Hanging upside down, wings folded, an Eastern Tailed-Blue goes for the nectar in a wild pea flower

One of the most abundant butterflies in the east, the small Eastern Tailed-Blue's wing span may be only an inch

Brunswick Wildlife
Happy Lep Year!

No, I did not forget to use spellchecker. 2008 may be a leap year but late summer and fall bring the bounty of a new "Lep Year" to celebrate. That is "Lep" as in Lepidoptera, the order of insects that includes butterflies and moths.

The next two months are the best time for observing most butterflies in the Lower Cape Fear. Nectar-bearing flowers and plants are at their peak bloom and some butterfly species are migrating south.

It is a good time to add butterfly watching to your wildlife watching repertoire. To find and identify butterflies, understanding the butterfly life cycle and natural history are very important and a good place to start.

The life cycle begins with a small egg, laid one at a time under the leaves of a larval host plant. The hatched egg produces a caterpillar (larva) which is an "eating machine" that will devour so much that, because their skin does not grow or stretch, they must shed four or five times. These sub-stages are called instars.

Metamorphosis is the miracle transformation of butterflies from caterpillar to adult. The final shed yields the stationary pupa (chrysalis) from which the flying adult will emerge and, after a couple of hours of stretching and drying its wings, it will take to the air.

The life expectancy of an adult (the flight stage), during which they produce eggs for the next generation, is only a few days for some species while for others it may be a two to five weeks. However, successive generations of some species "fly" for months. In South Florida generation by generation, many species fly year-round.

Successive broods of a few species may have varying life cycles. Summer generations of Monarchs, for example, survive only a few weeks while the year's last generation that migrates to Mexico in the fall will survive six or more months until they return and lay eggs for the first generation of the next Lep year.

The Eastern Tailed-Blue is a member of the gossamer-wing family and the blues subfamily. One of the most abundant butterflies in the east, its information below provides a good example of one butterfly's life cycle and natural history.

East of the Rockies it ranges from the Southeast to Southeastern Canada and west to North Dakota, Colorado, and Texas. Its habitat includes open, sunny spaces like weedy fields, meadows, forest glades, and disturbed habitats.

In the north, Eastern Tailed-Blues have three broods between April and November; however, in the south they may have many broods spanning the period from February to November.

Larval host plants include many legumes such as alfalfa, clover, and wild pea. Females lay eggs on flower stems and buds. Subsequently, the caterpillars eat all parts of the plant including its seed. Caterpillars then overwinter inside bean and pea pods and transform into pupas the following spring.

Eastern Tailed-Blues fly low and, given their short proboscis, normally seeks nectar close to the ground on flowers that are open or have short tubes. The adult's nectar plants include white sweet clover, wild strawberry, winter cress, and asters.

In addition to its dossier, many "field marks" are required for identification of a species. There may be gender-based differences in appearance. Also, size is a strong clue.

Young butterflies are not smaller than adults. Once transformation is complete they are the same size as other adults of their species…except that within a species females may be slightly larger than males.

Butterflies have two wings on each side…a forewing and a hindwing…and distinctive features of wing shape may help identify them. For example, the extended "tails" on the hindwings of a swallowtail are strong field marks for quickly narrowing your search to its family.

Some species have hindwings with jagged edges and the edge color and spot pattern on the hindwings may be good field marks.

Use caution, however, when considering appearance. All butterflies have individual differences. There are, however, enough similarities to compare field marks and identify the species. Also, due to wing wear, a butterfly's wings may look quite ragged and worn near the end of its adult life.

Note the flight pattern and sitting posture of a butterfly. Does it fly in a fairly direct line or is its path as erratic as a Miami driver on Interstate 95? Does it steadily flap its wings or flap a little and then glide? When sitting, are its wings folded above its head, spread flat out, or partly open in a V-shape?

There are a number of strategies for finding butterflies. Good observation strategies include watching larval food plants, flowers adults prefer for nectar, and for "hill topping" butterflies in fields across the top of hills. Good butterfly guides list larval food plants for each species and pictures of caterpillars may be found in guides and on the Internet.

Butterflies may also be found in mud, on animal dung, and on rotten fruit. These sources provide nutrients not found in nectar.

Dung? Unfortunately, my first memory of the fall migration of our famous Monarchs, in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, is seeing them totally covering a pile of "road apples".

Want more butterfly knowledge and some easy pickings? Between now and the end of October, be sure to visit the new butterfly house that just opened at Airlie Gardens. It is a temporary house, to be replaced by next summer with a 3,000 square foot permanent structure. The new exhibit features native butterflies such as Monarch, Red Admiral, and Giant Swallowtail.

Visitors will be able to see all stages of the butterfly life cycle and, if your timing is right, you may witness the end stage of metamorphosis. Matt Collogan, Airlie's environmental educator, has stockpiled a supply of chrysalises from several species. You may see a recently emerged butterfly stretch and dry its wings and make its first flight.

John Ennis

Gulf Fritillary coming in for a landing on verbena

After first flight this Black Swallowtail rests on the wall of Airlie's butterfly facility

After emerging from its chrysalis, a Black Swallowtail dries its wings