

Portraits of Butterflies

By Grazyna Tonkiel

I was thrilled when I was asked to write a series of articles about butterflies and how we can help preserve their natural habitat while enjoying their beauty.

Everything about butterflies is exceptional



: their movement, coloring, migration patterns and their incredible life cycles. The poetic beauty of the graceful movements of their wings is visible when watched in film viewed in slow motion. They have a spectacular kaleidoscopic, and yet, a balanced structure of colors in their wings.

They have surprising stamina for their fragile build, allowing some of them to fly extremely long distances, and reach the altitude of four kilometers.

But, above all, their life cycle, consisting of four completely different stages, each involving fundamental transformation in external appearance, as well as, behavior, is most remarkable.

First, butterflies exist as eggs. When the eggs hatch the butterflies appear as caterpillars. Caterpillars frantically feed to gather enough energy to pass into chrysalis, also called pupas. The chrysalis matures and transforms into the imago ? a completely developed adult insect. Once formed, the butterfly grows no more.

It is hard to say when my fascination with butterflies started. It was not the same formidable start like the beginning of my love for opera, which was triggered by seeing, at the age of eight and for the first time, Giacomo Puccini's opera Madame Butterfly. What a coincidence. As far as I remember my attraction to butterflies, the flying flowers as they are often called, was always there.

As a 10-year-old I crafted my own butterflies by pasting dried pansies on paper, carefully arranging different size small petals to make them look like the real thing. I did not want to capture the live creatures. It would be a murder; a disgusting act of violence against the beauty of the world. I wanted them to fly free and graceful, but craved their beauty. I therefore had to recreate them myself.

Have you ever listened to the Humming Chorus music from Madame Butterfly? If not, please do, or do it again, and think about a flying butterfly. You will be touched by the grace of the divine.

Butterflies and moth, in science called Lepidoptera is a 180,000-strong order of insects. Twenty thousand of those are butterflies. The term was developed by the 18th century Swedish botanist, physician and zoologist, Linnaeus. Lepidoptera is derived from the ancient Greek words lepto, meaning scale, and ptera, meaning wing. Lepidopterist or Aurelian is the words used to describe people who are interested in butterflies.

There have been a few very famous lepidopterists who were devoted to studying butterflies, while pursuing parallel careers. The first one that comes to mind is Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov wrote the best-known and most controversial example of 20th century literature, Lolita, while collecting butterflies for research in the western United States. His contribution as an Aurelian was so important that to honor his work genus Nabukovia carries his name.

Unfortunately, there are also appalling examples of people, who are fascinated by butterflies, but who exploit them for money and fame. Damien Hirst, the United Kingdom's richest living artist, kills butterflies in thousands, to dismember them and build Rosetta patterns with their wings. Hear the thunderstorm when you browse his work, if you must, and you will feel the shiver of the evil.

Butterflies have played a prominent role in the development of many cultures on five continents. In vast numbers of mythologies, they are the symbols of spiritual rebirth. For the Romans and Greeks, as well as, ancient Egyptians the butterfly was a symbol of the immortal soul. For Christians they are a symbol of resurrection. In some cultures, caterpillars symbolize human life, while the motionless, stiff and bound by a mortal veil, pupas suggest death. In Japan butterfly represents a new start, and girl's transition into

womanhood.

I have been studying butterflies for more than 20 years and the more I learned, the more I am convinced that they need our help to survive. They are being decimated as their habitats are being destroyed. We need to augment our behavior, so that the fast changing and rapidly expanding civilized world gives them a chance for life.

It is my hope that together we can invigorate butterfly conservation efforts in King Township and take concrete steps in expanding and preserving their habitat.

In my column you can expect more information about butterflies and nocturnal moths, their habits, behaviors, our cultural connections with them, and practical ways to help them survive.

For now, let me share one tip as an opera singer. Have you ever experienced "butterflies" in your stomach? I have. The thrill of singing on stage, or public speaking, although it may diminish with practice, never completely disappears. There is a very simple way to deal with it. When you feel nervous, squeeze your thumb against the index finger. Do it with both hands, and with strength. Nobody will notice. The tension will leave your body and relocate to the tips of the fingers. You will relax and will get ready for your flight.

Grazyna Tonkiel is an accomplished opera singer, visual artist and a conservationist. She was the soloist at Polish National Opera and Ballet Theater in Warsaw and won national and international vocal competitions, her butterfly studies are in collections in over 10 countries. She can be reached at her Gallery Solo studio in King City ? www.gtonkiel.com.