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*A mid-April-arriving Red Admiral sips from the blossoms on an ornamental honeysuckle next to the house.*

## **Red Admiral Boom**

A few weeks ago virtually *everyone* headed outside to marvel at a celestial event high overhead. Little did they know that there was a concurrent natural phenomenon taking place much closer to the ground and all around them.

A lepidopteran mass-movement has been taking place outdoors here and throughout the Midwest, viewable in country settings as well as in city neighborhoods over the past month, and it continues even now. Indeed, it's shaping up to be a 'boom' year in Michigan and surrounding states for the Red Admiral butterfly.

Since the first few scattered sunny, warm days in early April I've spotted many hundreds of this dazzling medium-sized butterfly; almost exclusively orienting north after emerging from chrysalises in Mexico and southernmost states. Surely, these are early spring numbers of a magnitude not seen around these parts since 2012 (<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20May12.pdf>).

Like many prolific organisms, the Red Admiral is quite cyclic from one year to the next. Also, few to none survive the winter this far north in any stage of the life cycle. Local populations are annually renewed by the arrival of spring migrants from the south.

Most springs will produce a relative middling northward flight of individuals into Michigan and beyond. Over the summer that follows, with a little diligence, their spiny larvae can be found hidden inside the lengthwise folded leaves of many - but not all - patches of nettle.

Less commonly, a particular spring experiences a flat-out 'bust' for migratory Red Admiral action. Sightings of the butterfly and the larvae are sparse at best throughout the ensuing summer.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, occurring every decade or so, a certain spring produces an explosive invasion of migrants. It's definitely happening in 2024.

This spring, on any relatively warm, sunny morning or afternoon, one can merely stand in an open area, face east or west, then watch the air space in front of you and into the distance. It won't take long to

glimpse a dark butterfly, only half the wingspan of a Monarch, zip by at low altitude - often eye-level or a mere few feet off the ground. Then another... and another. Nearly all are, yes, bee-lining northward across your field of view. They fly so quickly, though, that any one individual remains in sight for merely a few seconds.

Armed with this nugget of awareness, commuters or other motorists who find themselves traveling down any east-west road or highway can watch for them especially in sunny/warm weather conditions, and even keep a tally. The dark form of one butterfly after another zips past the windshield in the time it takes to blink.

As the calendar has turned to May and the landscape rapidly greens, the migratory flights are beginning to subside in Lower Michigan, but already, recent-arrivals are everywhere. Red Admirals are currently populating yards, parks and myriad open natural areas in uncommon abundance but with precious little time left in their brief lives.



*Even plain dirt at the base of a wall is a good enough basking spot in early morning sun.*

Energetic individuals can be difficult to follow on the wing as they go about their butterfly-business because of their rapid, zig-zaggy flight paths. If you're quick with your cell phone camera you might catch one alighting briefly to sip nectar from a dandelion. You may also catch one siphoning nutrients from a stagnant puddle, a decaying piece of fruit or even a moist clump of dung. Admirals will alight on virtually any surface to bask in the sunshine. If you hold still, that might include you!

A territorial male will chase other males away and pursue passing females that in all likelihood - given the abundance of suitors - have already mated. Fertile females are fixated on locating sprouting nettles on which to deposit eggs.

For anyone who deems and treats stinging nettle like an irritating and valueless noxious weed, keep in mind that the very existence of this bright, spritely butterfly, as well as three other Michigan-native butterfly species, depends on it. For more details, read 'The 180 on Stinging Nettle' (<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20June22.pdf>).

Red Admiral eggs are laid individually on the upper or underside of a leaf, usually adhered among the topmost tender growth. One such tiny, bright green dot to the unaided eye transforms under a magnifying glass into a glistening, prickly, barrel cactus.

I began locating the first Admiral eggs on sprouting nettles two weeks ago. I nipped a few target leaves and put them in an airtight jar. Students in Montessori Children's House, Stepping Stones Montessori and Okemos Nursery School (where I give Michigan-specific nature lessons every week) were treated to magnified views of the eggs. I also dug small patches of sprouting nettles from our yard, potted them and gave them to classrooms to keep outside the window. I assured the students that with the volume of Admirals out there eventually a female will locate their nettle and deposit eggs on it.

Those that I had collected hatched within a few days. The miniscule larvae are currently growing on fresh nettle leaves in jars at our nature center.

I'll no doubt continue to show the growing Admiral larvae in other contracted presentations in schools, to visitors at our nature center, and elsewhere through the end of the school year. By month's end some will be available for viewing after having transformed into the chrysalis stage. That of the Red Admiral is truly a muted gem: grayish brown like a twig but sporting scattered speckles of liquid gold. Additionally, two rows of gold-tinged spines adorn the dorsal side.



Try this! You can find Admiral eggs or newly-hatched larvae now on virtually any patch of nettles growing in sunshine. A spiny caterpillar hides atop the leaf on which it is feeding by folding the leaf lengthwise around it with silk. Search for Admiral caterpillars on any nettle stalk simply by scanning for leaves folded in this way. Note: a tiny, newly-hatched caterpillar hides in an equally tiny fold at the base or edge of a leaf near the apex.

If you'd like to raise a caterpillar to the chrysalis and adult stages, simply snip the folded leaf with the caterpillar inside. Then snip more leaves on which it can feed, then place all in a medium air-tight jar. Do NOT punch holes in the lid. Empty the droppings, wipe condensation from the inside of the jar and add fresh leaves each day as needed.

Only two to three weeks later, when the caterpillar eventually molts into chrysalis form, open the jar, remove the leaf to which it is attached and tape it so that it dangles from a window sash, doorway or other prominent place. This way, the butterfly can be observed ten or twelve days later when it emerges and commences to expand its wings.



*Three tiny larvae are hidden in separate folded leaves the the top of a nettle.*



*This opened nettle leaf reveals a much larger 4<sup>th</sup> instar larva.*

About thirty minutes after full expansion you can often ease your finger under the butterfly's legs and coax it to perch there. This is a perfect window of time to obtain photos of butterfly-in-hand before you take it outdoors for release.

Several generations of Red Admirals are in store throughout the upcoming summer. Searching for, then raising larvae is an impactful experience for children (and adults) of any age. While many a caterpillar-raising enthusiast laments the decline in Monarchs, the abundant opportunity provided by the Red Admiral this summer is a welcome consolation prize.

Would you like help getting started? Contact us to make an appointment almost any day at our big, little nature center north of Williamston. We can search the nettles on our property, then arrange for you to take your own Red Admiral caterpillar home to raise to 'butterflyhood.'

*-Jim McGrath*

## ***Around the State in May***

***Sunday, May 19: 10am-2pm. Michigan Frogs Exhibit; E. Ingham Farmers Market, Williamston.***

***Wednesday, May 22: 6-7:30pm. Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Emerson Elementary, Ann Arbor.***



# Nature Discovery

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## Visit Our Nature Center by Appointment

**Suggested Minimum Donation:  
\$5/person/hour**

The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Individual adults, couples, individual families and small groups are welcome to schedule an intimate indoor/outdoor visit to what we call “The Biggest Little Nature Center in Michigan,” and “Home to the Largest Zoo of Michigan-native Reptiles and Amphibians.” The unique hands-on experiences here are unrivaled in any conventional zoo or nature center! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level.

Identify and feed “the grand slam of Michigan turtles,” all ten species native to our state, as they swim in pools at your feet! Meet, pet and feed “Milberta”, our always hungry Red-footed tortoise.

Meet and even handle all of the ten Species of Michigan native snakes on hand here. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Rat Snake – the largest in the state. You might even get to see it constrict and eat a chipmunk – a common wild prey item!

Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders to identify and feed. Take a guided walk around the yard and on our trails to identify birds, insects, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

Contact us for more info or to make an appointment.





# *Nature Discovery Day Camps*

There are currently openings left in the following day camp sessions...

## *Mid-Michigan*

### *Field Birding*

**June 10-13; 8am - 2pm**

**For middle to high school students**



## *Nature Discovery Day Camp*

**August 5-8; 9am - 3pm**

**For students 7-9 years old**

For details and fees for any of these weeks see the summer day camps page in our March 2024 newsletter:

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Mar24.pdf>

*We are grateful for all our supporters, including these generous donors this past month...*

*Jann Nestell  
Gregg & Tiller Landick  
Matt Johnstone  
Mary Lou Turnbull*



# ***Recommended Reads During Bird Migration Season***

Texas Skyscrapers are Going Dark to Keep Billions of Birds Safe

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240410-how-switching-off-lights-stops-migrating-birds-collisions-with-buildings>

These Tricks Make Wind Farms More Bird-Friendly

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240425-these-tricks-made-wind-farms-more-bird-friendly>

-JM

*The next generation would be justified in looking back at us and asking, “What were you thinking? Couldn’t you hear what the scientists were saying? Couldn’t you hear what Mother Nature was screaming at you?” - Al Gore*

*I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act like you would in a crisis. I want you to act like your house is on fire, because it is. - Greta Thunberg*

*The personal actions that cut climate pollution fast are to go flight-, car-, and meat-free. Start with the one that feels most feasible for you; if you can’t totally go without, aim to cut your consumption today at least in half. – Kimberly Nicholas, Under the Sky We Make*

*What if we had storytelling mechanisms that said it is important that you know about the well-being of wildlife in your neighborhood? –Robin Wall Kimmerer*

Become a fan of ***Nature Discovery*** on Facebook!

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