

## Orange, Black And Rare All Over

Butterfly Lovers Hunt for Md.'s Official Insect

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Acting on a tip from a credible source, Pat Durkin led a search party through a northwestern Montgomery County farm one afternoon last week, traversing poison ivy, deer manure and mud in hopes of spotting a creature no bigger than the size of her hand.



Looking like an environmentally conscious Sherlock Holmes, Durkin clutched a net and peered through binoculars to find any clues that would lead her to the Baltimore checkerspot butterfly, which was once visible enough to become Maryland's official insect but is now hard to find.

In 20 years, the number of known checkerspot colonies in Maryland decreased from 30 to nine. Experts attribute the decline to hungry deer -- which munch on its host plant, the white turtlehead -- and encroaching development. No new colonies were found for years until last summer, landing the black, orange and white butterfly named for Maryland colonizer George Calvert, aka the first Lord Baltimore, on the state's watch list of rare species.

A group of environmentalists studying plants stumbled upon a 10th colony last summer on a Clarksburg farm. Buoyed by that find, Durkin organized a search for more colonies in Montgomery's agricultural reserve, where wetlands attract butterflies. The reserve is a protected area that covers a third of the county, mostly in the northwest. The effort began the first week of June and will continue until mid-July.

On Friday, Durkin scored an early victory. After an hour of trudging through waist-high grass at the Red Wiggler Community Farm near Damascus, she spotted a checkerspot, which she said is a good indication that there are many more on the property. She called the find "hugely important."

"My contribution to life on the planet is to try to save them," Durkin, 64, said.

Many residents don't know that the Baltimore checkerspot is the state insect, or that there even is a state insect.

With the state busy trying to save more endangered species, Durkin has taken on the role of steward of the checkerspot. Once Durkin and her army of butterfly enthusiasts find more checkerspot colonies, they will do what they can to protect the species from the deer and development that they believe have ravaged the wetlands. One way to do that, she said, is to build fences around any colonies.

"Some people don't think it's important," said Anne Sturm, who owns a farm in northwestern Montgomery. "I don't think there's anything more important."

Sturm has seen eastern tiger swallowtails and silver-spotted skippers on her 35-acre parcel near Barnesville. A Baltimore checkerspot would be a score. "How many beautiful surprises do we get in our life?" she said Saturday afternoon as she, Durkin and another friend hiked her land, once a horse farm. "Birds and butterflies are a little piece of wild surprises."

State officials rely on people such as Durkin and projects such as one to breed the insect at the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore.

Durkin takes her role seriously. She took a reporter to the Clarksburg farm that houses the 10th colony but asked that its location not be revealed. "People will come to take them," she said of the caterpillars that will become butterflies.

Durkin is a former teacher and journalist, a mother of three grown children and the operator of a bed and breakfast in Logan Circle. She is petite and quiet, particularly when she is out on the field.

She developed a passion for butterflies two decades ago after finding a green-and-black striped caterpillar on some parsley she was growing. She discovered that it would become a black swallowtail butterfly. "That made me excited," she said.

She co-founded the Washington Area Butterfly Club and later started the Baltimore Checkerspot Restoration Project. Several times a week, she drives through the agricultural reserve and stops when she sees a promising field, one near a stream, for example. Saving the checkerspot, which she began studying about seven years ago, would "justify my existence," she said.

Behind her Logan Circle house, in an alley that sees a lot of traffic, is a tiny garden she calls Dee's Butterfly Refuge, named for her mother.

"I don't really have a good answer," she said when asked to explain her affinity for butterflies. "You know, it's like, why do you fall in love with somebody?"

They are so charismatic, so interesting, she said.

On Friday afternoon, she led five volunteers on an expedition through the Red Wiggler farm after learning that Barbara Hittle, an avid bird watcher who works there, had spotted a black butterfly with orange trim a few days before.

As they hopped over streams, sometimes stumbling over branches and through bogs, they found some promising signs. Patches of skunk cabbage, stinging nettle and jewelweed meant that the group had arrived at wetlands.

"This is squishy here," Hittle said. A very good sign, Durkin declared. Even better, their feet were buried in mud. They stopped and looked up at the sky. Birds whizzed by. So did butterflies, but not the right ones.

Then a tiny black creature zipped by.

"Oh my God," said Melanie Choukas-Bradley, a writer who helped organize the search.

"We got one," shouted Woody Woodroof, who runs the farm.

They turned to Durkin for confirmation.

The verdict: It was a checkerspot.

The significance of the discovery sunk in. It would be only the 11th colony to be found in Maryland and the first in Montgomery since the summer. The group cheered and took photos. Durkin waved her arms in victory. "This is a major find," Choukas-Bradley said.

