



Saturday Edition

The Republican.

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JUNE 3, 2006

Butterfly enthusiasts flutter into WMass

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WEST SPRINGFIELD – It is hallowed ground for lepidopterists – at least, as hallowed as any rural dirt road can be.

One of the rarest butterflies in North America, the early hairstreak, had not been seen in Massachusetts in 99 years when

a retired secretary from Pittsfield, Edna Dunbar, spied one in the middle of a dirt road on Mount Greylock in the Berkshire hills in 1988. In fact, as she ate a baloney sandwich on the side of the road, four of the small, mysterious butterflies danced around her.

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Photo courtesy of **BILL BENNER**

The early hairstreak, one of the rarest butterflies in North America, can be found on Mount Greylock in the Berkshire hills.

Butterfly: Enthusiasts set to gather

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This weekend, more than 150 butterfly enthusiasts from around the United States will be in West Springfield at the Best Western Sovereign Hotel for the biennial meeting of the North American Butterfly Association, and a prime destination for field trips – should the rain let up – will be that same dirt road on Mount Greylock, which, over the years, has become a required stop for any serious butterfly chaser.

“It’s like visiting a shrine,” said Rick Cech, a featured speaker at the meeting and author of “Butterflies of the East Coast: An Observer’s Guide.”

“That butterfly is almost impossible to see in most places. Mount Greylock is one of the only places where you can go and have any chance of seeing an early hairstreak,” he said.

Carl H. Kamp, president of the Massachusetts Butterfly

Club, said West Springfield was chosen for the national meeting because of its proximity to habitats that are home to several of the continent’s rarest butterflies. In addition to the early hairstreaks in the Berkshires, in the white cedar swamps around Springfield there are populations of Hessel’s hairstreaks. And a population of bog elfins was discovered in the black spruce-tamarack bogs in northern Worcester County.

It took three trips to Mount Greylock before William H. Benner of West Whately saw and photographed his first early hairstreak, a small, gray-green butterfly with black and orange markings.

“You make the trip and hope,” he said.

The hairstreaks normally stay to the tops of beech trees along the road. They lay their eggs there and the young caterpillars feed on beechnuts.

“That one particular dirt road, they come down from the tree

tops and use it for sunning” and for absorbing minerals from rainwater on the road. However, early hairstreak adults live only from mid-May to mid-June, so there is a narrow window of opportunity to see one, he said.

Cech said that in Western Massachusetts, as elsewhere, butterflies face the problem of the loss to development of meadows, forests and other natural foraging areas. They must also deal with invasive plants that are replacing native plants on which they lay eggs and their caterpillars feed, and invasive animals, including insects, that are changing their environment.

One insect, the European paper wasp, an introduced species that resembles the yellow jacket, feeds on butterfly caterpillars and may be sharply reducing the population of caterpillars of some species, he said.

Part of the problem, said Cech, “is that we don’t know how big a problem it is. No one is really studying it. But the

wasps are spreading dramatically.”

However, as an indication that it might be serious, a friend of Cech’s put out 100 sphinx moth caterpillars on trees around his home in northeast Connecticut one evening and the next morning, all the caterpillars were gone.

The association’s meeting ends tomorrow.