

## IN THE SOURLANDS

### *Always Something New In The Store*

by Jared Rosenbaum

There's a Chinese department store in New York City whose slogan is *Always Something New in the Store*. We lived in an old cottage down a dirt road deep in the Sourlands, and that was our slogan too. My wife and I would repeat it, smiling, returning home with memories and photos of some new find in the woods or the wet meadow.

The meadow was a sodden and spectacular bee pasture across the dirt driveway from our cottage. It had about a hundred species of plants crammed into less than an acre, and there was *always* something new to observe, a new story to tell... always something new in the store.

One rainy May morning, we busted out of the gloom inside the cottage and set out across the meadow. The golden ragwort blooms had faded, the Joe Pye weed was whorling upward, and our muck boots squelched across tussocks of sedge and sunk into last year's cattail thatch.

We poked around looking for new plants and for wild edibles to nibble on, when one of us spotted a striking orange-and-black caterpillar. Its bands of orange stripes were punctuated by rows of spiny tubercles, menacing protrusions like small black cacti. The first caterpillar we saw was curled into the shape of the letter "C" around the stem of a white turtlehead-- a native wildflower which grew abundantly in the wettest parts of the meadow. Back at the cottage, we identified the caterpillar as the larval stage of the Baltimore checkerspot butterfly.

Later that season, we witnessed checkerspots after their metamorphosis into butterflies. The butterflies had wings like Tiffany glass, with intricate patterns of black, orange, and white. They seemed partial to nectaring on water hemlock and purple milkweed.

Checkerspots are somewhat uncommon, but the basic ingredients that led to us finding them outside our house are the same requirements that all butterflies have. Most importantly: food plants for the caterpillars and forage for the adult butterflies.

Checkerspot caterpillars are adapted to eat the foliage of white turtlehead, the native wildflower that we spotted our first checkerspot curled around. All plant species have different constituents that are either attractive or deterrent to the herbivores that seek to consume them. The adaptations that allow a caterpillar to digest a specific plant species are often deeply ancient and ancestral.

After the checkerspot caterpillars feast on white turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*, if you're thinking about getting some yourself), they metamorphose inside a chrysalis and emerge as adult butterflies that consume nectar.

Our wet meadow supported the adult butterflies need for nectar, with native wildflowers in bloom from earliest spring to the first hard frost. Numerous plants flowered in summer when checkerspots (and other butterflies) were especially active: purple and swamp milkweed, Joe Pye weed, New York ironweed, mountain mint, swamp rose, and a variety of goldenrods and asters.

Attracting butterflies to your own home landscape involves matchmaking. First, consider the food source for the caterpillar, the "host plant". These are usually native plant species that have co-existed with the native butterfly species for many millennia. Adult female butterflies lay their eggs on or near host plants. When the tiny caterpillars hatch from the eggs, their food is nearby.

Examples of host plants for the caterpillars of common butterflies include native milkweeds for monarchs, violets for greater fritillaries, spicebush for spicebush swallowtail, native asters for pearl crescent, and grasses like little bluestem and purpletop for common wood-nymph.

Now that the caterpillars are provided for, adult butterflies need food, too. Some excellent nectar plants for adult butterflies are also beautiful wildflowers that are showy and hardy in home landscapes. Great landscaping species that attract and sustain butterflies include swamp, purple, and butterfly milkweed, Joe Pye weed, broadleaf and Virginia mountain mint, wild bergamot, and blazing star.

If you plant these nectar plants and an array of host plants, you'll be greeted by surprise and serendipity every summer day, as new pollinators arrive and develop interdependencies in your home landscape. Or, as we say: *Always something new in the store.*

An upcoming butterfly count in Hopewell on July 12th, 9 am - 12 pm is a great opportunity to learn more about butterflies, while helping in the annual North American Butterfly Association's Count. The hike is led by Rachel Mackow of Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space and co-sponsored by the Sourland Conservancy. No experience is necessary. Contact [hikes@sourland.org](mailto:hikes@sourland.org) for details and to register.

Jared Rosenbaum is the Naturalist Advisor for Sourland Conservancy's Sourland Stewards project. Since 1986, the Sourland Conservancy has worked to protect the ecological integrity, historic resources and special character of the Sourland Mountain region, through education and advocacy. For more information, visit [www.sourland.org](http://www.sourland.org).