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American Painted Ladies

Next Generation

By Barbara Bray



Larva of An American Painted Lady.
Image courtesy: www.javajane.co.uk.

After reading my "Simple Act of Kindness" article about American painted lady caterpillars in the most recent issue of the *Journal*, Janice Stiefel of the Door County (WI) Chapter sent us a note relating some of her own experiences with the American painted lady larvae and butterflies.

From Janice:

I read, with interest, your article on American Painted Lady larvae in the November/December 2005 issue of the *Wild Ones Journal*. I, too, have had experience with that species. After rearing hundreds of larvae of various species of moths and butterflies, I would say that American painted lady larvae are the hardest to deal with. When rearing them in captivity, they seem to eat forever, hide themselves in messy silken webs so it's hard to monitor their development, and they take a long time to pupate. You were wondering where the larvae went when you could no longer find them on the sweet everlasting. In the wild, the larvae just disappear. I have never found where they actually form their chrysalis.

In Door County, Wisconsin, the larvae favor the perennial pearly everlasting (*Anaphalis margaritacea*). Some years there are large populations of American painted ladies. During those times, the plants are covered with hundreds of eggs. There would never be enough leaves for all of them, so many larvae die. To help Mother Nature a tad, I used to be able to buy an extra plant or two from the local nurseries, but they don't carry them anymore. I asked why. The answer was that people don't like the plants because they get too "buggy." I

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also reared the larvae when we lived in Sheboygan County, Wisconsin. In that location, they favored the perennial field pussytoes (*Antennaria neglecta*). They will readily accept either plant. Published books list several other host plants for the American painted lady, but my experience has shown that the larvae have no interest in them. Perhaps it's because they've become "hooked" on pearly everlastings or pussytoes and no other plant is acceptable. It would be educational to hear the observations from others who have reared this species.

Several years ago, I was giving a butterfly/moth slide lecture to a district garden club in a fairly large central Wisconsin city. During the program, the women had been whispering among themselves about something I put up on the screen like, "Oh, we had those last year, but I didn't know what they were." When I got to the American painted lady, I mentioned its love affair with the pearly everlasting plant...how the larvae almost defoliate the plant, but pointed out that the plant will come back. They do not kill it. After this last statement, there was a hush over the audience and no one spoke.

When the lecture was finished, a sweet, gray-haired lady came up to me and said, "Honey, we had those caterpillars all over our pearly everlasting plants last year – all over the city. Not knowing what they were, we just sprayed, squashed, and poisoned them. After what you just said, we are feeling real guilty. We had no idea they would end up to be beautiful butterflies."

The lack of knowledge about these creatures is sad. It's not something that is generally included in school curricula, and they certainly don't get it when they go off to college, unless they're majoring in entomology – and even then, I doubt that they learn details like this, unless they do their own research and rearing. Thank you for your "simple act of kindness."

Barb responds:

Thank you for your kind comments and for sending along your own experiences. I find I get a lot of good information from friends' experiences.

I did do a bit more research and found out that my sweet everlasting (*Gnaphalium obtusifolium*) are annuals. So the butterfly larvae are feeding on plants that will complete their life cycle at the end of the season, having produced seeds that will germinate in the spring.

In Michigan Butterflies and Skippers by Mogen Nielsen (Michigan State University Extension; 1999) I found this list of the American painted lady larval food: pearly everlasting, pussy-toes and cudweed. I'm sure that by cudweed he meant the native sweet cudweed or sweet everlasting (*G. obtusifolium*) and not the European cudweed (*Gnaphalium uliginosum*).

He further lists that adults take nectar from these native plants: aster, chokecherry, dogbane, common milkweed, bog-rosemary, and Labrador tea.

Barbara Bray is president of the Oakland (MI) Chapter.