

# The Other Side of Paradise

**By Rob Bettaso**

It's hard for me not to feel bad for those kids who have made the switch to a "year-round" school cycle. When I was growing up we were blessed with three long, luscious months of "summer vacation." Way back then, it hadn't taken me long, perhaps by the second grade, to realize that I wasn't really cut out for academia. As summer approached, my attention span got shorter and shorter and my gaze was perpetually fixed outside the classroom windows.

When summer did arrive and I was "free at last," I spent those stretched out days exploring the woods and fields near our suburban home and the evenings plopped in front of the T.V. watching perennial favorites like Johnny Quest, The Rifleman, and Marlon Perkins in Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom ("While Jim wrestles the anaconda...").

I have a vivid memory of one summer, while I was still young enough to only have a vague notion of the passage of time, my mom saying to me on a particularly fine morning: "Well, today marks the midpoint of your summer vacation." I stood looking at her, not fully comprehending, and uttered something like "Waddaya mean?" She explained that on this day there was as much of summer vacation behind us, as there was yet ahead.

Crestfallen, I moped around the house, sighing heavily and thinking to myself, "Geeze, what's the point of doing anything, summer is practically over." Now I would like to say that after all these years I've become more Zen about the passage of time, but, that would be a craven lie. There is scarcely a day that goes by where I don't fret over how much there is to do, see, and experience; and how little time there is in which to get it done.

Perhaps that is partially why I enjoy writing, as at least it is a way to remind myself that while the moment of discovery/beauty/joy is gone, the memory of it remains and that the next daily miracle is always just around the corner. It's still not "living in the moment" but it is at least a way for me to remain perpetually grateful for all the wondrous things that fill our world.

Maybe that is why for generations teachers have tasked their returning students to write about "what they did during their summer vacations" (even today's abbreviated ones). In my particular case, since retiring in 2014, one could legitimately say that my life has been one continuous vacation. However, this past winter I applied for, and got, a temp job with one of our natural resource agencies.

As such, instead of writing about what I did on my summer vacation, I am going to write about what I did while I was back within the ranks of the working class. Now that I am several months into my seasonal gig, I have amassed a wealth of observations and experiences and could easily write several articles about the things I've seen and done. And I might just do that but first, let me start off with a "disclaimer."

Not to be coy, but I am going to refrain from mentioning specific people, places, or projects. My reasons are simple: 1) I hope to return to my warm-season job next year and don't want to inadvertently say something that might jeopardize that option; 2) we've been working with some rare species and it would be unwise for me to be too detailed in my accounts, lest it cause problems for the critters we are trying to protect; and 3) if I was to get too exact in the information I share, it would be incumbent upon me that I allow my employer (and our collaborators) to review my drafts and, based on my experiences in the past, I know how significantly that could slow down (or kill) the publication process.

The wheels of bureaucracy grind very slowly and I don't want to be sharing stories about summer days while we are all shivering during the long nights of winter. Besides, does it really matter whether I

specify, hypothetically speaking, that I saw a family of Spotted Owls in the mixed conifer forest near the confluence of Thompson Creek and the West Fork of the Black River? As long as I don't misrepresent the facts I see no harm in being fuzzy about some of the particulars.

So let's get started. I will begin with the riparian stream banks, rich with summer blooms and the attendant flotilla of nectar-sucking butterflies. Because we've mostly been working above 8,000 feet in elevation, starting about May the floral displays and the butterflies have been amazing -- both in terms of species diversity and species abundance. Since our crew is being paid to conduct fisheries surveys, I have not been able to stop, break out a hand-lens and a dichotomous key, and attempt to accurately identify each flower and butterfly we've encountered.

However, I do my best to take mental pictures of what I observe and then, when I get home, peruse my plant and insect guides to get a rough idea of what we have been seeing. A very partial list of flowers would include the following (some to species, others to higher taxonomic groupings): golden columbine, blue flax, Thurber's cinquefoil, pine false lupine, common monkeyflower, Woodhouse's phlox, paintbrush, cliffrose, wild iris, New Mexico locust, Wood's rose, fireweed, Franciscan bluebells, wild bergamot, scarlet cinquefoil, false hellebore, penstemon, lupine, Western shooting star, and various composites (fleabane, asters, sneezeweed, et cetera).

And then there are the Lepidoptera -- the moths and butterflies. Since our work is exclusively conducted in the daylight hours, we do not see very many moths. However, various butterflies flutter by so frequently and so close that we could easily capture them with our fishing dip-nets, 'twere we not busy slipping and sliding in the creek beds netting trout. Although there have been many butterfly species, I have only recognized a few of the most common, including the tiger and black swallowtails, the mourning cloaks, and the monarchs.

Surprisingly, my insect guidebook has a paltry four color plates (plus several pages of the less helpful black and white illustrations) from which to attempt Lepidoptera identification. While it was virtually hopeless for me to identify most Lepidoptera to species, I can say with a modicum of confidence, that we did encounter members of the copper, sulphur, nymph, satyr, and fritillary groups.

Being witness to clouds of butterflies (perhaps most like the cirrus formations clouds take) has certainly been one of the more extraordinary natural phenomena of our season. It has also served to be yet another reminder of the woeful (pathetic, really) gap in my knowledge pertaining to the invertebrate world. Butterflies in particular, seem the obvious poetic equivalent to the brilliantly colored marine reef fishes, the gaudy tropical birds, and the dazzling array of showy flowers our planet has to offer.

Inspired by their beauty (or hideousness; looked at another way, one can easily imagine the monstrous visage of a butterfly if it had a 10 foot wingspan), I was not content to merely attempt identification of the butterflies we encountered. I also found myself craving greater knowledge regarding their life histories and ecological role in nature.

After pouring through my own books on biology, I next headed to the good old Larson Library to avail of their vastly greater resources -- I can't resist a plug for public libraries given the fact my mom had been a librarian her entire professional career (as are several other members of my extended family and also my life-long best friend). The internet alone was obviously a wealth of information but, being very old fashion, I invariably prefer to do my research by way of dusty scientific tomes, paperback field guides, glossy periodicals and just about whatever else is available in hardcopy.

Remarkably, what turned out to be the greatest source of inspiration to me were the websites and books geared toward younger readers. But then again, when you stop and think about it, is there anyone more likely to appreciate the astounding story of a butterfly's transfiguration from egg, to larvae (aka, the caterpillar), to pupa, to chrysalis (aka, the cocoon, although I suspect that hard-core etymologists might

argue with my using some terms interchangeably), and finally on to that most humbling revelation nature has to offer -- the emergence of the butterfly?

And although our Season of Lepidoptera is now fast waning, I am afraid that for the time being, I must suspend this story. My reason is straight-forward enough: I simply have too much that I want to share pertaining to what I have seen first hand; read about in books; and learned face-to-face while working with a few experts, to cover in a single article. So, with that "teaser," let me now encourage you to please stay tuned for Part II, which will hopefully appear in the October issue of GYMOAZ.