



Tales from a Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Counting butterflies

Looking at the toad photo, you may be wondering, “What does that toad have to do with counting butterflies?”

It has everything to do with counting butterflies, because everything out there in that amazing World of Nature is connected.

For 28 years, my wife Sue has been conducting butterfly surveys in Big Summit Prairie, over in the Ochocos, and around the Metolius River here in Sisters Country. On each trip we have anywhere from five to 20 people with us, ranging in age from newborn babes to home-schoolers and up to 90 years of age.

Every one of those helpers, from the mom carrying the newborn in a chest pack to the 90-year-old, have not only enjoyed the butterflies of the count, but all the other creatures they bumped into along the trail, even the

rattlesnakes and mosquitoes. That’s the message Sue wants everyone to understand: butterflies cannot survive unless everything in their home is in balance, and for that their neighbors, both friend and enemy must also be able to make a living.

There’s another message Sue wants to make clear as well: The North American Butterfly Association is strictly a non-collecting organization, advocating watching butterflies through binoculars, not catching them in nets.

However, in identifying fritillary butterflies, that doesn’t work. The fine details of different species require that one have said butterfly in hand to identify them into their correct species.

So, Sue begins the day by demonstrating the proper way to capture a butterfly without damaging it, as she is not in for killing and collecting every—or ANY—butterfly that goes by. Unfortunately, she and I have been out with butterfly people who do that. We identify them as “compulsive collectors” who for some strange reason, just can’t look, enjoy and let it go at that.

Sue wants the people who go with us to enjoy all aspects of doing a butterfly survey. Look and enjoy without damaging anything is primary. So, last Friday when 14-year-old Sisters

resident Joshua Newton went looking for butterflies in the Prairie Farm meadows up on Green Ridge, and came back carrying a great big, beautiful adult western toad, the rest of the party jumped up and enjoyed seeing it as much as Joshua did finding it, especially Teal.

Twenty-eight years ago when Sue recognized Prairie Farm and its surroundings as important butterfly habitat, because of the diversity of plants and water, she decided it was the perfect place for a prolonged lunch so it could be explored fully.

At about the same time our helpers — especially the home-school youngsters — also discovered it is vital reproductive habitat for amphibians, because of the small pond created each winter by snow and rain.

Central Oregon’s only salamander, the long-toed, (*Ambystoma macrodactylum*) breeds there in spring, along with western toads, tree frogs, Cascade frogs and a host of aquatic insects. Plain old mud also plays a vital role in the life of butterflies; tortoise shell and blue butterflies can be found “mudding,” using their proboscis mouth-part to suck the vital minerals into their bodies.

Unfortunately, about that same time the “mud-boggers” (those irresponsible 4-wheelers who tear up the countryside) also discovered Prairie Farm and cut the beautiful meadow to pieces, killing thousands of frogs, salamanders, toads and destroying butterfly habitat in the process.

Thankfully, the stout Missouri-type log fence erected by the Forest Service (and probably with the strong support of law-enforcement)



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Young Teal gets a close look at a toad.

has put an end to the destruction by the mud boggers; the meadow has healed over, as is the same situation at Dugout Lake, on the north side on Highway 242.

What’s left of the pond at Prairie Farm has a wonderful assortment of frogs, salamanders, and toad larvae swimming about. We had to almost tie our grandson Truman’s hands behind his back and put blinders on him to get him back counting butterflies, he was so hooked on amphibians.

Speaking of which, Joshua couldn’t have been more delighted while counting the blues, sulphurs, and admiral butterflies sucking minerals from the mud, when he discovered a new brood of Northwest garter snakes doing their best to devour as many tadpoles and salamander larvae as possible.

And what a day USFS wildlife biologist Shelley Borchert had. Like most wildlife bios through the ages, she, too, couldn’t stop learning. She was along to

become better acquainted with the butterfly fauna of Sisters Country.

At the end of the day, as we stopped at the Sisters Ranger Station parking lot to drop Shelley off to her car, she and Sue noted that how one day out in the field, focused on just one resource, can increase one’s knowledge exponentially. Which for Shelly, helps her to see the ecosystems she works with in a more detailed way.

Not only local people get involved with Sue’s counts; a crew came over from the Eugene chapter of the North American Butterfly Association, which collects all the data from the counts.

At the end of the day we all met at the Wizard Falls Fish Hatchery for a picnic dinner and compilation of the day’s butterfly discoveries. When the totals were worked up it appeared more than 45 species were tallied — which is about average — but the number of individuals was down. We’re wondering why.



PHOTO BY AMANDA KREB

Sue Anderson and a blue butterfly.

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