



Tales from a
**Sisters
Naturalist**
by Jim Anderson

**Woodshed
butterfly**

The temperature outside my nice warm, wood-heated old double-wide shaky-shanty was very cool the other night: 18 degrees to be exact. Inside the temperature was lingering around 60. Imagine my pleasure and delight when my wife, Sue, shouted above the classical music coming from my radio, “Hey, Jim, take a look at this butterfly on the inside of the kitchen window.”

I thought, “A butterfly in the house in the start of winter? Awww...come on!”

But I went to take a look anyway — right in the middle of Rossini’s “William Tell Overture” — and holy cats, there it was, a living and breathing adult California tortoiseshell butterfly!

“I think it came into the house with our last load of wood from the woodshed,” Sue said.

And I knew she was right.

For almost 30 years — ever since Sue started tagging monarchs and conducting butterfly studies for the National Park Service in nearby parks and monuments — I’ve been hearing about wintering butterflies found in woodsheds, under logs, and other sheltered places outside, but never observed it. Until now.

A few species — mainly tortoiseshells (*Nymphalis*)

and anglewings (*Polygonia*) — spend the winter as adults, “hibernating” in holes in trees, crevices and man-made structures — like woodsheds. Hibernating? Really?

All those California tortoiseshell butterflies we saw flitting all over this side of the Cascades last summer were not migrating; just moving about looking for new places to make new butterflies. In winter, many of them sleep it off right here — even when the temperature at night goes down to 30 degrees below zero.

As I was writing this on Friday, November 16, the temperature and sunlight outside reached almost 60 degrees, and a very lively adult California tortoiseshell was bumping against the outside of my office window (probably looking for her sister who I’d kidnapped from the woodshed.)

How do they do it? Here’s a clue:

An article I just read was titled, “This Newly Discovered Alaskan Butterfly Has Antifreeze in Its Blood.” The butterfly was scientifically described in the *Journal of Research on the Lepidoptera*, and features it as a new species, *Oeneis tanana*, named for the Tanana River valley where it was discovered.

The work is being carried out by lepidopterist Andrew Warren at the University of Florida. The new butterfly appears to be a cross-breed of two other known species, the white-veined Arctic, and the brown arctic, both of whom produce some kind of antifreeze.

Lepidopterist researcher Warren’s statement leaves the door wide open for future studies. “This study is just the first of what will undoubtedly be many on this cool butterfly.”

He hopes to use this new

species to help gain further understanding of what’s happening in Alaska as climate change causes alternating patterns in the weather. Warren added, “This butterfly has apparently lived in the Tanana River valley for so long that if it ever moves out, we’ll be able to say now there are some changes happening in this region, where the permafrost is already melting and our climate is changing.”

If you’re wondering why I’m going on and on about butterflies that overwinter here, it’s an attempt to hook the students in Dr. Eklund’s science class at Cascade Academy, Rima Givot’s students in Sisters High School, Suzie Werts’ young people in the Sisters Middle School, and Bend public school students to capture

one of those California tortoiseshells hiding in his or her woodpile.

Then using the new research tools that the schools have, the student can start his or her wonderful journey to a PhD — and while they’re at it, help us understand the lives of others who share the air we breath and the resources we use on our grand old Planet Earth.



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

A California Tortoiseshell Butterfly, left over from last summer that was sleeping in my woodshed.

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