

BIRD EXPLORER



Peter J. Thiemann

The fledging of Great Gray Owls

BY PETER J. THIEMANN

This is a story of some Great Gray Owls that I have known for five years now. This year they switched from a known nest to a different one, but not far away. The viewing angle at the new nest was not very good because trees blocked the way and I couldn't get high enough to get a good look inside.

Nevertheless, the female owl could be observed, though often barely visible on the nest. Late in the nesting season we were able to see that she had two owlets, one about a week older than the other.

I had observed the fledging of Great Gray Owls in previous years and knew that this is the most stressful phase of a

young owl's life. Great Gray Owls jump out of their nests not knowing how to fly. They glide down, flapping their wings to break the fall, often landing in tree branches or on the forest floor. This is when they are the most vulnerable, as predators can pick them up for a quick meal.

We have learned to help the owls a little by installing some climbing snags at a 45-degree angle near their landing zone. We put up several of those climbing snags this year to help the owlets get back up quickly to avoid danger. A year ago I had observed one owlet actually jumping from the nest, but could not find it anywhere. Not

wanting to interfere with the owls' lives then, I gave up looking.

The timing of a visit to the owls' nest to observe fledging is tricky—the estimated date of hatching is inaccurate, at best. So we were in luck one day in June when we arrived shortly after the actual jump.

We found one owlet sitting motionless on a very short broken tree stump on the forest floor and calmly staring at us. We immediately retreated to the nest a short distance away. Not more than a half hour later, the male Great Gray Owl delivered a vole to the waiting adult female and remaining owlet in the nest. What a sight! But it

got even better when the fledged owlet came stumbling along on the forest floor toward the climbing snags that we had put up over a month before.

Can you believe the joy we experienced when that little owl chose one of our snags to climb about 15 feet using its talons and beak? The photos tell the story—a “*National Geographic* moment.”

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Photos courtesy of Peter J. Thiemann flicker photo stream.



Is it really a monarch?

BY LINDA KAPPEN

As of this writing in late July, the northward spring migration of the monarch butterfly has passed for 2018. This has been a troubling year for the lower numbers of monarchs migrating in the Pacific Northwest. In fairly normal years Washington state would see the monarch by the first week of June. But this year, the first confirmed sighting in Washington was June 20.

Situations for the monarch this past spring delayed its spring migration from central California overwintering sites. Some contributing factors were that the overwintering population had lower numbers, the first generation of monarchs were late to develop due to a cooler spring, and milkweed plants were not completely out of the ground in some locations at the time of migration. These and possibly additional reasons resulted in less optimal conditions for the spring migration window.

Reports from the public help scientists figure out when and where the monarchs will show up. There is a new butterfly mapping site (see last paragraph for more information) for the public to report monarchs by submitting a photograph or a detailed description—the only sure ways to tell if a monarch has been sighted. Believe me, I had to explain myself to a reporting site once because I did not have a photo.

In late June, monarchs typically stay where they are and reproduce. Then, usually starting in mid-August, September, and sometimes the beginning of October, monarchs will begin their fall migration to overwintering sites on the central California coast.

Many times people will report a sighting of a monarch when, in fact, it is

a different butterfly species. The photos on this page show the differences between the two most common butterflies mistaken for monarchs: the Western Tiger Swallowtail and the California Tortoiseshell.

Western Tiger Swallowtail

The Western Tiger Swallowtail is having a very successful year with many of them being seen in the Pacific Northwest. This swallowtail is bright yellow with black borders and tiger stripes on the wings. Its 3.5- to 5-inch wingspan makes it larger than the monarch, and the wing shape differs from a monarch's. The Western Tiger Swallowtail does not migrate.

California Tortoiseshell

The California Tortoiseshell is again having a burst in population this year as it did in 2017. It can be seen at high-elevation mountain passes in very large numbers as it migrates north, then south again in August and September.

Some will overwinter here as adults (for more information, you can read my article about this butterfly in the summer 2017 *Applegater*). In the photo to the right, look at the differences in the wing shape and size. The California Tortoiseshell is more of a russet to orange color with a black border and black spots on the wings. It is smaller than a monarch.

Monarch

The monarch butterfly is large, reaching a 3+-inch wingspan. It is a deep orange color with black borders and veins. Within the borders are two rows of white dots. Its head and thorax are black with white polka dots. Looking at these photos side by side really shows the differences.

As fall migration nears, monarch reports need to be as accurate as



Monarch

possible. If you have a chance to photograph a monarch to report, please do so. If the monarch has a tag, a photo is best, but if you are without a camera and can clearly see the letter and number of the tag, try to memorize them or write them down. Tags are to be reported to the email address on the tag.



Western Tiger Swallowtail



California Tortoiseshell

Many citizen scientists report sightings of eggs, caterpillars, and adult monarchs, including overwintered tagged monarchs in California. Many also help with conservation projects and plant milkweed on their properties or in their backyards

Monarch sightings during fall or spring migration can be reported at any time to a new online tool for tracking the western monarch—visit monarchmilkweedmapper.org. Also, messages sent to the Facebook pages of two monarch sites, Southern Oregon Monarch Advocates and Monarch

Butterflies in the Pacific Northwest, are much appreciated as well and are a quick way to get the word out.

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Butterfly photos by Linda Kappen.