the King City trails, singing aloud Sergei Rachmaninov’s “Spring Waters” song with the sounds of the rushing creek as background? If so, that was me! For many years, this has been my spring ritual.

Once the creek’s waters awaken, the rest of the world follows. Every bug and blade of grass is in a hurry to begin a new season, everything including butterflies.

Some butterflies overwinter as eggs, others as caterpillars or pupas and some even as imago, the mature insect. While others fly to King Township from the south, like geese.

In Ontario, lepidopterists (people who study butterflies) observed 168 different butterfly species from five families. Depending on the composition of plants growing in your backyard you may meet some of them. As I write this article sitting in my garden under my magnificent linden tree I see quite a few of them.

One morning I freed an accidentally-trapped Painted Lady from my gazebo.

This butterfly derives its name for its painterly coloring – usually salmon pink and orange with a dash of brownish black. Its bold, refined radiance exudes nature’s beauty, while its fragility reminds us of the finality of life. One of my favorite artists Rachel Ruysch, Dutch “natura morta” painter, must have seen the same essence within the Painted Lady when she placed it in her “Bouquet of Flowers” painting that she created over 300 years ago.

The Painted Lady butterflies are so impressive that I have drawn not one, but two portraits of them.

The Painted Lady is a migratory butterfly, escaping northerly latitude cold winter weather by flying towards the

equator only to comeback early spring. It is sometimes called the Thistle butterfly because its caterpillars feed primarily on thistle plants. Surprisingly, last year, I also found them feeding on non-native curry plants in my herb garden. I hope this year the same thing will happen again. The butterfly, I freed this morning, will discover the same plant,

land on it, taste it using its legs, recognized it as suitable caterpillar food and decide to lay eggs. Yes! Surprise, surprise! The butterfly’s taste sensors are located on their legs.

The key to securing an abundance of butterflies in your garden is to start thinking about the needs of caterpillars. Use the mantra “caterpillars equal butterflies!” The caterpillar stage is the most crucial one in the butterfly’s growth cycle. They require a lot of food to develop, are very selective in regards to what they eat, and are very sensitive to chemicals. Taking care of caterpillars is the condition sine qua non for having mature butterflies.

Today, I had another garden visitor, The Great Spangled Fritillary. It is a large butterfly, which to me, looks like a flying sunflower; it has bright orange wings and black marking. This combination of color, reflecting light and flight energy fills the moment with happiness.

Fritillary overwinters in Canada as a newly hatched caterpillar, just three millimeters long, tucked in a blanket of leaves.

Their females are very unusual, as they lay eggs often far away from the food plants that will support future caterpillars. This is an uncommon behavior among butterflies. The Great Spangled Fritillary caterpillars feed on variety of violets. They are seldom seen in our gardens and woodlands, because they feed only at night. If you want to see how they look a flashlight will be handy.

To be graced with an abundance of Fritillaries, plant some violets in your garden and let them spread. The added



bonus is that the flowers look beautifully fragile and smell heavenly. This is exactly what I did many years ago and now I enjoy the benefits, as I see the “sunflower dance” every summer.

There were also a few small butterflies, in particular the Eastern Tailed Blue and Blue Azure, flying around today. They are definitely one of my favorites. Often only 18mm large, their iridescent, French blue azure wings, look like beautiful blue dots on my emerald green lawn, mixing within the vibrant yellow heads of dandelions. That impres-

sionistic bliss causes me to say Bonjour Monsieur Monet, every sunny day when they come to visit.

The reason why I have Tailed Blue and Blue Azure in my garden is quite simple, I grow a lot of clovers, one of the preferred foods for their caterpillars. Remember: caterpillars equal butterflies.

The Eastern Tailed Blue overwinter in Ontario as mature caterpillar hiding in seed pods and the Blue Azure as Chrysalis. My lawn is a mix of clover and grass and it has never been sprayed with chemicals. Each year I seed some white clover to maintain their presence. The reward is unattainable to those who do the opposite and aggressively brand nature to abandon its beautiful variety and grow industrialized, boring, and monochrome grass deserts.

One year I had a few hundred of the

Blue butterflies basking on the top of my clover covered lawn.

This was the indication that my garden is a healthy environment. If you also want butterflies in your garden, do not use any chemicals. Please remember: what is good for butterflies is also good for you.

On the musical note, if you are curious about “Spring Waters” song op.14 nr. 11 by Rachmaninov, and want to hear Spring the same way that I do, please go to my website and listen to my recording of this magnificent composition. Performed by yours truly with the fabulous pianist Ella Susmanek, professor of The Chopin Music Academy in Warsaw, and recorded for the Polish Radio Broadcasting Corporation.

Grazyna Tonkiel is an accomplished opera singer, visual artist and a conservationist. She was the soloist at Polish National Opera and Ballet Theater in Warsaw and won national and international vocal competitions, her butterfly studies are in collections in over 10 countries. She can be reached at her Gallery Solo studio in King City - www.gtonkiel.com.

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Jodi Maranno

“No. I’d like to, though.”



Carter Mitchell

“I’ve seen a bit of it.”



Amy Sifton

“I know how Canada is doing, that’s it.”



Lou Davey

“I haven’t had much time to watch, but I’ve been keeping up with it.”