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***If You Plant It They Will Come...***

Especially, this year! Over the past couple of weeks, many people have asked me to identify a butterfly that is suddenly around the yard, and everywhere else in great abundance. The Red Admiral has exploded on to the scene in Lower Michigan. It is a uniquely-marked species with about a two-inch wingspan. The dark brown background color helps to highlight a diagonal, bright orange stripe on each forewing and another orange stripe on the trailing edge of each hind wing. Nearly every backyard has a few. Nearly every country yard has a dozen or more.

Michigan is home to over 100 species of butterflies, but, by and large very few of them are acknowledged by the average citizen. The Monarch is the exception. Most people are also aware of its larval food plant, the milkweed, and with that knowledge, may choose to grow it purposefully in the yard. In fact, the larva of nearly every species of butterfly or moth is specialized to feed on only one or a handful of plants. Very simply, if the larval food plant does not exist in a given neighborhood, the butterfly will rarely be seen. The majority of our society, undereducated in this simple ecology, fails to recognize butterfly diversity, and, by extension, the necessary plant diversity required to support it.

For many gardeners, anything that sprouts in the yard that is not lawn, or was not otherwise purchased and planted, is dismissed as a weed and physically or chemically removed. Ironically, some of the same gardeners that plant pretty flowers to attract butterflies are simultaneously doing things in their yards that strongly discourage, if not completely eliminate butterfly reproduction.

The following statement holds true not just for butterflies, but for every wild thing on our landscape. It's also a great recipe for extinction: Take away a living thing's ability to make more of itself, and its population will crash. Indeed, the majority of our butterflies are not with us because of anything special we give them in our yards, but because of the wild growth on the roadsides and in untended fields that surround our yards which provide them the means to reproduce.

In Michigan, the Red Admiral attempts to overwinter as an adult. Most individuals freeze and perish, but a few that find an especially sheltered location may survive. However, the bulk of Red Admiral activity here in the spring is borne from butterfly action to our south, where adults abundantly survive the less rigorous winters. These spring emergents harbor a powerful tendency to fly north.

The number of Red Admirals varies greatly from year to year. Most summers, this species is just one of many to be seen and noted in Michigan. Other years, it can be quite difficult to find. Then, maybe only once or twice a decade, there are years like this. If you pay attention on a sunny day this spring, no matter where you are, you'll catch a glimpse of a "fly-by." This is a strong, fast-flying butterfly that zig-zags a lot. It can be difficult to keep your eye on one for long, but it is so crazy-abundant this spring, any medium-sized, dark butterfly that flits past in an instant can be assumed to be a Red Admiral.

Last week, on a sunny afternoon, I was traveling west on I-96 returning from a presentation in metro-Detroit. Several per minute passed in front of the windshield as they crossed the interstate. Which direction were they headed? You've got it. Left to right - almost unanimously north. Pay attention while driving east-west on any rural road. Just this afternoon, while gazing eastward over the 100-foot expanse of lawn behind our patio, they were passing at the rate of 10-20 butterflies per minute. Wow!

One spring several years ago, I was invited to present to a garden club on a backyard wildlife topic. Before leaving home I dug a half dozen small stinging nettles from the yard and transplanted them into plastic pots. When I arrived I set them on the table in front of me as I prepared for the presentation. While passing to take a seat one woman after another frowned, winced, scowled or looked befuddled at the sight. Some even commented, "Nettle? I hate that plant!"

At the presentation's conclusion, gardeners were scrambling to take one of the limited supply home. Some even offered to pay for it. They had just learned that nettle is the primary food plant for the larva of the Red Admiral, and that the larvae of a few other Michigan species will feed on it, too, including the Question Mark, the Eastern Comma and the Milbert's Tortoise Shell. I mentioned to the club that in most summers I am able to find the larva of at least one of these species, most often the Red Admiral, on almost any patch of nettle. Conversely, in well-kept neighborhoods and neatly-groomed subdivisions the nettle is conspicuously absent – and so are these butterflies.

It is not a far stretch to think of a Red Admiral as a beautifully colored and patterned aerial reincarnation of a stinging nettle. What a simple and direct ecological relationship, and an easy one to encourage and observe. This spring and summer, more than most, if you grow it, they will come!

-Jim McGrath

## *Enroll for Summer Day Camps Now*

Go to our website and click on the 2012 Summer Day Camps link for all the details. All weeks still have openings. Here is a list of the weeks, topics and recommended age ranges.

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| June 18-21   | Michigan Birds & Birding (9 yrs & up)<br>Nature Discovery (7-9 yrs) |
| June 25-28   | Birding for Visually Impaired (10 & up)                             |
| July 9-12    | Nature Discovery (7-9 yrs)  |
| July 16-19   | Budding Naturalists (5-6 yrs)*                                      |
| July 23-26   | Free-Range Naturalist (11 yrs & up)                                 |
| Jul 30-Aug 2 | Okemos Nursery School Week*   |
| Aug 6-9      | MI Reptiles & Amphibians (9 yrs & up)                               |
| Aug 20-23    | Insect Collecting (9 yrs & up)                                      |
| Aug 27-30    | Insect Collecting for MS & HS Students                              |



*Orioles are returning to Michigan now. Place an orange half in a conspicuous place outside a window. They are fond of bananas, too. Students enrolled in birding camp will get great looks at this species as well as more than 80 others the week of June 18. Get your middle school or high school student off the couch and outdoors.*

\* Budding Naturalists and Okemos Nursery School weeks are half-days, however, Budding Naturalists also offers a full-day option.

## Open Hours

**Sunday, May 6**  
**1 to 5pm; \$5 admission**

**2pm Presentation**

# **Red Admiral** **BOOM**



*Red Admirals are hard to miss on sunny days this spring. We'll help you to know and enjoy them more!*

The Red Admiral butterfly has undergone a population boom in Lower Michigan this spring. Find out why in Jim's Powerpoint presentation, **Red Admiral Boom**, at 2pm. Participants will learn about Red Admiral ecology, especially in relation to an otherwise, unpopular plant – stinging nettle. Discover what other butterfly species depend on this plant. Learn how to find and rear their larvae. It's a great and timely hobby or lesson for the home or the classroom. At the presentation's conclusion we'll walk around outside to view butterflies and note various wild-growing larval food plants that you may consider planting in your yard. We'll also have potted small nettles available to any interested participants for a donation while the supply lasts.



*Stinging Nettle. If you grow it, they will come.*

As always, come early or stay late because there is a LOT to do.

- Before, during or after the presentation our staff is always ready to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit.
  - Feed frogs inside their tanks. We can even take the big bull frog onto the patio to watch it leap around and gobble up worms.
  - A sampling of the abundant invertebrate life in our vernal pond will be available for viewing in large pans.
  - Watch garter snakes and turtles feast on worms, fish, tadpoles and frogs.
  - Hand-feed a box turtle.
- Hold a big black rat snake. See a clutch of incubating rat snake eggs, due to hatch in late May.
  - On the trail, let our staff help you identify three invasive species of plants that are decimating native wildflowers and trees in many area woodlots.
  - On the trail, ask a staff person to help you identify singing birds "by ear."
  - Photo ops galore! After the presentation, visitors with cameras are encouraged to photograph any of the reptiles and amphibians on hand. We may even be able to take some outside for photos in a more natural state.
  - Refreshments available, too!





Exhibiting at MDEQ's Earth Day event, April 19.

## *Around the State*

- ❖ *Saturday, May 5: 2pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Seven Ponds Nature Center, Dryden. Public is welcome.*
- ❖ *Saturday, May 19: 6am-12pm. Clare County Birding; Clare Conservation District, Harrison. Registration required.*
- ❖ *Saturday, June 2: 12pm. MI Wildlife Presentation; North Country Trail Association, Ludington. Public is welcome.*
- ❖ *Sunday, June 3: 2pm. MI Giant Silk Moths; Sarett Nature Center, Benton Harbor. Public is welcome.*

### *After Dark*

## *Guided Vernal Pond Wading Offered by Appointment in May*

Experience the unforgettable sights and surround-sound cacophony of breeding tree frogs by way of a flashlight wade on a warm May evening. Bring a strong flashlight (head-lamp is best) and wading clothes (old pants, shoes, socks work fine). It's a nature photographers dream. We'll also supply you with a small bucket and net to scoop myriad invertebrates from the living waters. The best nights are warm ones (60 & above) with little to no wind. Watch the weather forecast and give us a call or drop an email for an impromptu appointment for groups of any size up to ten. It's a unique opportunity for families, adults and photographers. Our base small group fee is \$10/person.



## *“Breeding Birds of the U.P.” Tour, June 12-16, 2012*

There's still time to join our economical and laid-back 5-day guided tour in Michigan's Upper Peninsula within an intimate group of only 4 adults. Our goal is to experience as many species as possible, emphasizing locations to tally specific U.P. gems, like Connecticut Warbler, LeConte's Sparrow and the endangered Yellow Rail. COST: \$650 (\$250 deposit), includes all transportation, lodging, 4 breakfasts and 4 lunches. Contact us to enroll or for more information.

Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!

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