

## LOCAL FOCUS

# Butterflies are Free at Environmental Nature Center

By RICHARD SIMON | NB INDY

How can you not smile at the sight of a butterfly, free and as erratic as a windblown leaf?

What kid hasn't snuck up to this complexly born insect to try to pinch it gently between thumb and finger (not recommended); imprison it as a trophy in mom's Mason jar (definitely not recommended); or to study it in nature, in one's backyard, or in a butterfly house (definitely recommended)?

In Orange County, there are numerous opportunities to interact with butterflies. Between 60 and 80 species flit through our gardens and wild lands all year, although many are small, elusive, and cleverly camouflaged amongst the leaves of their chemically compatible plants.

Others parade as colorfully as haute couture models prancing on a New York runway during Fashion Week.

Perhaps the easiest way to see butterflies with no risk of falling off a trail or trampling dad's favorite plants is to visit the Environmental Nature Center (ENC), located just off Dover Drive on 16th Street (adjacent to the playing fields of Newport Harbor High).

According to ENC's assistant director, Lori Whalen, "There are butterflies in



ENC Assistant Director Laurie Whalen

nature all year, but just not yet in our butterfly house," the only such habitat in all of Orange County."

The center's butterfly enclosure, which is planted with the greenery necessary to feed the insects during their four-month residence between May and August, hosts 12 distinct varieties, said Whalen. Their popular names include Monarch, Mourning Cloak, Painted



Butterflies are in the house

Lady, West Coast Lady, California Dogface, Lorquin's Admiral, Red Admiral, Western Tiger Swallowtail, Buckeye, Cloudless Sulphur, and Sara Orangetip.

Interestingly, none of the butterflies within the enclosure arrives naturally. They come to the ENC from a professional butterfly breeder as pupae ignominiously wrapped in dry toilet paper within a perforated Tupperware container. The butterflies don't know they're not flying First Class.

Whalen wants everyone to know that the ENC makes extra sure that no butterflies escape outside the confines of the enclosure, for "...captive-bred butterflies can spread diseases to natural populations. They can inappropriately mix genetically distinct populations of the same species, and can disrupt the migratory behavior of native butterflies." From an entomologist's perspective, "it can confuse scientific studies of butterfly migrations."

There's much to learn about butterflies, as well as the Environmental Nature Center – a trail-and-plant laced retreat that for a short while takes one out of Newport's crowded environs.

Whalen answers the butterfly questions most commonly asked on a daily basis:

**Q: What time of year is best to visit the butterfly house?**

A: Late spring and early summer. The species change throughout the season, so I encourage folks to come back throughout the season to see a diversity of species. It's always a good idea to call first to check on the population and ask which species we have.

**Q: How many visitors do you have to the butterfly house every year?**

A: Just about every school group that visits in May and June visit the house, so with students and teachers alone that's about 3,500.

All of the 600 Nature Campers that attend camp each summer visit the house. This is in addition to the Scout groups visiting for their programs, and the public.

**Q: What do butterflies eat?**

A: As adults, they drink nectar from flowers. As larvae, they eat the leaves of their host plants, which are native plants that they are chemically compatible with. Butterflies taste with their feet.

**Q: How long do butterflies live?**

A: It depends on the species. Some species can live several months, and some live only a few days. This is also very dependent on the time of year, weather, availability of food, and more.

**Q: Do butterflies see?**


A: They have compound eyes like most insects, and they see movement quite well to avoid predators, like birds and lizards.

**Q: Do butterflies have a sense of smell?**

A: I don't know, but they taste with their feet. Most of their experience of the world around comes from what they take in with their antennae. If a butterfly's antennae is broken, he's a goner.

For complete information on the Butterfly House and other ENC programs, go to [encenter.org](http://encenter.org).

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