

Blue Ridge Parkway for Naturalists
(Joint Activity with the Carolina Butterfly Society and T. Gilbert
Pearson Audubon Society)
September 30, 2017

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The Carolina Butterfly Society, T. Gilbert Pearson Audubon Society, and Piedmont Bird Club hosted a joint naturalists' field trip on September 30, to the Blue Ridge Parkway. The Parkway is a beautiful place, and late September is a great time to welcome the beginning of autumn. Thirteen folks participated in the field trip.

The trip was planned as an outing for naturalists of all kinds. We had set it on this date because late September is prime time for Monarch butterfly migration, and these beautiful and interesting butterflies tend to follow the Parkway on their journey south to Mexico.

For birders, the date also is near the peak of migration for hawks. Also, for wildflower enthusiasts, late summer wildflowers are blooming in profusion at the end of September.

We began our field trip at the Blue Ridge Music Center at Milepost 213 just inside Virginia. We were welcomed and given an introduction to the music center by a National Park Service ranger to start the morning. Then we explored the meadows and woodland edges around the grounds.

We ended up spending more time there than expected, so we stopped at the music center to eat our picnic lunch. Coincidentally, there was a bluegrass group playing mountain music on the veranda near our picnic tables.

From the music center we worked our way slowly southwest along the Parkway toward Sparta, stopping along the roadside periodically to check flowering meadows and woodland edges. It was a beautiful sunny day for exploring.

As expected, wildflowers dominated the landscape. By the end of the trip, we had seen 10 species of butterflies nectaring on the flowers and flying by.

Fall is the season when folklore tells us that Wooley Bear Caterpillars will predict how cold and snowy the coming winter will be. We saw two species, three Banded Woolly Bear Caterpillars (Isabella Tiger Moth larvae), and a blond Yellow Bear Caterpillar (Virginian Tiger Moth larva). Unfortunately, we couldn't figure out what kind of winter we'll have!

Oddly, birds were a bit scarce, although we did see one hawk, a Red-tailed. We also saw interesting species, such as several Eastern Phoebes and a flock of American Goldfinches, as well as expected birds such as Eastern Towhees, Blue Jays, and Carolina Wrens.

By the time we called it a day in mid-afternoon, everyone had enjoyed the variety of wildlife and even a bit of mountain music.