

Winter Butterflies

If the phrase “winter butterflies” sounds strange to you, it is probably because, like most of us, you associate butterflies with summer and blooming wildflowers. And we always think about winter as a time when most all insects have either died or are in an egg or pupae stage or have become dormant underground or are otherwise unseen. But, when it comes to nature, nothing is quite that simple.

Several years ago we planted an elbow bush (*Forestiera pubescens*), on the south side of our house. It is now about 6-7 feet tall and about that big around. It always begins to bloom on the last few days of January or the first week or so of February, which is why it is also called the “spring herald”. This year I noticed it in near full bloom on February 7, so I went out to look at it and the critters it attracted. I found four different species of butterflies and a number of bees taking advantage of a rare resource—nectar in the middle of winter!

I also went over to our Rosemary bush which is loaded with blooms and found the same species of butterflies and again a collections of bees. Rosemary is not a native plant but it is not invasive and is easy to grow and it blooms several times a year. But don't plant one close to your house or any other building—in a wildfire, it is very flammable.

Sometimes, our coral honeysuckle would also be blooming this time of year, but ours has not been very healthy lately and is not blooming yet this year.

The species of butterflies I observed were the red admiral, painted lady, variegated fritillary, and orange sulphur (aka clouded sulphur), all fairly common local butterflies. So seeing them was not in itself unusual, but seeing most of these butterflies active in winter, especially just three days after we had a cold (23 deg.) morning was somewhat surprising. Actually, seeing sulphur butterflies flitting around the yard on warm winter days is not unusual. A few days later I saw a snout butterfly on the elbow bush.

What is amazing to me is how these critters survive winter when it gets well below freezing. I know insects are technically “cold-blooded”, but it also means there is often very little if any food available to them, so they obviously have to go into some kind of dormant state but then come out of it on warm days.

And then there is the aspect of how does the plant let the butterflies and bees know that it is blooming and it would like to be pollinated? And how do the pollinators find the plant that is blooming? The obvious answer is that the blooms produce molecules which tell pollinators that there are blooms around and by following the trail of these chemicals they find the blooms. As a chemist with a lot of experience working with very small amounts of material, I am still in awe that such a process works as well as it does.

This whole process of how a plant decides when to bring carbohydrates and other materials up from the roots to produce blooms and/or leaves, which kind of bloom and leaves to make, which chemicals the blooms produce, and then how the various pollinator species recognize the chemical and can follow the trail back to the bloom so they get their nectar and the plant gets pollinated to reproduce the species.

How can anyone not marvel at how Mother Nature works.

After I finished writing the above, I was out in the back yard doing some maintenance on our water feature and I saw a butterfly floating in the water. I gently scooped it up and put it on a rock for it to dry out although I suspected it was dead. But a few minutes later I noticed it had flown away. It was a painted lady.

Until next time...

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