

Conservation Corner

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Pocahontas County Naturalist



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Conservation would like to thank everyone who took part in the 34th Annual Wiegert Prairie Fall Fest on August 27. We appreciate each and every one of you! It was a good day down on the farm. Check out the Current Events page on our website for photos and a recap of this special day and place where we pause in our busy lives to remember our family, farming, education, faith, and natural heritage.

Once again, we tagged and released several Monarch Butterflies on our prairie rides as part of the University of Kansas Monarch Watch Program. Perhaps you've noticed these bright orange and black butterflies with their lilting flight patterns as they nectar on flowering plants during the day and shelter in evergreens or shrubs each evening preparatory to their long migratory trip to Mexico. And while I've noticed an increase in Monarch numbers this fall, it is another brush-footed butterfly whose populations have exploded on our farm. And so *Vanessa cardui*, the Painted Lady, will be our insect friend this week.

Painted Ladies, also known as Cosmopolitans, are one of the most widely distributed butterflies in the world. They may be found anywhere and everywhere on every continent except South America and Antarctica.

Painted Ladies are medium-sized butterflies with the strange habit of flying in sort of a screw shape. The topsides of their forewings are orange-brown in color with black and white spots while their lower hindwings feature four to five blue-centered eyespots. In contrast, their wing undersides are a spotted, mottled brown.

Unlike Monarchs, Painted Ladies are not choosy about where they lay their eggs. Hundreds of host plants have been identified, including thistles, hollyhocks, mallow, and legumes. The females, however, seem to favor quantity over quality and usually lay their eggs on high nectar plants or adult food sources such as thistles, asters, cosmos, blazing star, ironweed, and joe-pye weed. The caterpillars hide from predators such as wasps, spiders, ants, and birds in small silk nests on leaf tops. Perhaps you've seen these messy little nests on thistle plants. Painted Ladies continue to mate and reproduce year-round, a behavior that is quite unique in the butterfly world.

Like Monarchs, Painted Ladies also migrate. Unlike Monarchs, however, they don't migrate every year. Their migration patterns are also highly erratic and appear to be affected by global weather patterns such as *el Niño*. Did you know Painted Ladies like to fly towards rain? I'm surprised there are any left here in Pocahontas County.

In closing, I'd like to invite everyone to our Come & Go Honey Day on Tuesday, Sept. 19, from 2:00 to 7:00 p.m. with an educational program at 4:00 p.m. Join us in our Nature Center as we welcome Carley Vannoy, the Iowa Honey Queen, to the Princess City. I'm also surprised that, despite the many challenges of the 2017 growing season, it's been a good summer for honeybees and honey production. We trust you've had a good, productive summer as well.

