

Notes from a Rogue entomologist**A stranger in a strange land:
Nabokov's southern Oregon sojourn**

BY RICHARD J. HILTON

The story of Vladimir Nabokov has interested this Rogue entomologist on two fronts. First, there is Nabokov's career as a lepidopterist, an expert in butterflies, and second, Nabokov spent a summer in southern Oregon where, in addition to collecting butterflies, he was finishing his masterwork, *Lolita*.

Nabokov's life story reads like a Russian novel, an archetypal story of the 20th Century. Born to the Russian aristocracy in 1899, he grew up speaking Russian, French and English, with a good knowledge of German. His father was a reformer and was involved in the interim government in 1917, but following the Bolshevik revolution the family was forced to flee Russia. Nabokov studied at Cambridge, starting in zoology before switching to literature. He then lived in Berlin, where his father was murdered by Russian monarchists in 1922. With his Jewish wife, Nabokov moved first to Paris in 1937 and then took refuge in the United States in 1940 when the Nazis invaded France. One of his brothers died in the concentration camps.

While in Europe, his literary efforts were in Russian and his last Russian novel, *The Gift*, is considered to be among the most important works of Russian literature in the last century. In the book, the protagonist's father is a lepidopterist. When Nabokov was just 12, he submitted a description of what he believed was a new species of moth to the scientific journal *The Entomologist*, only to be informed that the moth had already been described. All told, Nabokov had 18 papers on butterflies published in scientific literature.

When he first lived in the US in New York City, he volunteered to work on the butterfly collection at the American Museum of Natural History.

When he got a job teaching at Wellesley College in Massachusetts (by the way, the protagonist in *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert, was a professor at the fictional "Beardsley" College), he volunteered at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, working primarily with butterflies. He demonstrated such expertise that he was elevated into a salaried position as a curator. It has been noted that this period was his least productive in terms of literary output, but it was also the period when he made the transition to writing in English. Eventually he joined the faculty at Cornell where he concentrated on teaching and writing, although he remained an avid collector and took regular trips out west in search of butterflies.

It was one of these trips that resulted in his stay in Ashland in the summer of 1953. Apparently he did attend some plays; the house he rented on Meade Street was not far from the Elizabethan Theater. It does not seem that he interacted much with anyone from what was then Southern Oregon College of Education, but he finished *Lolita* and began his next novel. He also wrote a couple of poems and, in reading "Lines Written in Oregon" (see box at right), I get the feeling that southern Oregon worked its magic on him as he refers to "bewitched...forests" and "Phantom Orchids." And there's that curious list of place names—"Lake Merlin, Castle Creek, and (obliterated) Peak," which seem weirdly familiar. Robert Michael Pyle, founder of the Xerces Society and a well-known lepidopterist, surmises that the "Esmeralda" in the poem refers to an Oregon species of moth that resembled the moth *Plusia esmeralda* that Nabokov had "discovered" when he was a boy.

I do find it strange that, to my knowledge, Nabokov never made a return

visit to southern Oregon. The house he rented in Ashland burned down in 1999, but there is a commemorative plaque noting the site as where he "...completed his notorious *Lolita*."

Of course, with the eventual publication of *Lolita* (after numerous rejections) he became a celebrity and moved back to Europe in 1960, living in Switzerland until his death in 1977. It has been said that by 1959 Nabokov was the most famous lepidopterist in the world. More than a few entomologists of the time took umbrage at that description, especially considering that Nabokov's most scholarly work, which focused on the evolutionary history of a group of South American butterflies, had been thoroughly ignored by the scientific community when it was published. However, as fate would have it, with the advent of advanced molecular techniques, it appears that many of his original conclusions in that article have proven to be surprisingly accurate.

It is hard to imagine a better intersection of science and the aesthetic than butterflies in all their forms, although Nabokov did say that "all butterflies are beautiful and ugly at the same time—like human beings." Nabokov was a scientist and an astute observer of nature, but he did not believe that science held all the answers. He embraced the mystery of existence and, in one of his later interviews, stated, "We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature."

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Vladimir Nabokov taken by Philippe Halsman in 1966 for the Saturday Evening Post (<http://www.toutceciestmagnifique.com/2011/07/butterfly-hunting.html>).

"Lines Written in Oregon"

Esmeralda! now we rest
Here, in the bewitched and blest
Mountain forests of the West.
Here the very air is stranger.
Damsel, anchoress, and ranger
Share the woodland's dream and danger.
And to think I deemed you dead!
(In a dungeon, it was said;
Tortured, strangled); but instead—
Blue birds from the bluest fable,
Bear and hare in coats of sable,
Peacock moth on picnic table.
Huddled roadsigns softly speak
Of Lake Merlin, Castle Creek,
And (obliterated) Peak.
Do you recognize that clover?
Dandelions, *l'or du pauvre*?
(Europe, nonetheless, is over.)
Up the turk, along the burn
Latin lilies climb and turn
Into Gothic fir and fern.
Cornfields have befouled the prairies
But these canyons laugh! And there is
Still the forest with its fairies.
And I rest where I awoke
In the sea shade—*l'ombre glauque*—
Of a legendary oak;
Where the woods get ever dimmer,
Where the Phantom Orchids glimmer—
Esmeralda, *immer, immer*.
—Vladimir Nabokov (1953)

RECREATION

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recreation/ohv), or the Motorcycle Riders Association in Medford (www.motorcycleridersassociation.org).

Water opportunities**• Boating**

Motorboats: Applegate Lake. 10 miles per hour speed limit.

Canoeing: Applegate Lake, Squaw Lakes. The coves and inlets are best explored from a canoe!

Kayaking: The Applegate River provides beautiful scenery plus Class II and III rapids. There are some shallow stretches. The Middle Fork of the Applegate, with a put-in just past Cook and Green Campground on Road 1040, has some Class V rapids and is a good creek run.

White water rafting might also be possible through those Class V rapids. They would be good thrills, but the frequent shallow spots on the Applegate are more easily done in a kayak. Maybe it's best to do your rafting on the Rogue.

• Windsurfing. I've never seen windsurfers on Applegate Lake, but maybe?

• SUP (stand-up paddling). I've never seen this there, either, but I'd try it, and Northwest SUP and Surf in Ashland recommends it. It should work on Squaw Lakes too.

• Inner-tubing. Put in at Cantrall-Buckley Park on the Applegate River and

loll away a hot afternoon.

• Fishing

Applegate River: "World-class steelheading," also rainbow and cutthroat trout(ing). Fishing season opens on May 24 and is from shores only.

Applegate Lake: Year-round fishing. Rainbow and cutthroat trout, small- and large-mouth bass, crappie, perch. Yearly bass fishing tournaments.

Squaw Lakes: Rainbow and cutthroat trout, yellow perch, brown bullhead and



Stand-up paddling on Applegate Lake. Photo: <http://northwestsupandsurf.com>.

black bass. According to the Reserve America website, Little Squaw Lake provides a rare fishery for 8 - 11" wild, native coastal cutthroat trout.

Note: Some species are catch-and-release only, so check the regulations of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) at www.dfw.state.or.us/fish/docs.

• Swimming

It's good at Applegate Lake, but I prefer the cold, clear water of Squaw Lake. There's a rope swing there too.

Luscious swimming holes on the Applegate River—Cantrall-Buckley, McKee Bridge, the gorge on the Middle Applegate, etc. Look for a rope swing over the river between the green Applegate bridge and Provolt.

Some creeks have amazing swimming holes, e.g., Middle Fork Applegate.

• Snorkeling. Anywhere you can put your face in water.

• Scuba diving. Possible in Applegate Lake.

Hunting opportunities

• Big game and upland game birds. Year-round in Southern Oregon. Game in the Applegate includes deer (October 4 - November 7), bears (August 1 - December 31), cougars (year-round), western gray squirrels (August 30 - November 12), wild turkeys (April 15 - May 31), and grouse and quail (September 1 - January 31). As far as I know, there are no elk in the Applegate. Seasons differ for rifles, muzzle-loaders, and bows. Check with the ODFW in Roseburg (541-440-3353) or at their website (www.dfw.state.or.us).

• Gold panning. Little Applegate is open to recreational gold mining.

• Stargazing. Pretty good anywhere in the Applegate since light pollution is minimal. It's best atop Whisky Peak.

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