

MINDSET AND BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION

In the 19th century the Victorian mindset towards wildlife was essentially human supremacist; the environment was considered to have been 'created' to meet human needs, humans being the last, most important, and most intelligent animals to have been 'created'. These arrogant beliefs led to an astonishing degree of over-exploitation, not just to meet perceived human needs, but to satisfy desire, such as for fashion and home furnishings. Creationism is now discredited amongst the educated, and evolution reveals that humans are Primates, closely related to rabbits and rodents, descended from tree shrews, and sharing a common ancestor with the flying lemurs. Primates were not the last mammals to have evolved, that honour goes to the cetaceans. How disappointing these revelations would have been to the Victorian human supremacist mindset.

Huge numbers of butterflies and moths, if I can retain for convenience a distinction that is not supported by evolutionary genetics, found their way unashamedly into the collections of the Victorian idle rich. Their passion for all colourful and exotic living things saw the introduction of foreign species of plants, the expansion of the breeding of horticultural varieties of plants with showy flowers, beyond the useful fruit and vegetables, and the uncontrolled release of foreign species of butterflies and moths into the countryside. All this was done without thought or knowledge of the possible ecological consequences. Mercifully, all the lepidopteran introductions were a failure, but the plant introductions have led to an ecological disaster in our urban areas particularly, where it has become very difficult to find a single native species of tree or shrub. Most garden owners retain a Victorian horticultural mindset and rarely purchase native plants to put in their gardens, for many of them are perceived to be rather dull.

The following foreign butterflies, with dates where known, are on record as having been released into the countryside by ignorant enthusiasts: large chequered skipper (into Jersey), Fiery Skipper, Mallow Skipper, Small Apollo, Spanish Festoon, Southern Festoon, Tiger Swallowtail (into Ireland), Julia (1936), Albin's Hampstead Eye, Blue Pansy (1950), Zebra (1933), Indian Red Admiral (1973), Map, Weaver's Fritillary, Aphrodite Fritillary, Niobe Fritillary, Spotted Fritillary, Large Wall, Woodland Grayling, Hermit, Slate Flash, Purple-shot Copper, Purple-edged Copper, Geranium Bronze, Turquoise Blue, Green-underside Blue. All are now extinct.

Our urban green spaces are potentially good living space for butterflies and moths if only garden owners and those councils and other bodies responsible for planting policy and management of public green areas could throw off the Victorian mindset and return to planting native species only, so that our native fauna has the habitat it evolved in and still depends upon if it is to thrive. The current fashion for tidy, paving and lawn gardens, which owners have persuaded themselves are low maintenance, has led to the deployment of huge volumes of herbicides, fungicides, and insecticides to maintain the desired 'neatness'. Only a small area is set aside for a few alien or horticultural hybrid plants purchased from a garden centre. Such a garden is ideally presented for a visit by Great Aunt Agatha, but it will have no wildlife, and certainly no butterflies. On the other hand, an untidy, chemical-free garden, in which the trees, shrubs, and wildflowers are all native, and where there are places of no disturbance with plenty of dense cover and ground litter, will have plenty of wildlife. Sourcing plants that are high in nectar for adult butterflies, and those that are food plants for caterpillars, is easy nowadays. In fact one does not have to visit garden centres at all if one wants a garden that will attract wildlife, for they sell few if any native plants with which to establish a natural habitat.

The Royal Horticultural Society has decided to try and change its image as a promoter of exotic alien plants and genetic hybrids of all complexions by teaming up with the Wildlife Trusts to encourage planting for wildlife, including butterflies. However, with published statements like '*The RHS promotes the discriminating use of chemical pesticides*' one is tempted to suggest that this partnership from the RHS point of view is a cunning plan worthy of Baldrick himself, to ride on the back of the excellent

conservation reputation of the Wildlife Trusts. There is no such thing as a discriminatory poison, for none can be universally tested, and the enduring residues of poisons are as potentially dangerous as the poisons themselves as they are successively concentrated along food chains. All small-bodied creatures like the Lepidoptera are therefore vulnerable in a horticultural environment. The horticultural mindset is in this way incompatible with conservation.

The joint WT/RHS list of plants to encourage butterflies is by no means all native, and such a list is not what our butterflies and moths most need, and it won't help to convert the public mindset into recognising the value of all native green spaces. Native plants, especially trees, have a much higher and more biodiverse permanent population of microorganisms and invertebrates than any foreign plant, and it is these populations that our native wildlife, including butterflies and moths, have evolved to depend upon. So, if Great Aunt Agatha is appalled by your garden, you are probably on the right track. If you are lucky, she may call off her visit because she is too busy trying to find the few remaining suppliers of ocelot coats, ostrich-plume hats, and whalebone corsets.

BC conservationists do a wonderful job out in the countryside, but it should not be forgotten that urban green spaces, which amount to a huge area, are a largely untapped resource for butterflies and moths, whose potential depends upon how completely we can change the public mindset.

Brian Day, September 2019