



Crystal Bridges
Museum of American Art

Butterflies

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American Lady Butterfly

About the American Lady

NARRATOR: Butterfly expert Lori Spencer describes the American lady butterfly—a summer visitor to Northwest Arkansas.

LORI SPENCER: Well, the American lady is also a migrant, and it does form colonies here in the summertime. The American lady is a bit smaller. It's got a little angular wing shape. It's a mosaic of colors, both on its upper side and its underside. But on its underside, it has really two big eyespots on the hind wing. Their lifespan is a little bit shorter. In the summertime, it's about three weeks. But as a migrant, they could live a few more months. When they migrate, they just want to get out of the cold. They don't move into one big sanctuary like the monarchs do.

LORI CONTINUES: And in some of our more mild years, I've even seen American ladies stay up here and just go into torpor in some leaf litter.

[End of Stop]

American Lady Butterfly

Scales on the Wings

NARRATOR: Contrary to what you may have been told, touching a butterfly's wings will not really kill it. Lori Spencer, the Butterfly Lady, discusses the powdery scales found on butterfly wings and explains how best to hold a butterfly if you need to take it outside.

LORI SPENCER: We were all told growing up not to touch butterflies and moths because we would get that stuff on our fingers, and we would kill them. Because we aren't born with the innate ability of knowing how to handle them, and we were all probably told that because our parents and everybody else was afraid that we would just kill them without meaning to.

LORI CONTINUES: So you can pick up a butterfly or a moth very gently by the thorax, which is where the legs and the wings are attached, and just gently move them outside. Now, they're going to struggle because there's this big thing coming at them that's got a hold of them, so they're going to struggle, like all animals would. But the powdery substance is the scales. The microscopic scales are what gives a butterfly and a moth their color, and the wing pattern, and the ability of other butterflies and moths to see each other.

And there is a wing membrane that those are attached to. Scales are like modified hair and they're slippery, they're made to fall off in flight, and they also detach when in the clutches of a bird or other animal. So you might've seen a butterfly or a moth that had a little triangular chunk taken out, that's a bird attack.

LORI CONTINUES: That butterfly had a story to tell. But you can safely do it. If you get some of that... the scales, the powdery stuff on your fingers, it's not a bad thing. I mean, I've seen butterflies crawl out of bird baths and fly off just fine. I've seen butterflies with just two wings survive just fine. It does decrease the amount of visibility it has to another member of its species. And of course, if you just wad it up in your hands, you're going to kill it. But we need not be so concerned about that, as opposed to just getting it outside.

[End of Stop]

Giant Swallowtail Butterfly

About the Giant Swallowtail Butterfly

NARRATOR: Lori Spencer, known as the Butterfly Lady of Northwest Arkansas, describes the life cycle and habits of the giant swallowtail butterfly.

LORI SPENCER: The giant swallowtail is North America's largest butterfly. It has a wingspan, from tip to tip, of about six inches. And it's a slow mover, it's about 300 wing beats per minute. So, it's the one butterfly that really glides through your yard, and through the grounds. And you can identify it too because a swallowtail has two tails on its hind wings. And the giant swallowtail is a chocolate brown color with yellow-orange Stripe pattern to it, sort of like a clown face, so it makes it really easy to identify.

LORI CONTINUES: And its caterpillars' host plants are members of the citrus family like hop tree and toothache tree.

Giant swallowtails live for about three weeks as an adult. It might take a month or two for the caterpillar to develop. Being a larger butterfly, they tend to take their nectar from taller plants. You may or may not see a giant swallowtail, say, on dandelions. They like tiger lilies, and other tall plants. They like milkweed, and garden flux, and many others. But this is a big butterfly, it retains heat. And being so big, it just needs something that will hold its weight, so think tall flowers.

[End of Stop]

Giant Swallowtail Butterfly

Courtship

NARRATOR: Butterfly expert Lori Spencer describes the inflight courtship dance of butterflies and how to tell if the female in question says yes or no.

LORI SPENCER: Watching courtship is a lot of fun when they spiral up in the air several feet, that's courtship, and sometimes the answer's yes and sometimes the answer's no. Females that aren't receptive to males will tilt their abdomens up to warn him away. Sometimes butterflies need to mate more than once just to make sure that the eggs got fertilized, but many females, they just want to mate once and that is it.

LORI CONTINUES: I have seen courtship, males fluttering behind females, and it's a neat dance to watch and it's neat to see what her answer is.

[End of Stop]

Luna Moth

The Life Cycle of the Luna Moth

NARRATOR: Butterfly and moth expert Lori Spencer discusses the life cycle of the beautiful Luna moth.

LORI SPENCER: Even people who are just afraid of bugs in general love the Luna moth and just like the monarch, everybody's heard of Luna moth. It's that beautiful green moth with the long tails that could be very small and sort of a yellowish green in the springtime, but in the summer and the fall it can be that beautiful candy apple green and just gorgeous with those slightly mauve stripes and eyespots. And that's kind of how it helps protect itself too, is those eyespots look a little bit like snake heads. Of course, it's all in the way you move the tails too.

LORI CONTINUES: When they move their tails, the tails divert the bird's attention to the tails and a butterfly, or a moth could fly just fine with a chunk of the tail missing.

Of course, Luna moths, being a moth, they tend to fly late afternoon through the evening. Butterflies typically fly in the daytime. But Luna moths don't have mouth parts when they're adults. There is no proboscis for taking up nectar. They live off the fat that they accumulated as caterpillars. So their lifespan is really very short, just 10 to 14 days. The Luna moth, like all other silk moths, it thrives in the woods, in wooded areas, because its host plants are the big hardwood trees like hickories. So the Luna moth does better when there's not a lot of light pollution.

LORI CONTINUES: Since they navigate by the light of the moon, the fewer artificial lights there are at night, the better its survival because the lights can get hot and of course there's bug zappers and that spells doom for moths. So in a place where there's less light pollution, the silk moths are going to do better.

[End of Stop]

Monarch Butterfly

Monarch Butterflies

NARRATOR: Lori Spencer, author of Arkansas Butterflies and Moths, discusses the relationship between Monarch butterflies and native milkweed plants.

LORI SPENCER: Well, the Monarch is probably the best known and the best loved butterfly in North America, if not the world. And of course, monarchs have been in the news recently because of the decline in migration. So having milkweed is key for Monarch survival and not just because it's a host plant, but also because it's a nectar plant as well.

LORI CONTINUES: Monarchs will only lay their eggs on milkweeds, and we have several different milkweeds in the state of Arkansas, butterfly weed, swamp milkweed, variegated milkweed, common milkweed, a lot to choose from.

Monarchs are sort of a medium size butterfly that's a cinnamon brown color with white spot patterns. And Nell's have little bunches of scent scales on the hind wings. Because of the milkweed, the Monarch is somewhat distasteful to birds. It's a learning curve. If a bird ate a Monarch, it would probably get very sick to his stomach and then learn to avoid anything that looked like that again in the future. So Monarch's gain a certain amount of protection from the toxicity of milkweed.

[End of Stop]

Monarch Butterfly

The Lifespan of Monarchs

LORI SPENCER: The Monarch life span is kind of tricky. The butterflies that are alive in the summertime, live for about three weeks. Not every Monarch that goes to Mexico makes it all the way back up to Canada the following year, it's successive generations. What might fly through this part of Arkansas in the springtime might be the children or the grandchildren of the previous year's migration. But the butterflies that migrate South and spend the winter in Mexico, could live for about nine months. They're just not active those whole nine months, they're hanging out on the fir trees on top of those Mexican mountains in their sanctuaries.

[End of Stop]

Monarch Butterfly

Planting a Butterfly Garden

LORI SPENCER: Planting a butterfly garden is really one of the easiest and simplest things that you can do. They don't have to be very large. If people have one or two acres, that's wonderful. But when I lived in an apartment, I just had window boxes and that's a fine butterfly garden. Not just for monarchs, but for other butterflies. Especially for monarchs, 3 to 10 milkweeds would be good. That's food plants plus nectar.

Other flowers such as asters and goldenrods, purple coneflowers, black-eyed Susans, those are fine nectar plants to mass around it. And not just use single plants, mass, and big color.

LORI CONTINUES: Because butterflies, they need to have things mass so it shows up better in their vision. You can kind of think of them as being just a big near-sighted. They also need a shelter from the wind, a few trees around for shelter would help out. Make sure it's in sun, of course, all of these flowers need sun to survive. But butterflies have to warm up their flight muscles, so it needs to be about 60 degrees outside for them to be warm enough to even fly. Because butterflies, like all insects, are cold-blooded. They're not going to move when it's freezing.

Water sources can be very simple, from a sprinkler system to wet earth, they can just take their sodium and water from a damp mud spot. That's why we call it puddling, it's a mud puddle, but you can commercially buy some feeders, but I just like to use a clay saucer with some mud in it.

LORI CONTINUES: So it's not hard at all. You just need just a little bit of space, no bigger than a few feet, and you can have an excellent butterfly garden.

[End of Stop]

Snowberry Clearwing Moth

About the Snowberry Clearwing

NARRATOR: Lori Spencer, the Butterfly Lady, explains how the snowberry clearwing moth got its name and how to distinguish between these pollinating moths and bees.

LORI SPENCER: The snowberry clearwing is a sphinx moth, and it flies during the daytime, and when the snowberry clearwing first emerges from its pupa, all the scales, all those microscopic scales fall off the wings and you can see clear through the wing membrane, so clearwing. It's a wonderful pollinator as well, and it's often mistaken for a bumblebee and a hummingbird, but when you watch it, you'll notice that it's hovering on the flowers, just above the flowers.

LORI CONTINUES: It's not crawling inside it like a bee would, and its antennae are longer, not stubby like a bee's. Its wings make a bit of a hum when it's flying around, and that's probably why people think it's a hummingbird, but there's no stinger, it will not sting you, and they are a lot of fun to watch. They have black stripes on the thorax, so it's easy to distinguish them from its sister species, the hummingbird clearwing.

[End of Stop]

White-lined Sphinx Moth

About the White-lined Sphinx Moth

NARRATOR: Butterfly expert, Lori Spencer, describes the fast-moving white lined to sphinx moth, and its role in the garden as a pollinator.

LORI SPENCER: Personally, I love sphinx moths and the white lined sphinx is one of my favorites because you might see it morning, noon and night. It is a wonderful pollinator, and sphinx moths could move 35 miles an hour and with the white lined sphinx, sometimes when the wings are just beating so fast, the only thing you see is the white lines. That's how you know it's a white lined sphinx.

LORI CONTINUES: But if it ever stood still for a photograph, it's the white lines and there's blue shading and pink shading, it's a gorgeous little moth with such big eyes that you feel are staring back at you, and that long proboscis where they just hover like hummingbirds and it's just fun to watch them on veg and moon flower and some of the other flowers in the garden.

[End of Stop]