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Surprise sighting of rare butterflies creates 'a huge deal' for enthusiasts

By Neil Santaniello
Staff Writer

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Inside a private garden in Fort Lauderdale, four people on a butterfly stakeout ring a white patio table. They keenly watch a blood berry bush just a few feet away with cameras and binoculars at the ready.

Five days this month, in a tiny fluttering of tan-green, one of North America's rarest butterflies has popped into this yard, landing at times on the 3-foot-high blood berry -- "cordial globes" -- to sip nectar.

The surprise urban appearance of the tiny amethyst hairstreak, which first flitted into entomologist Bob Pemberton's view April 2, has stirred the local butterfly-watching world.

A single female with frayed wings turned up in June on Bahia Honda Key, long enough to be caught in a shadowy photograph. Before that, there had been no reliable reports of the amethyst hairstreak, historically inhabiting only the southern tip of South Florida in the United States, for nearly a decade, according to the North American Butterfly Association.

"People have claimed they have seen one here or there, but there have been no photographs or specimens," said David Fine, a Delray Beach butterfly collector and Butterfly World worker who encountered the lone Bahia Honda amethyst for 30 seconds before it flew up into a tree and disappeared.

Pemberton's series of sightings -- the last on Saturday -- occurred in a yard off Riverland Road, a location the Agricultural Research Service scientist wants to keep secret so collectors don't try to nab the rare butterflies, known to inhabit tree canopies more than ground cover. He even managed to snap a clear digital picture of one of the surprise visitors in all its minute and fragile beauty.

When he first saw one alight on a frost weed in the garden under scrutiny early this month, Pemberton said he knew "it was something special."

"I was startled by its green color. There aren't that many green butterflies," he said.

One floated in on crisp-looking wings and seemed "fresh," according to Pemberton. That suggests it had just left its chrysalis and was not a vagrant knocked off course, said Rick Cech, a Manhattan banker and author at work on the book *Butterflies of the East Coast* who joined the stakeout this week.

"Sometimes you get a stray that just wanders," said Cech, one of four butterfly watchers planted in front of the blood berry bush Monday. "It's pretty clear there's a colony here."

Cech interrupted his vacation to catch a flight from New York City to Fort Lauderdale to join a butterfly vigil for a day and a half, including a nine-hour session Sunday.

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Out of 250 East Coast butterflies, the amethyst hairstreak is one of just two Cech said he's never laid eyes on. (The other is the disguised hairstreak). He went home without even a fleeting glimpse, but said he considered the roughly \$650 trip worth the time and money.

"That's nature," he said. "It's always chancy; there's never a guarantee."

Glassberg said the amethyst, "to the best of anyone's knowledge," has always been rather scarce in South Florida, seen mostly around Miami and the Keys for years. State and federal officials have not ranked it as threatened or endangered, possibly because its population and range does not appear to have shrunken dramatically over time.

Sightings occurred here and there in the 1970s but after that decade the butterfly "basically disappeared," Cech said. The butterflies roam some Caribbean islands but are uncommon in those locations too, experts said.

Butterfly experts say the finding compares in importance to the discovery in 1999 of rare, quarter-sized Miami Blue butterflies in the Lower Keys.

"It's a very exciting find," said Jeffrey Glassberg, the butterfly association president.

The amethyst's appearance in suburban Fort Lauderdale is "a huge deal," said Alan Chin-Lee, a lepidopterist for Butterfly World who also visited the Riverland Road garden butterfly vigil along with Alana Edwards, co-founder of the Atala Chapter of the butterfly association.

Pemberton said Broward County Mosquito Control agreed to curtail mosquito-spraying in the vicinity of the amethyst hairstreak sightings because of the potential harm it could cause the rare creatures.

Florida's official state arthropod collection at the Division of Plant Industry in Gainesville contains 22 dead amethyst hairstreaks, all gathered in Miami, Pemberton said. One was snared in 1978 and another in 1979 but the rest were netted in the 1930s, he said.

The Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., is home to 20 amethyst specimens culled from Florida -- 19 from the Miami area and one from Fort Lauderdale. The latter must have been overlooked, said Pemberton, because "the published literature [on the amethyst hairstreak] does not even mention Fort Lauderdale."

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Photographs by Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Emily Peyton, Rick Cech, center, and Bill Wallace work on the annual butterfly count at the Pound Ridge Reservation.

Letting Butterflies Flutter Free

Enlightened Insect Lovers Forget the Net and the Pins

By ANDREW C. REVKIN

MT. KISCO, N.Y., July 19 — The regular Saturday-morning rush of soccer moms and joggers filled the Starbucks here recently, but something was different about a cluster of people hunkered over some tables in a corner.

They pored over checklists full of strange names: Red-spotted Purple, American Snout, Hackberry Emperor, Question Mark.

Strung around their necks were \$300 binoculars specially designed not to scan a distant horizon, but to look at things just 8 or 10 feet away.

They spoke of the merits of dogbane and milkweed.

The butterfly count was on again.

Every July, in northern Westchester County and dozens of other places around North America, hordes of butterfly lovers fan out to spend a day counting species and individuals of the insect families that start life as

creepy caterpillars, but then, often for just a week or two, transform into evanescent winged wonders, seeking nectar and mates before expiring.

Increasingly, the age-old image of the butterfly collector equipped with a diaphanous net and a cigar box is being supplanted by a new, environmentally aware variant with a hands-off ethic — the butterfly watcher, said Jeffrey Glassberg, the president of the North American Butterfly Association and the leader of this day's count.

Butterflies are under assault these days, he said, as their favorite meadows and wetlands are transformed into sterile cropped lawns or condo developments. The counts, he said, help track changes in populations and provide a new way for people to appreciate the glittery, flitting insects. (The association's Web site is www.naba.org.)

"If people don't care about something, they're not going to be interested in conserving it," Mr. Glassberg said.

He said the shift from collecting to watching parallels a shift that took place long ago among bird-watchers. "Audubon

A tiger swallowtail, below, and a Monarch, bottom left. Butterfly guidebooks now identify species on the fly.

started out with a shotgun, shooting birds and bringing them back to identify and paint them," he said. "Butterflying is now starting to make that transition."

The annual butterfly tally began in a few places in 1974, originally sponsored by the Xerces Society, a group devoted to the study of all kinds of insects. It has grown explosively in recent years, with counts in 35 locations in 1984 and 345 sites last year.

The rising popularity of butterflies has manifested itself lately

in walk-through rooms of tropical butterflies at museums and zoos, including the American Museum of Natural History last winter, and in the latest nuptial trend: releasing clouds of farm-raised butterflies at weddings or other ceremonies. Mr. Glassberg and some other butterfly experts oppose this practice, saying it poses a disease threat to wild species.

Lately, the species totals from northern Westchester have consistently been the highest of any spot east of the Mississippi, said Mr. Glassberg, who moved from Westchester to Morristown, N.J., five years ago but still returns each summer for the count.

Mr. Glassberg, 51, a molecular biologist, grew wealthy a decade ago when he patented a DNA fingerprinting technique, and now he is able to spend most of his time writing guides to butterfly watching, including his latest, "Butterflies Through Binoculars: The East" (Oxford University Press, 1999).

But butterfly watching is not restricted to the leisure class, as was evidenced by the variegated group that assembled that recent Saturday in Mount Kisco, worrying about the clouds and possible showers that might keep their quarry hidden in the woods and grass.

For each lawyer or investment banker, there was a nurse, computer programmer or other middle-class type, including



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The New York Times

Fluttering Free: New Butterfly Counters Forget Net

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Charles Roberto, a captain in the New York City Fire Department who unashamedly tends a butterfly garden in his backyard in Ossining when he is not putting out fires in Harlem.

A burly man from Yonkers, who is a member of the Butterfly Club of New York City, gave only his first name, Mike, saying if he identified himself, his co-workers would rib him to death.

After guzzling their grande lattes, the counters split into teams and drove away to canvass a roughly-drawn circle 15 miles in diameter, visiting spots from cemeteries to meadows, railroad cuts to swamps.

Mr. Glassberg and his wife, Jane Scott, headed to a favorite field abutting a nature preserve, and soon were wading into tufts of orange milkweed studded with yellow Eastern tiger swallowtails, whose delicate black tongues probed each tiny floret to retrieve the sweet nectar while unwittingly spreading the plants' pollen.

Every few minutes, husband or wife would spot a dog tick clambering on the other mate and pause to pull it off, but their focus remained on the flitting winged things around them. The swallowtails were easy to spot; the muddy-colored, thumb-nail-size common wood nymphs were trickier.

When a wild turkey and a domesticated peacock from a nearby farm poked their heads out of the meadow grass, the couple barely noticed — their eyes fixed on the undergrowth. Every few minutes, in a kind of rambling poem, a name was called and Mr. Glassberg kept a mental tally.

"American copper," Ms. Scott called out. "Delaware skipper ... Silver-spotted skipper ... Silver-spotted. Silver-spotted."

Mr. Glassberg noted the ragged orange wings of a fast-fading great spangled fritillary. In contrast, one swallowtail was so freshly emerged from its chrysalis that it had a metallic sheen. "They're just like people," he said. "As they age, you notice the nicks and wear marks."

Sometimes, the close-focus nature of butterfly watching can put the watcher in peril. On a recent trip to California, where he was doing research for a forthcoming guide to Western species, Mr. Glassberg tumbled off a 15-foot cliff while photo-



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Jeffrey Glassberg, a molecular biologist and author of "Butterflies Through Binoculars," leads the count in northern Westchester County.

graphing a California giant skipper, he said. "But I got the picture, and it's my only one of that species," he said.

In New Mexico, he nearly stepped on a rattlesnake while pursuing a Mexican sootwing. "You can't take your eyes off them for a moment — they dart in and out of the bushes," he explained, a bit sheepishly.

While crossing the field of milkweed, Mr. Glassberg recalled a similar day 30 years earlier when butterflies became his passion. During a break from college, at the height of the Sixties, he was hiking across a field on Long Island with a childhood friend, Robert Robbins, hoping to find a suitable spot to try out some mind-altering mushrooms.

But they were enveloped in a cloud of dancing skippers so thick they resembled confetti, he recalled. "We put away the mushrooms and went home and got our nets," Mr. Glassberg said.

Now his friend, Dr. Robbins is the chairman of the department of ento-

species — to be distinguished simply by looking.

"The option of just watching butterflies and understanding what you're seeing just wasn't there before," Dr. Robbins said.

Mr. Glassberg and his wife were behind their usual count, with only 22 species by lunchtime. A sense of urgency built as he drove his red Saab to the next spot, a swamp along the Kisco River. They scurried along a path, noting several moisture-loving species, including an Appalachian Brown and an American lady.

But he also noted that what had last year been a grassy path through a wood was now a paved road to a new cellular-telephone tower and a complex of fenced buildings.

He and his wife paused to eat sandwiches at the Oakwood Cemetery, but the counting did not stop. While eating, they counted a gray hair-streak — the only one they saw that day. They continued on their rounds. About five miles to the south, the firefighter from Harlem, Charles Roberto, scanned the bushes at a nature center, the Teatown Reservation.

Five miles east of Mount Kisco, at the Pound Ridge Reservation, a sprawling preserve of meadows and forests, another counting crew waded into a chest-high thicket of dogbane, a plant dotted with tiny white blossoms that were milling with bumblebees and butterflies.

A man chasing his toddling son paused and watched with a confused expression as the butterfly counters, each looking in a different direction, scanned the bushes around them with fancy binoculars.

Dorothy Poole, a data processor from Manhattan, saw a flicker she did not recognize. She called out for help to Rick Cech, a Manhattan investor-banker. "It's just seething in here," she said. "What's this right here? Is it a tawny-edged?"

But Mr. Cech could not assist. His binoculars were fixed on another set of beating wings. "I'm on to my own mystery," he said.

At 6:30 P.M., most of the counters met up to compare notes and share a meal at the kosher deli in Mount Kisco. They tallied 6,000 individual butterflies from 50 species — an encouraging result, Mr. Glassberg said.

Ms. Poole, though, did not stay for dinner. She had to catch an early train back to the city and rest up. She was heading to another count the next day, in Sterling Forest.

Butterflyers take a cue from birders and go counting, not collecting.

mology at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History.

Dr. Robbins said that Mr. Glassberg's butterfly guides have provided a new way for amateur naturalists to identify species without collecting them or dissecting them. Previously, he said, butterfly books distinguished between species using technical, almost microscopic details. But in Mr. Glassberg's years of field observations, Dr. Robbins said, he has found variations in the way butterflies appear that allow species — or the sex of individuals of a