

Maine Voices: Consider embarking on a flowerbed safari

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By Margie Patlak

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Every day, I go on safari in my flower garden.

Armed with my iPhone and an observant and patient eye, I trail whatever flying bug comes my way and snap a picture of it when it stops to rest or eat, or zoom in and take pictures of the specks skating the surface of flower petals. Every day, my findings amaze me.

So far, my discoveries include: two kinds of bird-poop-mimicking moths, a dozen different kinds of bees, multiple kinds of flower flies that mimic bees with their stripes, iridescent beetles and wasps, a moth that resembles a hummingbird and numerous humpbacked dance flies wearing golden slippers of pollen. My world has enlarged immensely since I started doing these backyard safaris, focusing on the minute and exotic around me rather than the tigers, elephants and other huge beasts comprising traditional fodder for such trips.

Like most people, I once tended not to notice tiny insects, even though they outnumber us on the planet by more than 200 million times, according to the Smithsonian Institution. But my camera phone and photo editing software can capture and enlarge these creatures so they fill my screen. With that capability, along with the use of the app iNaturalist to identify them, I'm discovering all sorts of critters I didn't know were there.

Many are stunningly beautiful. One morning, I spotted something glinting on a leaf and discovered it was made by a golden 2-millimeter-sized long-legged fly. Another time,

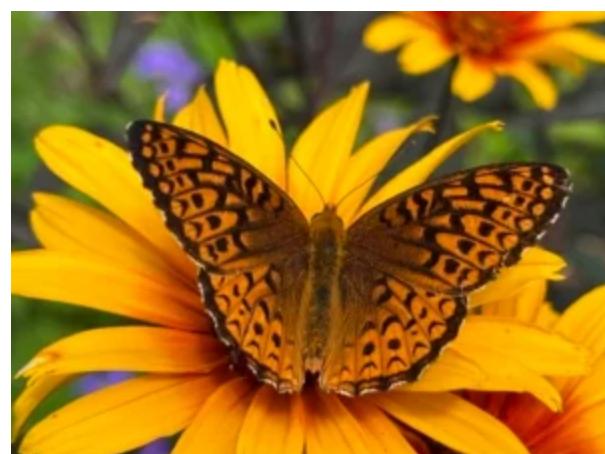


A hummingbird clearwing moth hovers over a flower in naturalist Margie Patlak's Down East garden. *Photo by Margie Patlak*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margie Patlak is a part-time resident of Corea, a science writer and a naturalist.

The great spangled fritillary prefers open, sunny areas like pastures and meadows. *Photo by Margie Patlak*



The great spangled fritillary prefers open, sunny areas like pastures and meadows. *Photo by Margie Patlak*

the macro lens of my camera transformed a green speck that landed on my sweatshirt into a glittering emerald tiger beetle with distinctive white spots and long antennae. Often the insects were more gorgeous than the flowers on which they landed.

The variety of butterflies and bees detected multiplied exponentially once I learned to carefully follow them until they stopped to suck nectar from a flower. While they were immobilized for a few seconds, I captured them with my lens, instead of a net, and identified them later. It turns out orange-and-black butterflies are not all monarchs, but rather a number of species with fanciful names like great spangled fritillary, Northern crescent and American lady. And the bees in my garden weren't just the large and obvious bumblebees, of which I detected several kinds, but also the much smaller sweat, leaf-cutter or furrow bees. These smaller bees are only between one-quarter and one-half inch in length and are barely noticeable with the naked eye. I even discovered previously unnoticed lifecycle forms of insects – the half-inch-long, oblong patches of flat black scales attached to one of the walls of my house are the juvenile forms of fireflies; the fat white grubs with brown heads found while digging in the garden are the larval forms of June bugs.

One morning, I noticed a bee unusually still on a flower. It wasn't until zooming in on the bee to take a picture that I discovered a well-camouflaged crab spider clutching it. The spider had paralyzed the bee with its venom so as to consume it. A life-and-death drama befitting a David Attenborough show, all unfolding on a black-eyed Susan petal.

I don't have to go on an African safari to see new exotic creatures. Instead I can venture into my own backyard where there are many animals I've never seen before – hiding in plain sight.

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