

washingtonpost.com

Winging It for the Sake of Science

Annual Butterfly Count Draws Enthusiasts, Eager Amateurs

By Charity Corkey
Special to loudounextra.com
Thursday, August 7, 2008; LZ03

Adults do not often get to spend a large part of a day chasing butterflies, but that was the mission Sunday for about 45 people who took part in the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's annual butterfly count.

Clad in hikers' clothing and equipped with backpacks and binoculars, six teams of volunteers began searching for the delicate creatures at 9 a.m. throughout Loudoun County, and they continued into the late afternoon.

"In 15 minutes, any fool can learn," one of the counters, Fred Bogar, said as he compared identifying butterflies with playing golf. "But you spend the rest of your life learning to do it well."

The purpose of the count is to record the region's butterfly species and habitats. The count covers a 7.5-mile radius and includes sections of Leesburg, Lucketts, Waterford, Neersville and Purcellville.

"We go to the same locations each year, so that we're able to see the trends and how things are changing," said Nicole Hamilton, who coordinated the count for the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy.

The presence of butterflies reflects the health of the environment because they are susceptible to pollutants, fertilizers and pesticides, Hamilton said. The number of each species, when compared with counts from previous years, can reveal environmental changes such as an increase in predators or shifting weather patterns. During a drought, for example, counters might see fewer butterflies.

Mona Miller of Herndon, a self-described butterfly enthusiast, said she thinks global warming is bringing new types of butterflies to the area. Miller, whom Hamilton calls "the butterfly lady," has a butterfly garden at her home and said she has been a counter for eight years. "We're getting some new species in the area, like the goatweed butterfly," Miller said.

During the Loudoun count, participants can track populations of up to 85 species.

Counters also pay close attention to butterfly host plants, such as milkweed. In their early stages as caterpillars, butterflies-to-be rely on host plants for nutrition, Hamilton said. Therefore, any changes to the plants can affect the butterfly population. Milkweed is a common host for the ever-popular monarch butterfly.

The most commonly spotted butterfly in Loudoun is the nonnative cabbage white, a European species noted for its pale white wings and ebony specks. Another typical butterfly in the area is the Eastern tiger

Advertisement



Sedaris reads Sedaris
Download it **FREE** today!
audible.com[®]
Learn More

swallowtail, which is bright yellow with zebra-like black stripes. On occasion, someone will spot a rarer species, such as a red-banded hairstreak.

After 12 years of annual butterfly counts, the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy has compiled a substantial amount of data.

This year's numbers won't be finalized until late this month, when Hamilton publishes the results from the six teams.

After the data are collected locally, Hamilton will send the figures to the North American Butterfly Association -- which receives data from counting teams across the country -- for a review of regional and national trends.

"It's really a great chance for us to do citizen science," Hamilton said. "It gets aggregated up to the national level to have some meaning."

The information gathered for Loudoun is also published on the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's Web site, <http://www.loudounwildlife.org>.

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[Washington DC Hotel Rooms](#)

Book Online for Hyatt's Best Hotel Rates on the Internet, Guaranteed.
www.Hyatt.com/WashingtonDC

[Coffee Exposed](#)

A shocking secret coffee co's don't want you to know.
www.coffeefool.com

[Average Redskins' IQ=125](#)

Are You Smarter Than a Redskins Player? Take a Real IQ Test Now!
www.FindIQ.info