

Butterfly Population Explosion, Part II

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

About a month ago I wrote a column about a pending butterfly population explosion. I'm beginning to think that nobody read it based on the number of texts, emails and phone calls I've been receiving in recent weeks. I've had at least two phone calls from people on the road who were encountering large swarms of butterflies and they were calling me to settle a family "disagreement" on what the butterflies are or aren't.

Yes, there have been a lot more butterflies than usual of late. Yes, this is somewhat unusual. No, they are not monarch butterflies or young monarch butterflies. Most of those orange and brownish looking butterflies that you have been seeing are Painted Lady butterflies. Yes, the larvae (caterpillars) of these butterflies can be a crop pest.

Painted Lady butterflies are around every year. Adults overwinter by hibernating but most of the ones that hibernate here do not survive the winter so each spring they arrive from the south and the females lay eggs singly on top of host plants. While they are quite fond of thistles, hence the common name of thistle caterpillar for the larvae, they are documented feeding on over 100 species. In late summer it is not uncommon to find them feeding on soybeans in Kansas.

The caterpillars usually pull together leaves with silken threads to create a little area where they can feed somewhat protected from predators. Butterflies don't spin cocoons like many moth species do but they molt into a pupal form known as a chrysalis. These chrysalides are usually attached to the underside of a leaf of the host plant or a nearby plant. Upon emerging as an adult, they proceed to feed on any number of nectar producing plants. We can have as many as 3 generations per year. In years like this, the late summer population of caterpillars feeding on the soybeans can become so numerous that they can reach thresholds justifying insecticidal treatment.

One of the points of confusion this year came from many people who thought that they were young monarchs, probably because monarch is the only orange butterfly that many people are familiar with. When I asked them about the size the comment was often, "I just figured they weren't fully grown yet." Insects of all kinds go through a series of molts a process we refer to as metamorphosis. Butterflies start as an egg, go through several sizes of caterpillars, molting their skin as they grow, ultimately molting into a chrysalis. When the adult emerges from the chrysalis, sometimes called eclosion, it has fully functional wings and will undergo no further molts. It will not change size and will go through the rest of its life in this form and size. In fact, any insect that has fully functional wings is an adult and will go through no further molts.

Every so often wintering Painted Ladies have a large population buildup and they are observed moving north in larger numbers than normal. This occurred this past spring and already in June, entomologists were predicting a very large buildup which they felt would lead to large numbers this fall. They were correct! Even as I write this column I have many Painted Ladies visiting the butterfly bush outside my office window. Some of these will move south with northerly breezes and cooler temperatures, others will try, generally unsuccessfully, to overwinter here as adults.

We will have Painted Lady butterflies again next year. But it is unlikely that they will be nearly as numerous as they are this year. In fact, it may be 15 or 20 years before we see this many again. So take some time in the days ahead to go out and enjoy these phenomenal numbers of butterflies!