

 **Recreation** LIFESTYLE

Where to see butterflies on Long Island

Updated August 14, 2015 2:01 PM

By TOM SCHLICHTER. Special to Newsday

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An cabbage white butterfly lands on a zinnia at Old Westbury Gardens. Photo Credit: Xiomaro



Light of wing and rich in color, butterflies are delightful to behold. Watch one flutter past or flit from flower to flower and feel it lift your spirit. Examine them up close and marvel at their intricate markings.

From early spring through late fall, butterflies of different varieties abound in Long Island gardens, fields, meadows and yards. Taking a few minutes -- or several hours -- to chill out and observe them can be pure pleasure, inexpensive and great family fun. Think of it like birding, only butterflies are more numerous, easy to identify and let you sneak close enough to get a really good look -- no binoculars needed.

AUGUST IS PRIME TIME

Although present here throughout the warmer months, it's during August and early September when you'll find the greatest variety of butterflies. From speedy aerodynamic skippers to demure blues and abundant cabbage whites, plus woodland varieties like mourning cloaks, red admirals, commas and question marks (yes, the last two have punctuation clearly stamped on their wings) -- the varieties seem endless. More than 150 species of butterflies inhabit the state each year. Among the more uncommon ones locally: buckeyes, Baltimore checkerspots, pipevine swallowtails and, largest of all, the giant swallowtail, a huge, brown, tailed butterfly with yellow bars and a wingspan that can breach 7 inches.

"There really are a lot of varieties to see on Long Island," says Andrea Burrows, 23, of East Islip, an intern with the environmental program at Connetquot River State Park Preserve, where there's a butterfly garden. "My favorites are the eastern tailed blues -- they are tiny, cute and I love their colors."

VIEWING TIPS

Be aware that most species tend to fly in the late morning or late afternoon, preferring cloudy skies when it is very hot. Looking on windless days also offers an advantage since butterflies don't take well to being blown around. "It also helps to look in areas with a diversity of flowering plants since each butterfly species has a favorite on which to feed and requires a specific type of leaf on which to lay eggs," explains Jeffry Petracca, a Cornell University entomologist on staff at the Long Island Aquarium's butterfly exhibit in Riverhead. Certain species prefer the edges of woodlots and swamps. Tiger swallowtails, he says, like to rest in the canopy of trees but drop down to feed in gardens and fields. Meanwhile, black swallowtails love zinnias.

For a close-up photo op, approach slowly from behind and position yourself among the flowers so the sun will shine on a butterfly's open wings when it lands.

MONARCH MIGRATION

The butterfly crescendo on Long Island arrives with the fall monarch migration. Hit the ocean or Long Island Sound beaches in early October and you'll see dozens each day stopping to feed on goldenrod growing wild among the dune grass before taking evening shelter in the protective needles of pine trees. Monarchs start appearing here in July, but broods that mature in early fall are larger and better at dealing with a migration that may cover 2,000 miles and stretch from Canada to Mexico.

"We just found monarch caterpillars on our milkweed plants," Burrows says. "That's a signal to get out and look now. Butterfly populations in our area are at their peak this month, so don't wait to head out."