

Be Prepared For A Butterfly Invasion

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

A few weeks ago, a friend in Atchison commented on all the butterflies that he was seeing in his area. A few days later we were driving to Omaha and I was able to see what he was talking about. We were seeing literally hundreds, if not thousands, of medium sized butterflies flying along or over the highway or dead on the shoulder. This population explosion has slowly drifted south and if you haven't yet noticed a lot of these butterflies, you soon will!

We have butterflies every year and a surprising number of butterflies actually do migrate. The monarch migration is probably the best known, but other butterflies (and some insects) migrate as well. Butterfly migration tends to be slower and occur earlier than a lot of bird migration. But on the other hand, some bird migration is timed to occur with dragonfly migrations. The concentration of dragonflies, which serve as a food source, is a good stimulus for when to migrate!

We are used to seeing increases in insect populations as we move towards the end of summer. Monarchs start to move through the state. The various little yellow butterflies (as a group called the sulphurs) can be very abundant around alfalfa fields. Everywhere you look now days there seems to be some kind of swallowtail or another. But what we are seeing far more of this year than other years is the painted lady.

Painted ladies are considered one of the thistle butterflies. As this name implies the caterpillars feed on thistles, but also on sunflower, hollyhock, burdock and even soybeans. The caterpillar is spiny; not fuzzy like a woolly bear or salt marsh caterpillar, but spiny looking. Once every ten to twenty years we'll see a population explosion like this year. The large increase has been well noted in Canada as well and as the summer wanes the large numbers will work their way south where additional generations will add to the growing numbers.

While everyone loves to see the butterflies many people don't think about the other side of that butterfly life cycle which is that larval form we call the caterpillar. Butterflies are nectar feeders. They have a coiled mouthpart called a proboscis which is a hollow tube that allows them to sip nectar out of flowers. Adult butterflies (or moths) don't cause a problem with their feeding. The larval form, the caterpillar, does. Caterpillars have chewing mouthparts. What they eat, usually, are the leaves of plants.

Remember, we said that painted ladies are one of the thistle butterflies. They are first and foremost found on thistles. But if you are in the middle of a population explosion they will feed on many plants including sunflowers and soybeans. It doesn't happen very often but every few decades soybean fields actually need to be sprayed for painted lady butterfly caterpillars. If caterpillar populations reach an average of ten per foot of row in soybean fields, then treatments do need to be applied. I'll be surprised if we have any fields develop that high of population in the next few weeks.

In the weeks ahead we will see a lot of butterflies; we always do in August and September. This year it will be extra special because of the painted ladies. Enjoy the butterflies when ever and where ever you see them. And if you aren't seeing a lot of them, take a mid day drive out in the country and just cruise the country roads slowly. You may be astounded at what you see!