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MEDIA ADVISORY

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Butterfly Count Leads to Startling Discovery at Horseshoe Bend Preserve

KINGWOOD – When a team participating in a recent National Butterfly Count inspected the Horseshoe Bend Preserve, they made a discovery so startling it has been dubbed “the big butterfly news of the year.”

The team found a Gray Comma Butterfly there -- the only place in New Jersey where they’re known to exist. In fact, it’s only the fourth time in more than a decade that anyone has reported seeing Gray Commas in the Garden State.

"This will be the big butterfly news of the year and will generate many visits to the preserve," said Jim Springer, vice president of the North American Butterfly Association.

Subsequent teams returning to Horseshoe Bend reported seeing almost a dozen Gray Commas, along with a number of caterpillars on one of their host plants, a gooseberry. Photographs taken at the preserve confirmed the sighting.

“From this it appears that there is a resident year-round colony at Horseshoe Bend,” said Mary Anne Borge, a naturalist for Bowman’s Hill Wildflower Preserve, which organized and sponsored the count circle in this area. “It’s not just a stray individual.”

A few weeks later, more than 20 members of the North Jersey chapter of NABA returned to Horseshoe Bend, where they counted 39 species of butterfly, including two White M Hairstreaks and two Sleepy Oranges, both of which are rarely found in this part of New Jersey.

The Hunterdon Land Trust participated in the July 20th National Butterfly Count conducted by NABA. NABA started the count because butterflies are an excellent early indicator of a region’s environmental health. Butterflies react swiftly to weather or habitat changes, enabling groups like NABA to monitor local environmental conditions. Volunteers helped the Land Trust count butterflies at Zega-Lockatong Preserve in Delaware Township.

Horseshoe Bend was preserved after a decade of negotiations by the Hunterdon Land Trust, NJ Conservation Foundation, Kingwood Township and other government partners. This discovery buttressed the importance of this preservation effort.

“The discovery of Gray Comma Butterflies at Horseshoe Bend Preserve, which is part of an 800-acre greenbelt along the Delaware River, demonstrates that we are in fact preserving the most critical natural ecosystems that allow rare species to thrive,” said Patricia Ruby, executive director of the Hunterdon Land Trust.

So, how did they wind up with the name “comma?” Named by a grammarian with a love for butterflies? Actually, this particular butterfly has a whitish mark on each of its forewings that resembles a comma. The Gray Comma is a medium-sized butterfly with a bright orange and brown on the top of the wings and a darker border on the hind wing. Their caterpillar food plants are currants and gooseberries, which were found at Horseshoe Bend. Historical records indicate that Gray Commas could be found in Hunterdon County during the 1950s.

Horseshoe Bend attracts butterflies because of its mix of habitats: meadows, woods and streams. “Butterflies may specialize on woody species as food plants,” Borge said. “For example, Eastern Tiger Swallowtails use Tuliptrees, Cherry Trees and so forth. Spicebush Swallowtails use the Common Spicebush. Many adult butterflies rely on nectar for food, including those that use trees or shrubs as caterpillar food plants, and there is a good supply of that available there, too. So the mixed habitats and availability of nectar sources are key.”

By stewarding such properties, Borge said there are ways we can continue to attract Gray Commas and other butterflies to this area. “It’s all about the caterpillar food plants. Monarch butterflies depend on milkweed. The Gray Comma primarily uses plants of the genus Ribes – including gooseberries and currants -- although they may use some azaleas and possibly elms. We need to make sure the plants continue to be available to them.”

“A pair of Gray Commas led me to a small patch of gooseberries one day when I was up there, but the shrubs were partly covered by invasive Japanese honeysuckle,” Borge said. “If we keep the woods free of these non-native invasive species, we ensure the survival of gooseberries and other important native plants.”

To further the hope of encouraging butterflies to discover Hunterdon County, the Hunterdon Land Trust plans to create a butterfly meadow at Quakertown Preserve in Franklin Township. Recently Land Trust Steward Tom Thorsen and a team of volunteers cleared out invasive autumn olive plants at the preserve to encourage the growth of milkweed and other plants that will attract butterflies

Horseshoe Bend is a 313-acre preserve on Horseshoe Bend Road in Kingwood Township. Please note that collecting animals (including butterflies) is prohibited on the preserve.

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