

AN AMAZING BUTTERFLY YEAR

BY RICHARD SMITH

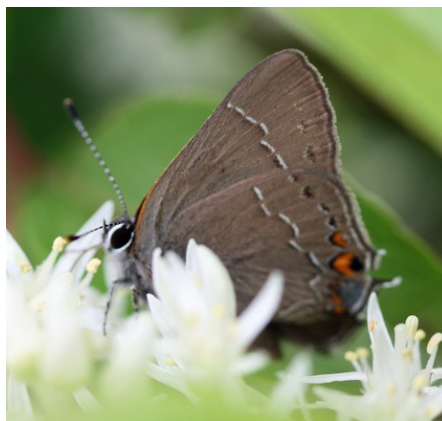
Since the inauguration of the Howard County Bird Club's (HCBC's) on-line butterfly photo guide (see http://www.howardbirds.org/butterflies/HC_Butterfly_photos.htm) in April 2011, the diversity of butterfly life in Howard County, MD has seemed to stage a fabulous improvement. This uptick in diversity is due in part, no doubt, to the interest the county's burgeoning amateur nature photographers have taken in county butterflies with the advent of the photographic website. After all, the site stipulates that all images must be taken in Howard County. However, we cannot also dismiss the recent dramatic range shifts in butterfly species occurring over much of the U.S. and the northern hemisphere as a factor in the diversity's climb. These shifts are very likely due to the cumulative effects of global warming, as suggested by a recently mounting body of evidence.

The local photographic surprises in butterfly occurrences appeared slowly toward the end of 2011 and then resumed, with increasing intensity, during the 2012 season. The first contribution was a video of the Silvery Checkerspot, unknown in Howard County since a single record in the early 1970s. The video was shot in June of 2009 by **Robert Schaefer** in his Long Corner Rd. yard and submitted in November 2011. This species was later turned up at two other sites in Howard County (**Dick Smith; Tom Feild**) during the HCBC's September 2012 Fall Count, which added butterflies and dragonflies to its count for the first time this year. In March 2012, a photo of the Broad-winged Skipper, a species supposedly confined to Chesapeake Bay shoreline marshes, was submitted. It had been snapped by **Allen Lewis** near Lake Elkhorn in July 2011. In May 2012, **Kathy Litzinger** secured a photo of a single specimen of the extremely rare Northern Oak Hairstreak in her backyard south of Ellicott City. Only one previous record of this butterfly had been logged in the county, sometime before the 1980s. After these early surprises, the appearances of unexpected southern butterfly species began to mount. In early June at Mt. Pleasant, and again in Columbia in August, **Annette Allor** photographed Southern Broken-Dash skippers. Except for a 2011 Harford County record, this southern U.S. species had not been known in Central Maryland north of Washington, D.C.

The year 2012, with its very early spring and unusually hot summer, was also the period for grand appearances of southern sulphur butterfly species. At the Robinson Nature Center and at other county sites such as the Elkhorn Garden Plots, multiple sightings of Cloudless Sulphurs, Little Yellows, and Sleepy Oranges were recorded. The appearances at the center were no doubt assisted by

the coincidental extensive plantings of Partridge Pea, a prime larval host plant of the Cloudless Sulphur. The caterpillars were even photographed there by **Cheryl Farfaras**. In August, a Giant Swallowtail, a southern butterfly having a citrus leaf-feeding caterpillar, was photographed by **Kathy Litzinger**, again in her Ellicott City yard for a first county record. A second Giant Swallowtail was photographed in early September by **John McKitterick** in his Allview yard, on the south edge of Columbia. Long-tailed Skippers and American Snouts, which are rare summer southern immigrant butterflies to Howard County, turned up with startling frequency in the county in September. Additional butterfly species considered to be rare in Howard County were also spotted, sometimes more than one at a time or in more than one location. These were the southern immigrant Clouded and Ocola Skippers and the White M and Juniper Hairstreaks and the Hackberry Emperor. The last three are usually confined to unique areas that harbor high concentrations of their respective and specialized larval host plants.

The unfolding of southern butterflies in Maryland in general was especially exemplified in 2012 by the recording of the Dainty Sulphur in nine Maryland counties. Amazingly, this was a species characterized only by sporadic strays in this entire part of the country in years before 2012. None had ever been reported at all before in Maryland. Howard County was not to be left out of this 2012 epic species expansion. In late October, **Jim Wilkinson** observed a Dainty Sulphur at Gateway, and **Linda Hunt** photographed one along the Patuxent Branch Trail. In all, 2012 was a phenomenal year in Howard County for butterflies with the addition of four new county records and the appearance of 12 other species long considered rare in the county. By way of comparison, the previous three county butterfly records occurred in 1994 (Long-tailed Skipper), in 1995 (American Snout), and the most recent in 1998 (Brown Elfin), which was of course 14 years ago.



Northern Oak Hairstreak photograph taken May 23, 2012 in Ellicott City by Kathy Litzinger