Butterflying While Being Black
1. by Jaeson Clayborn

Ethos
My name is Dr. Jaeson Clayborn. If you need medical advice, talk to a medical doctor; however, if you have pressing questions and concerns about insects and plants, particularly butterflies, let’s chat. I earned my Ph.D. in biological sciences at Florida International University under the guidance of Dr. Suzanne Koptur, an insect-plant ecologist. My doctoral work centered around federally endangered Schaus’ Swallowtail: (1) habitat restoration, (2) predator-prey interactions, and (3) community engagement using a butterfly gardening curriculum unit. Currently, I am an assistant professor at Miami-Dade College Padrón Campus. My professional life goals are to understand and preserve the entomological and botanical worlds, engage local communities through service-learning and inquiry-based activities, and empower people to become community scientists.

Pathos
Urban vs. suburban: as a young scientist in Cleveland, I experienced neither pristine forests nor clean waterways. I lived in the city and explored city parks and backyards of friends and family; nonetheless, the affluent areas in Cleveland and surrounding suburbs were more verdant and rich in wildlife, yet these areas were not inviting. In nature exploration was unusual (or weird) and the opposite of being “in the streets”. My friends and I really, like really, enjoyed playing outside and searching for wildlife. The problem was, however, the best sites for exploration and observing flora and fauna were the least inviting.

Vacant lots, unkempt fields adjacent to manufacturing facilities, and creeks were my field sites for exploration and adventure. I visited the library often and read many books about animals and various ecosystems from around the world. The Neotropics and Africa (the whole continent) were particularly fascinating to me because of their diverse fish and reptile species; however, the world of invertebrates, particularly insects, reigned supreme. Invertebrate life cycles, predator-prey interactions, and courtship piqued my imagination and occupied an endless amount of my free time.

I observed gradual declines in our local wildlife, particularly aquatic organisms in the creeks, because of habitat loss and pollution. The manufacturing facilities expanded and paved over fields, litter and sludge accumulated in creeks, and vacant lots transformed into chain restaurants. My small patches of urban wild-space succumbed to urbanization, not immune to the reality of deforestation and water pollution portrayed in literature and TV shows. I have always been an advocate for urban green space and wildlife conservation in marginalized communities and schools through butterfly gardening and aquaponic systems. These I see as forms of reconciliation and restoration ecology as well as ecotherapy.

Logos
Environmentalists recognize that urbanization and indifference are major threats to Earth’s biodiversity and ecosystem services beneficial to humanity, intersecting with social and economic inequality. Butterfly conservation and environmental stewardship are not antithetical to past and present social justice movements. We need an all hands on deck approach to protect butterflies and ecosystems; we should also strive to be antiracist (individuals that fight against racism: individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural) and promote a fair and just world for all: economically, environmentally, mentally, and socially. Let’s listen and talk to each other beyond the comfort of friends.

Biodiversity preservation and habitat conservation generate countless ecosystem services for humans ranging from nutrient cycling and pollination for crop production to reduced stress and increased memory and attention span. The human population is expected to exceed 9 billion by 2050 with the majority residing in cities. The demand for space and resources presents a significant conundrum as to how to manage the needs...
of humans and wildlife. A reconciliation ecology approach to ongoing urbanization can thwart biodiversity loss. Simply put, connections can exist between urban gardens and forests connected to nature preserves. It’s time to consider a scalable reconciliation ecology approach to insect and ecosystem conservation. Cities and suburbs should become more verdant and richer in wildlife, which is possible through gardening and tree plantings (and other methods, too). Let’s engage all communities. The largest bloc of people concerned about climate change and environmental degradation comprises Millennials, Zoomers, and people of color.

Let’s get to work.

By embracing reconciliation ecology, in which we acknowledge the confluence of nature and people in human-dominated landscapes, this concept can be used in all United States’ cities facing increased human populations and rampant development. However, to be successful in environmental stewardship in the United States and, ultimately, the planet, we must also work toward dismantling the social and economic inequities embedded in society. We must call out, challenge, and dismantle the structures and behaviors that sustain systemic racism. By doing so, we can enrich local biodiversity in all neighborhoods, parks, and natural areas. There is value in representation not only in diverse ideas and perspectives, but also in solidarity. Keeping this in mind, let’s strive to keep helping the butterfly and plant communities together, which ultimately helps us.

2. by Pat Rossi

As I trudged along the immersive garden path out came the Dainty Yellows using the ever present Spanish needles (Romérito), a White Peacock perched on the Turkey-tangle Fogfruit and the occasional Red-banded Hairstreak or Monarch that flew about the wild plants searching for nectar. There were the birds or the inquisitive raccoon that crept up the border of the native garden to peek at the toiling woman with the clanking tools.

The nature center wasn’t yet open. But quite obviously, there were loads of activity in the soil and trees. Sweaty from planting in the sun, I stopped to squat; yes, in an ant pile. Yet despite the harsh venom of those bites, it gave me the determined push to complete the garden space. My task was to fill it with native plants that would bring fritillaries, sulphurs and swallowtails and food for birds.

In time, the finished garden drew youngsters to the center every summer, becoming part of our environmental nature classes. For sure, those ants were my motivator. We were both determined to get our respective jobs done in the dirt.

The desire to be close to nature was always there. As a child in the 1940s, on the island of Jamaica, living the country life, most of the homes lacked electricity, which meant lanterns broke the twilight. In this era, you could hear the songs of crickets, cicadas, grasshoppers or frogs. All of it was loud, and scary. In a way the nightly animal chorus was a reminder that nature breathed all around us. At bedtime the moths and mosquitoes were kept at bay by the mosquito ceiling net. But fireflies in the spring drew all the young us. At bedtime the moths and mosquitoes were kept at bay by the mosquito ceiling net. But fireflies in the spring drew all the young.

Close family members all worked in the agricultural world, in various posts, and their experiences made me realize how important land care was. My known family roots start with a great, great grandfather born in 1832, from landowner farmers. On the patriarchal side of the family, family enterprises have flourished for years in an old historic town replete with a great house that my dad lived in till passing. My grandmother’s chickens gave us good eggs, and this wasn’t unusual even for the city, a lot of hen houses like hers were in the large suburbs.

The earthy lifestyle in Jamaica provided us with something to teach us.

wonders of the ecosystem. But who knew that this lady’s passion for planting native plants, a hobby, would also bring cherished butterfly experiences to share with fellow nature lovers whatever their color. These experiences soon led to learning everything about butterflies, these mesmerizing animals.

As a black female island sun-worshiper, I presented what I gleaned about plants and butterflies to native plant or garden club groups. And I was the lone Black person in the room. And, I had also created the unusual native butterfly and insect garden that has stood out on my street for years. It also didn’t neatly fit into the manicured lawns of the neighborhood — a double whammy! I welcome gaining, sharing information about those weird pollinators, and fascinating plants and encourage everyone to visit those natural areas, e.g., the Everglades and the Scherer-
Since 2009 I have been actively engaged in nature photography. I have photographed birds, dragonflies, animals, and primarily butterflies. I was a military brat and mostly grew up in either integrated or mostly white neighborhoods. I learned about race in 1967 while living in Fayetteville, North Carolina, near Fort Bragg. Prior to living in North Carolina, I cannot remember issues concerning race, despite having lived in Germany for a few years. In North Carolina, I remember the signs that read “Colored Bathroom” and “Colored Laundromat”. I was called the “N” word so many times by White kids that I thought that was my name. I tell you this because it affects me still to this day in how safe I feel being out in the field in certain areas. I’m 60 years old.

Only once or twice have I had encounters with police while out in the field. One time, a homeowner in Livermore, California called the police when they saw a Black man on a trail near their house. As I was walking to another location, the officer approached and stopped me. He asked what I was doing. I showed him the butterflies I was photographing. He was polite and professional. A few years ago, while near the Sierra Nevada a officer again approached me to see what I was doing. I explained that I was photographing butterflies. He accepted my explanation and moved on. The officer was polite and professional. A few years ago, while near the Sierra Nevada a officer again approached me to see what I was doing. I explained that I was photographing butterflies. He accepted my explanation and moved on. The officer was polite and professional. But in fairness, being stopped by a police officer while in the field is not limited to me or other people of color. This has also happened to White people I know and perhaps even to you. I have not always been so lucky with civilians.

Around 2014, while in Winter Park, Colorado, for a jazz fest, I walked into an open space area that was absolutely great for butterflies. Winter Park is 2% Black. The only time the town has a significant amount of Black people in town is over the blues & jazz fest weekends. A local resident was driving by the open space which was not close to any houses (it is today!). He suddenly stops when he sees me, asks me repeatedly if I am lost. I am showing him my camera. He was rude to me. It was clear to me that this guy was unhappy that I was there. He eventually moved on and I returned to photographing amazing butterflies.

That is the most difficult confrontation that I have dealt with. However, it is not uncommon to get stares and glares. Or people appear to be visibly scared of me. Sometimes they turn and walk the other way. I am used to it. That comes with being Black. To be fair, 99% of the people I have directly encountered in the field have treated me well. I have nothing too complain about. For every Winter Park guy, I have dealt with, there have been 99 really good people like the Steve Moore’s & Barbara Vokle’s of the world.

A few years ago, my buddy, Chris Tenney, did a Big Year. I would like to do that one day, but I do not know if that will be realistic. I try to be careful where I go. The memories I spoke about from 1967 have never fully gone away. It is always in the back of my mind. America has changed but I am not sure it has changed as much as some want us to believe. Truth is, I am not comfortable going to some places by myself. During Chris’s Big Year, we visited Harshaw Creek near Patagonia, Arizona. Later we went into town for a snack. I felt unwelcome there. I remember a guy in the restaurant with his daughter wearing a gun and he kept staring at me as if he wanted me to be intimidated. Luckily for me, I was not intimidated. I have been back to Harshaw Creek many times — I was there just recently — but I stay away from town. I am careful not to draw attention to myself. I always obey the speed limit.

For me, the reality is that when I am in the field with a White friend it is safer for me than being alone. Especially in rural America. There is so much hate out there right now that things could possibly get dangerous, quickly. To say that is not to ignore that many great nature enthusiasts I have met and have come to know the last 11 years. Rarely have I crossed paths with other Black people while butterflying or just being out in nature. That will change in time. I have no regrets and the truth is that my experience has been mostly positive. For those of you who have been a part of my journey, thank you. And thank you to Jeffrey Glassberg for giving me a voice in sharing my Butterflying While Being Black experiences.

3. by Ken Wilson