

# COLUMBIA GORGE INTERPRETIVE CENTER MUSEUM

# EXPLORATIONS



## *Butterfly Watching – A Sunny Day Pastime*

by John Davis

The Columbia River Gorge and its surrounding areas offer many kinds of opportunities for enjoying the outdoors. Many recreationists enjoy the outdoors for the chance to bicycle, kayak, kite-board, wind-surf, hike, and ski. Other recreationists enjoy a more observational recreation, such as bird-watching, mushrooming, plant identification, photography, and butterfly watching. This article will take a look at some of the butterflies and the opportunities for seeing them in the Columbia River Gorge and adjoining areas.

The low elevation passage of the Columbia River through the Cascade Mountains creates many types of habitats, weather patterns, and microclimates. Elevation goes from near sea level to over 4,900 feet on Mt. Defiance. Rainfall increases from about 40 inches at the west end of the Columbia Gorge to over 100 inches at higher elevations in the Bonneville Dam area, and then decreases to 10-15 inches in the eastern parts of the Columbia Gorge. Plant communities vary from Douglas fir/hemlock forest in the western parts of the Gorge to mixed Garry oak/Ponderosa pine woodland in the central and eastern parts to grasslands in the eastern areas of the Columbia Gorge. The north and south facing slopes of the Gorge walls have very

different amounts of sunshine. All of this variation creates many types of habitats that can support many species of plants, vertebrates, and invertebrates.

In this area butterflies can usually be found starting in March and continuing into October, depending on the weather and temperatures. We will look at some of the butterflies that one might see during the time of year that they are active and how one might find them. There are about 100 species of butterflies that might be found in this area of Washington and Oregon. Butterflies start out as eggs and spend varying amounts of time as caterpillars before the amazing transformation to an adult butterfly. The study of caterpillars is another fascinating story, but we won't spend much time on them in this article. For those that are interested, the recent book, *Life Histories of Cascadia Butterflies* by David James and David Nunnallee, contains an abundance of new information and is highly recommended.

How does one increase the chances of seeing some of the variety of butterflies that occur in the area? Learning about the habitats where the different species are usually found is a big help. Using resources on the internet, mobile devices, field guides and books provide information that is very use-

ful for the identification and ecology of the various species. Binoculars are very useful in making it easier to see some of the features that help in identification. Fortunately, several manufacturers are making binoculars for butterfly-watchers that can focus much closer than most binoculars — as close as 2 feet. This allows a much more detailed view of the butterfly. If a butterfly is basking (a behavior where the butterfly helps regulate its own body temperature by opening or closing its wings to absorb more or less heat from the sun) or nectaring (the butterfly obtains nectar from a flower with its proboscis), it is useful to move slowly with no abrupt movement and maintain a low profile when approaching the butterfly. Try to avoid letting your shadow pass over the butterfly as this often startles it and causes it to fly.

#### **Mourning Cloak**



One of the first butterflies of the season that one might see is the Mourning Cloak. It actually overwinters as an adult and might appear in late winter or early spring anytime there is a sunny day with temperatures higher than 55 F. A good place to search for them is in areas where you can find willows, often along streams or ponds. They usually don't appear in large numbers, but they are fairly easy to recognize, even when flying.

#### **Sheridan's Green Hairstreak**



Another early season butterfly is a beautiful one called Sheridan's Green Hairstreak. It has an emerald green color that reflects back to you when the sun hits the wings, which are usually held vertically. It is only about the size of a nickel and often basks on open ground or stony soil in the low elevation sections of the eastern parts of the Gorge. The males often perch on their territory and fly up to challenge any other passing butterflies. Sometimes it will be basking on early season plants, such as the Desert-parsley or wild buckwheats. It can also be seen at higher elevations as temperatures warm and the season progresses.

#### **Sara's Orangetip**



In mid to late March in the eastern parts of the Columbia River Gorge, one often sees a small, mostly white to pale yellowish butterfly with orange towards the wing-tips fly by. This is the Sara's Orangetip. When nectaring or basking, the wings are often held in a vertical position

and the underside of the wings show a very different mottled dark and light pattern than the upper surface of the wings. One of its favorite nectar plants is the Small Phlox (*Phlox gracilis*) which starts its flowering early in the season. The Sara's Orangetip will often fly past other plants that are flowering and then stop for this very small Phlox to nectar for a moment. Sometimes you will find a mating pair on a plant or on the ground. The pair is less likely to fly and allows a better opportunity to observe the attractive patterns and color. Sara's Orangetip flies until August and can be found in many different semi-open habitats, but not usually in dense forests.

#### **Propertius Duskywing**



If one visits an area that has Garry oak stands or woodlands between late March into June, you will probably notice a fast-flying brownish butterfly, but may not get a good look at it. Although there are other similar looking species, it very likely could be a Propertius Duskywing. The caterpillars of the Propertius Duskywing are totally dependent on oak as a larval food. The easiest ways to get a good look at the butterfly is either to watch for them nectaring on Balsamroot or other flowers, or find a spot where the ground is damp from a seep or puddle. This species and many other butterfly and moth species visit these damp areas. This behavior is called puddling. The visitors are usually males and thought to be getting some minerals or micronutrients from the damp soil. Often one can find

numerous individuals of a variety of butterfly species at one of these seeps. Although the Propertius Duskywing isn't very colorful, the upper sides of the wings have a nice pattern of shades of grays and browns.

#### **Western Tiger Swallowtail**



Almost everyone that wanders about in the Columbia River Gorge has probably seen at least one of the several species of swallowtail butterflies that occur in the area. One of the most common and widespread is the Western Tiger Swallowtail. It occurs in many habitats, including parks and gardens. It nectars on a variety of flowers and is also exhibits puddling behavior. The upper surface of the wings is a bright yellow with vertical black markings. A similar looking butterfly that is also very common is the Pale Tiger Swallowtail. The surface of its upper wings is a pale yellow with the black stripes being slightly wider. Both species can be found from late April into late summer.

#### **Western Tailed Blue**



In our area there are about a dozen different butterflies that are called Blues. Most are quite small with a wing span of about an inch, but can usually be identified if the lower surface of the wings can be viewed. Most male blue butterflies have an upper surface that is usually a bright blue while the females have a darker blue-gray coloration. When the wings are held vertically the undersides of the different species show species specific patterns of spots, lines, and some color on a whitish background which aid in the identification. One species that can be readily identified without seeing the underside is the Western Tailed Blue. It has a “tail” on the edge of each hindwing. When the wings are held vertically, they appear to be short antennae and may act to trick a predator into attacking the decoy antennae instead of the real antennae on the head, giving the butterfly a chance to escape with only some possible wing damage instead of becoming a meal for the predator. The Western Tailed Blue flies from March until September. Males of this species and many of the other Blues can often be found at puddles and on damp soil where you may observe them more easily. They nectar on many flowering plants and the females lay their eggs on various species in the legume family.

#### **Edith’s Checkerspot**



The Checkerspots and Crescent butterflies are a colorful group with a color variety of reds, oranges, yellows, and blacks. Some species are very similar looking and

are hard or impossible to identify in the field. One of the prettiest is the Edith’s Checkerspot. It can be readily identified if you can observe the underside of the hindwing. It may not be easily seen in this black and white version of the photo, but there is a dark line running through the reddish orange band between the two light colored bands. It is called the “editha line”, which helps separate this species from several other similar looking ones. This species is usually found at higher elevations in semi-open meadows and flies from April through August. They often lay their eggs on various species in the snap-dragon family.

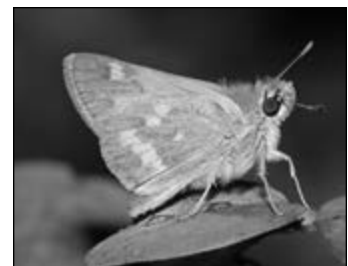
#### **Mylitta Crescent**



The Mylitta Crescent can appear almost anywhere, from vacant lots to forests and from low elevation up to fairly high elevation in the mountains. It can be found from March to October and is often one of the last butterflies of the season seen in mountain meadows. The females lay their eggs on various species of thistles and also nectar on them and a variety of other flowers. Males will often be seen patrolling up and down a stretch of gravel road or trail guarding their territory.

#### **Woodland Skipper**

There are many different species of Skippers in our area, nearly all



of which are small, brown, and fly fast. The antennae of Skippers differ from other types of butterflies in that the tips of the antennae show a slight crook or bend, while other butterflies usually have a small knob at the tips. The one you are most likely to notice is the Woodland Skipper. It does quite well any where there are some grassy areas that aren't groomed like a golf course. The female uses a variety of grasses as the host plants for the eggs. The adults are most common in the later part of the summer from July until September. They will nectar on many kinds of native and ornamental flowering plants. I've seen as many as a dozen nectaring on lavender plants in my yard. Skippers often hold their wings a little differently than most other butterflies. The hind wing often remains at an angle away from the forewing when they are resting. It's best seen when looking down at the Skipper. The pattern of spots on the lower hind wing in the photo is characteristic of this species. Other species also have their distinct patterns. The Skippers are a challenging group, but are fun to try and identify.

#### **Western Pine Elfin**



The Western Pine Elfin is a beautiful little butterfly that is found near pines and is more common on the eastern slopes of the Cascades. Appearing in March and flying until August, males of this butterfly perch on the outer branches of Ponderosa pine and wait for females to pass by. They often perch at about eye level and when

you walk by they will often rapidly fly out check you out and then quickly retreat to another or the same perch. The underside of the hind wing, especially of the male, has subtle purple pinkish coloration and can be very pretty. The Western Pine Elfin often nectars on flowers such as desert parsley (*Lomatium*spp) and yarrow. Eggs are laid at the base of pine needles.

Residential gardens and city, county, and state parks are often good places to look for butterflies. A home flower garden can be planted to offer nectar plants that are available during the times butterflies are flying. By watching which flowers are visited by butterflies, one can increase the chances of developing a garden visited by a variety of species. There are many resources available for determining which plants are best for the area where you live. Extension agencies, web resources, and books on butterfly gardening are good places to look.

In addition to trying to find and identify butterflies, photographing them can be very rewarding, but sometimes can be frustrating. Many modern digital SLRs and point and shoot cameras are capable of taking excellent photos. What are some ways that can increase the chances of successful butterfly photography? One can use the same approach techniques for photography as are used for watching. Butterflies are cold-blooded so going out in the morning when the temperatures are a little cooler and they are a little sluggish might allow one to get a closer and have a little more time for a photo. Learn about the habitats and behavior of the various species.

The bright sun can create harsh shadows, so be aware of the direction of the light. It's hard for the camera to capture very bright areas and dark shadows at the same time. Try to position yourself to make the light more even, but avoid casting your shadow over the butterfly. Don't forget about the background behind the butterfly, you can sometimes get disappointing

results if the background is distracting. If you want to try to get as much as possible in focus, try to align the plane of the back of the camera with the plane of the wings, whether they are held open or closed. A smaller aperture, such as f8 to f16, helps to increase the amount of the subject that is in focus. The shutter speed can vary depending on the camera, lens, and hand steadiness, but 1/200 to 1/250 of a second or faster can help stop motion blur. If the butterfly is on a flower, even a light breeze can cause movement of the plant and make focusing more challenging. Winds are often lighter earlier in the day than during the afternoon. Keep these techniques in mind

when you are photographing and you will often be surprised how well the photos look.

I hope this short article about a few of our area butterflies will inspire you to go out and try your luck at butterfly watching or butterfly photography. It is a hobby that can be done for a lifetime, starting even as a young child. It is a good reason to go out on a sunny day, and is good exercise even if you don't see any butterflies. Don't worry about not being able to identify or get close to every butterfly you see. Watch what they do and where they are and your success will improve.