

For all the presentations, camps and exhibits we do surrounding Michigan reptiles & amphibians, I relish the opportunity to teach about butterflies. At the risk of sounding pretentious (*a pretentious naturalist?*), I find other lessons on butterflies that I've seen in schools and at nature centers to be stagnant, repetitive and sometimes even inaccurate. Monarchs and Painted Ladies are, by far, the species of choice over a long list of butterflies out there, and, for younger children, story time with *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* is a given.

I consciously avoid any discussion of Monarchs, but I do have plenty to say about *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Eric Carle would not be pleased with my commentary. In fact, I should probably look into what constitutes slander.

Why no Monarchs? It seems like nearly everyone knows the basics already - the caterpillar feeds on milkweed, the chrysalis looks like a hanging green jewel, it flies to Mexico at summer's end, yada, yada... I say teach 'em something new!

There are over 100 species of butterflies in Michigan, each with its own individual beauty, life cycle twists and larval food plants. With a little know-how, any of them can be found outside and their caterpillars reared into adults. Every new species studied is further acknowledgement of the natural diversity around us.

The Very Hungry Caterpillar contains and teaches a number of glaring fundamental errors regarding butterfly anatomy and the process of metamorphosis. I meet many adults who cling to these early-sown perceptions as fact. Here are a few.

We'll give the author some latitude in his "anthropomorphizing-up" the caterpillar's head with human-like eyeballs and a nose, but since we don't have antennae sprouting from our crania, the pair of antennae adorning the *Very Hungry* is going too far. No real caterpillar has them.



The Real Very Hungry Caterpillar above is one of many Luna Moth larvae raised in our classroom this summer among other species. No antennae on this one!

If a caterpillar spins a cocoon, a butterfly will never emerge – unless it's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, that is. In reality, the very sight of an unknown caterpillar spinning a cocoon clinches the fact that some species of moth will emerge. A real butterfly caterpillar will either suspend itself upside down or at an angle from a tree limb or other surface, or sometimes bury itself in leaf litter on the ground. The larval skin is then molted, and it has completed metamorphosis into the chrysalis stage. It does not "spin" a chrysalis. The insect *is* the chrysalis - the term for a butterfly pupa.

Thirdly, take a close look at a live butterfly nectaring from a flower in your yard or a photograph like the one below, then look at the book's last page. The butterfly's wings are clearly attached *upside-down!*?



This Viceroy Butterfly displays wide-tipped, triangular front wings. Flip it upside down and its shape matches the deformed butterfly on the VHC's last page.

lost book with a great little field guide about real butterflies and moths, like *The Little Golden Guide to Butterflies & Moths* that I grew up with and still use often, or *The Peterson First Guide to Caterpillars*. Both are accurately illustrated and list larval food plants to get you started on your quest to intimately explore lepidopteran diversity.

The widest part of its wingspan is at the bottom of its wings. In reality, each wing of the front pair on butterflies and moths is triangular. With few exceptions, measurement between the outer tips of the front wings is the widest part of the wingspan. The lower pair is generally more rounded and less wide.

In presentations, I jokingly, but half-seriously, suggest that if I was elected Nature Mayor or Nature President, one of my first orders of business would be to demand that all of these books be gathered up, piled in the town square and burned! I then add that for anyone who is feeling sad over their book's incineration, we'll have lots of marshmallows available for toasting. For anyone still feeling sad, we will replace the

-Jim McGrath

August 9-12 Nature Discovery Camp Still Has Openings

This week is targeted for 7-8 year-olds, but children a year younger or up to 10 years will also be allowed. Students will be exposed to a wide range of Michigan wildlife through a mix of inside and outside activities, including hands-on studies with the largest collection of live Michigan frogs, salamanders, turtles, and snakes found anywhere in the state, in addition to bird-watching, insect-collecting, tree, shrub, vine, and wildflower identification, pond life studies, and more. We will also take short drives around the neighborhood to experience a diversity of habitats and wildlife. Students will have the opportunity to take a larval insect pet home to rear into an adult, too.



FEE: \$160. Contact us to reserve a spot.



Find Nature Discovery on Facebook

Watch for updates, photos and more.

Look for Us at These Locations Around Michigan in August...

If you're in the neighborhood, catch us at one of these locations on the dates below.

Saturday, August 7

Leila Arboretum (Battle Creek), 10:30am – Backyard Critters.

Hoffmaster State Park (Muskegon), 7pm – Michigan Snakes.

Mitchell State Park (Cadillac), 10am & 1pm, Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians.

Saturday, August 14

Hartwick Pines State Park (Grayling), 7pm – Michigan Snakes.

Waterloo Recreation Area (Chelsea), 7pm – Michigan Frogs.

Sunday, August 15

Hartwick Pines State Park (Grayling), Seldom Seen MI Reptiles & Amphibians.

Mon-Wed, August 16-18

UP State Fair (Escanaba), MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit.

Saturday, August 21

Huron Co. Nature Center (Port Austin), 10:30am – Michigan Wildlife.

Wed-Sat, August 25-28

Otsego Co. Fair, MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit

Saturday, August 28

Sierra Club Retreat (Stony Lake) 1pm – Michigan Wetland Wildlife.



Jim photographed this Red-spotted Purple probing for nutrients on an unpaved road near Cadillac. The red spots for which it is named are found on the underside of the wings.

Contact us, contact the host of the event, or check the internet for more details.

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