Baltimore Checkerspots Recolonize Long Island, New York

by Rich Kelly
Baltimore Checkerspots

are brilliantly colored brushfoot butterflies that range from Nova Scotia west to Minnesota and south to northern Alabama. They are found throughout most of New York State, but in recent years have been conspicuously absent from Long Island. On Long Island, there have only been 4 records, each of single butterflies, in the last 40 years, including a span of about 17 years when none were recorded. Therefore, butterfly enthusiasts on Long Island were quite surprised when, in late June 2009, a large butterfly enthusiast spotted a Baltimore Checkerspot in a vacant lot in northwestern Suffolk County.

In 1974 Arthur M. Shapiro, in Butterflies and Skippers of New York State, listed Baltimore Checkerspots as occurring throughout New York State, but made the comment (without any additional information) that they were, “Formerly abundant on the Coastal Plain, but now much reduced.” Long Island is on the Coastal Plain. Three distribution “dots” are shown on Long Island, and roughly correspond to the Queens/Nassau County borderline, the Nassau/Suffolk County borderline, and western Suffolk County.

The other individual reports are as follows. Steve Rosenthal observed a Baltimore Checkerspot in a vacant lot in Westbury, Nassau County approximately 40 years ago. Steve Walter observed 2 separate individuals at Douglaston Marsh, northern Queens County in the early 1990s. And, most recently, Matt Bayer observed one at Caumsett State Park, Suffolk County in 2008. Perhaps this individual, or others not noticed, was the start of things to come in 2009.

On June 30, 2009 Ken and Sue Feustel discovered the new colony of Baltimore Checkerspots at Caumsett State Park, and counted 31 individuals in a series of three early successional dry, upland “old fields.” Some small trees and shrubs (cherries, sumacs) are coming in, which is the reason the Parks people mow them regularly. There are two borders around the fields. The adjacent borders are an assortment of low to medium height forbs. This is where the English plantain is most prevalent. The outer borders are mostly low grasses which get mowed quite often. Rich Kelly and Steve Rosenthal counted 53 individuals at this site on July 3rd. They were subsequently seen by Steve Walter, George Dadone, and other observers. The last observation was of a very worn individual by Dadone and David Kunstler on the Muttontown Fourth of July Count on July 18th.

How did the Baltimores get to Caumsett State Park? It’s only conjecture, but the location of the park right on Long Island Sound must be an enabler to animals coming ashore at Caumsett. It must be a whole lot easier for a butterfly to get caught up in an air mass that is traveling from northwest to southeast, as much of the local weather moves, and make the crossing over Long Island Sound.

So, the status of Baltimore Checkerspots in Connecticut being relevant to this story, I turned to Larry Gall and Lenny Brown for information from the 1999 Connecticut butterfly atlas. These data indicate that, during the atlas, Baltimore Checkerspots were found at five locations in inland Fairfield County, Connecticut — Sherman (two sites), Wilton, Redding, and New Fairfield. Although slightly inland and east of Caumsett — with the Wilton location being the closest to Caumsett (at a distance of about 17 miles) — butterflies from this general area, as well as from ephemeral colonies in Westchester County, New York, may have been the source of the pioneers to Caumsett. The only strictly coastal Connecticut atlas site from which Baltimores were recorded was at Old Lyme, which is far to the east of Caumsett.

Historically, Baltimore Checkerspots mainly have been reported to use white turtlehead (Chelone glabra) as their foodplant. This plant is usually found in wet or moist situations, so Baltimores are often associated with wet meadows. White turtlehead is somewhat rare on Long Island and is not known from Caumsett or from the general area nearby. Both the Feustels and George Dadone

Left: One of the first Baltimore Checkerspots to call Caumsett State Park “home.”


Overleaf: A view of Connecticut across Long Island Sound, taken from the north side of Caumsett State Park. Note the Baltimore Checkerspot flying behind the middle sailboat.