

Claudia, the Newborn Butterfly

By Susan Camp

Another column about a garden critter so soon after my article on Charlotte, our resident writing spider, wasn't in my plans, but this little beauty literally fell at our feet. One day last week I was working in our still barren front garden, getting beds ready for fall planting. My husband, who was standing outside our picket fence, suddenly said, "Oh, poor butterfly, it's caught in a web!" I looked over the fence to see a small, drab butterfly struggling to escape some silky strands attached to something stuck to the fence. Suddenly, the butterfly dropped to the ground and moved under a clump of clover. I looked closely at the object on the fence. It was a small, transparent chrysalis. The butterfly had just hatched and was flapping its wings to dry them. I realized I had seen a similar chrysalis a few years earlier. I had photographed it, and although I searched field guides and online sites at the time, I was never able to identify it. After about thirty minutes, I noticed that the butterfly's wings had unfolded and I quickly snapped a few photos. Now, armed with butterfly and chrysalis pictures, I checked our copy of the Peterson Field Guides Series "A Field Guide to Eastern Butterflies" and in a few minutes, I found the variegated fritillary, *Euptoieta claudia*.

Variegated fritillaries are native to South and Central America, the southern United States, and the upper elevations of Cuba and Jamaica. In summer they venture north as far as southern Canada and westward to Southern California, but rarely are found in the Pacific Northwest. Their habitat includes open, sunny fields, pastures, and prairies. The female lays a single, pale green or white, cone-shaped egg on a leaf of a host plant. Favorite host plants include violets and pansies (*Viola* spp.), common purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*), flax (*Linum* spp.), and passion vines (*Passiflora* spp.). The red, black, and white larvae feed on the leaves and flowers of the same plants, often hiding during the day and feeding at night. The chrysalis of the variegated fritillary is exquisitely beautiful, cream and dark brown, highlighted with metallic gold and copper projections called tubercles. As the larva within matures, the walls of the chrysalis become transparent and the wings forming inside are visible.

The adult variegated fritillary is a striking tawny orange and brown with distinctive black checkerboard markings. The underside is light brown and lacks the silver "spangles" of other fritillaries, according to several sources. Not that it is easy to get close enough to see if spangles are present. According to one source, the variegated fritillary's formal name *Euptoieta* comes from the Greek word "euptoiotos", meaning "easily scared." This butterfly takes flight when approached and probably won't land on your finger. Its flight is swift and low to the ground, with shallow wingbeats. The adult is small, ranging from 1 3/4 to 3 1/8 inches.

Euptoieta claudia feeds from a wide variety of nectar plants, including common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), asters (*Aster* spp.), coneflowers (*Echinacea* spp.), thistles (*Cirsium* spp.), and red clover (*Trifolium pratense*), all found in local gardens and fields.

Besides the Peterson Field Guide, www.butterfliesandmoths.org and bugguide.net are good internet sites for the gardener and amateur butterfly admirer to start. Both sites contain excellent color photographs and basic information for the novice. “Art Shapiro’s Butterfly Site” at butterfly.ucdavis.edu contains a helpful glossary of terms related to butterflies.

One of the joys of having a garden, however small, however weedy and ragged, is the presence of these glorious, winged creatures that bring color and light as they fly among the flowers. It is a pleasure to share the garden and field with them.

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