

Fluctuating number of fluttering species spotted locally

Annual Connecticut Butterfly Association count held throughout the area

By Sloan Brewster
Senior Staff Writer

There were a record high number of butterflies in the Farmington Valley during this year's annual butterfly count.

One surprise to the folks who performed the count for the Connecticut Butterfly Association was the number of Baltimore Checkerspots seen fluttering through a field on Old Farms Road.

By the end of the visit to the field, which started just before 10 a.m. Saturday, July 12 and lasted about 45 minutes, 14 of the unusual butterflies had been spotted.

Jay Kaplan, executive director of Roaring Brook Nature Center in Canton, who lead the count, attributed the spike in numbers of Checkerspots and the high overall count to the fact that it was performed a week earlier than usual.

Still, he got excited when he saw the black and orange Checkerspots.

"It's really a thing to see," he said, pointing to the graceful insect as it landed on a black-eyed Susan.

When he spotted a bright orange Viceroy, which he said is often confused with a Monarch butterfly, he practically whooped for joy. Seeing butterflies he could not recognize due to the distance also got him fairly excited.

"Now there's something that we want," he said giving chase after a specimen.

When he captured the fluttering creature in his net, he looked carefully to determine its species and decided it should be returned to the nature center for further study.

The number of species counted was also a record, Kaplan said in an email on Monday, July 14. In total there were 44 different species.

"This is two more than the previous record, and quite the surprise in a year when butterflies seem to be down overall," he wrote.

Preparing for the count a day or two beforehand, Kaplan said he anticipated an unusual number of butterflies to be spotted this year, but he was not expecting the number to be so high.

In fact, with the dry weather leaving nectar sources such as butterfly bush, clover and black-eyed Susans all but burned by the hot sun, he anticipated low numbers.

"The dry season has cut down on the



Photo by Sloan Brewster



Courtesy photo

Above, left: Roaring Brook Nature Center Executive Director Jay Kaplan (standing) and volunteer David Leff during the butterfly count. Above, right: a Baltimore Checkerspot

nectar sources," he said during the count, pointing to a bunch of clover whose normally purple flowers had turned straw colored as they strained from lack of moisture.

Kaplan expected to see certain species and knew others would not be around as they were between broods, he said.

For example, by about 10:30 a.m., and after a few stops at sites in the seven-and-a-half mile radius the count covers, he had not seen any Swallow Tails, nor did he expect he would.

Swallow Tails had all just hatched out, he said. Once their eggs hatch, the butterflies all die off. They did get some of the species a little later in the day.

He did not expect to see any Monarchs either, but while pointing out a different species, he mentioned two of the regal species had already been seen that morning.

"I'm surprised we have any," he said.

Last year there were only two Monarchs, but the year before there were 41.

The decline has been caused by a number of things, he said, including unregulated pesticide spraying and genetically altered produce such as corn, which now grows with a pesticide in the kernels that ends up also getting trapped in milkweed, the butterflies' favorite source of nectar.

Climate change, "if you're a proponent of that" is another reason for the

decline, Kaplan said, as was the unusually cold wet June in Mexico last year, which caused about 80 percent of the monarchs to freeze and die off.

Butterflies, like frogs and dragonflies, are an indicator species.

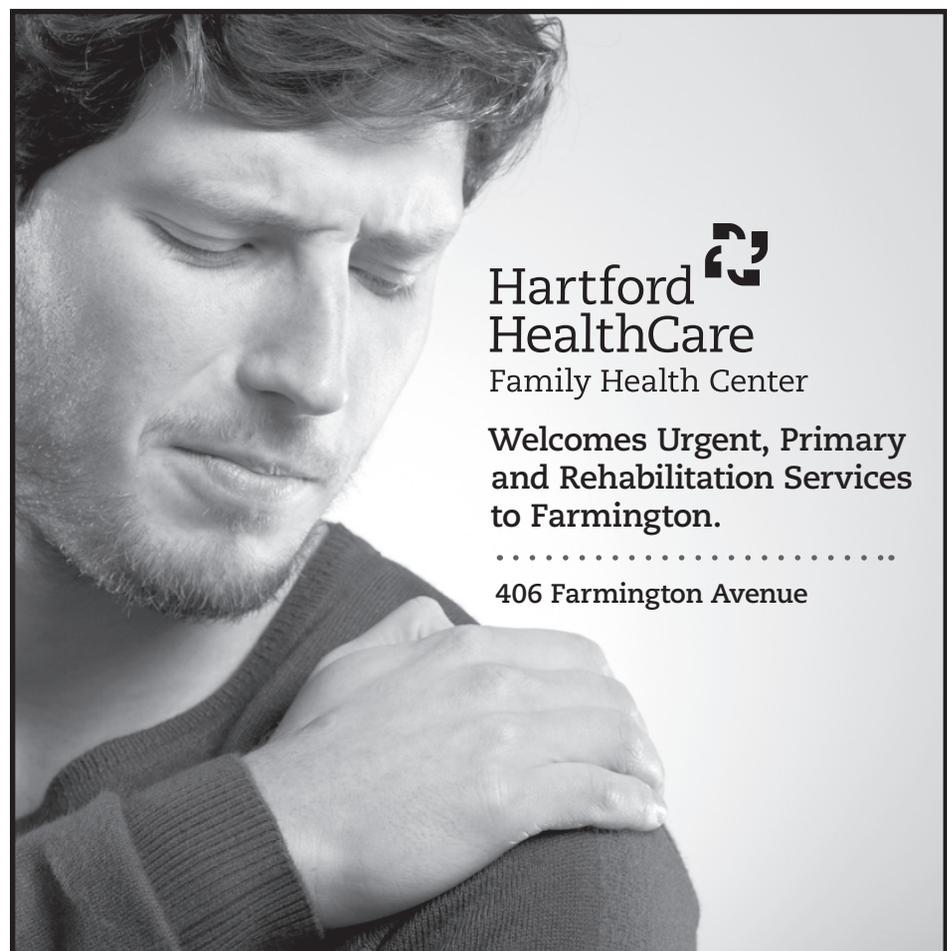
"They tell us about the health of our environment," Kaplan explained.

Fluctuations in their numbers can mean changes to habitats and other environmental fluxes, he said.

Butterflies spotted on the count included Cabbage Whites, Checkeredspots, Orange Sulfurs, Mourning Cloa. David Leff, a local author assisting the count, took a poetic view of seeing the butterflies.

"It's like living in stained glass," he said as he stooped over to snap a photo of a checkerspots, wood nymphs, viceroys, pearl crescents and others.

"It's kind of like a casino, you never know what you're going to get."



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