

The Coming of Autumn on the Refuge

by Pam Darty, Refuge Ranger, Lower Suwannee & Cedar Keys NWR

As the days get shorter, the sun sends a message to autumn's beauties like our local blazing star (liatris), vanilla plant (carphophorus), paintbrush and deer tongue. Less sunlight stimulates the plant's system to bare its blossoms to buzzing wild bees and butterflies (just in time for the migration of large butterflies), guaranteeing pollination for next year.

For those of you looking for a scavenger hunt to find these and other treasures, the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is the place to explore.

Try the Dixie Mainline, a nine-mile biking, hiking, driving trail at the north end of the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge. Soon after the trail begins (at the Suwannee end) watch on the unfenced side for fields of tall vanilla plants attracting butterflies including American painted ladies, small skippers, hairstreak and Gulf fritillary.

Or walk the ¾-mile loop Dennis Creek Trail, adjacent to Shell Mound, just north of Cedar Key, where acres of vanilla plants fill the air with their sweet vanilla aroma and fuchsia-colored blossoms lure important pollinators like butterflies and miniscule wild bees. You couldn't get a better photo opportunity! If you are lucky you might also catch the showy blazing star. Almost anyone with a camera has shots of butterflies on thistle, but the blazing star shows its color for such a short time that photos are rare.

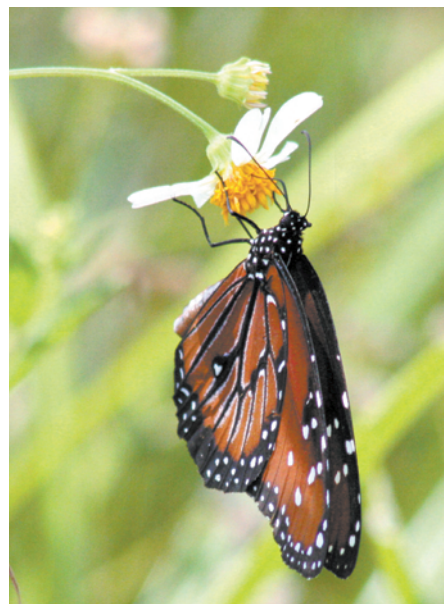
You can also visit the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge butterfly garden at the main office southwest of Chiefland off CR347 at 16450 NW 31 Place. (This is just a few miles south of Fowlers Bluff.)

Beyond flowers and butterflies, there is much more to discover across the 53,000 acres of natural area and wildlife habitat: trails, a fishing pier, boardwalks, observation decks for photography, wildlife drives, fishing ponds, over-sized bat houses, and archaeological sites. The conservation agency kiosk with bulletin boards and benches, adjacent to Cedar Key Marina, posts special events, ranger programs, the three annual lighthouse openings, and "Birds, Butterflies and Blossoms Walks". With fall approaching, there's more to see and do at the Lower Suwannee NWR.

We share the earth with an incredible array of wildlife, some vitally important, but too small to be noticed. The National Wildlife Refuge System provides a safe haven for all native and migratory species – even for the human animal. Knowing that everything is connected by the web of life, we humans have the power to act as stewards of

the earth, and its gigantic and minute critters. If you enjoy the butterflies, plant a special garden and provide a refuge in your own backyard.

For more information on how to plant a butterfly garden, or to learn more about the Dixie Mainline or Dennis Creek trail, call us at 352-493-0238 or check out the Refuge website at www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee.



Along the Dixie Mainline in early fall, a Gulf fritillary feeds on vanilla plant (top) while a spotted viceroy hangs suspended on common beggar tick (bottom).

Backyard Butterfly Haven

Early this fall, Hidden Coast homeowners Richard and Anne Herman played host to many butterflies including the orange and black Gulf fritillary, the bright yellow sulphur, the dramatic black and white zebra longwing (pictured at right above), black and eastern tiger swallowtails, the long-tailed skipper and the hummingbird moth, as well as several monarch larva (see top right). And no wonder. The Hermans have made the entire yard around their Suwannee home into a butterfly haven.



Their garden includes colorful beds of flowers known to attract a variety of butterflies, especially butterfly weed (milkweed) to ensure that monarch butterflies will lay eggs in their yard. Other plants, both native and non-native, include old-fashioned zinnia, Mexican sage, Mexican sunflower, plumbago, lantana, penta, and two varieties of salvia.

To bring butterflies, a garden should include plants for larval hosts as well as those for adult nectar sources. Butterflies pass through a four-stage life cycle: egg, larva (or caterpillar), pupa and adult (the

winged butterfly). Small eggs are laid on or near a host plant. Once hatched, tiny larvae start feeding on the host plant. When fully grown (having expanded and shed skin several times), the larva stops eating and seeks a safe place to pupate, usually by attaching itself to a leaf or twig. Finally, when the transformation from pupa to butterfly is complete, the pupa splits open and a butterfly forces its way out. Until ready to fly it will hang quietly.

To develop your own backyard haven, observation and research are important. See what attracts butterflies into other yards in your area. Consult a good butterfly reference to learn the plants recommended. Your local nursery professionals should also be familiar with butterfly plants of

all kinds. Don't neglect a close study of your own yard. There may be existing plants already attracting butterflies. When maintaining your butterfly garden, go easy on pesticides as these may be deadly to the insects you hope to attract.

RESOURCES

Butterflies of Florida: Field Guide by Jaret C. Daniels (available on Amazon.com and at the Butterfly Rainforest Shop at the Museum of Natural History in Gainesville, FL - www.flmnh.ufl.edu)

National Audubon Society Field Guide to Florida (available on Amazon.com)

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