

# The Red Admiral Butterfly

It's an Invasion

*By Warren Uxley*

The Red Admiral is a butterfly of exquisite beauty. It is painted in rich hues of black, white, orange and brown in a pattern that is stunning. In recent days (it's May 10<sup>th</sup> as I write this) there has been a massive influx of these Butterflies into Ohio. Anyone who takes a walk in the fields and woodlands of Crawford County right now can see dozens, if not hundreds, of these magnificent butterflies.

A southern butterfly, the Red Admiral has entered the Buckeye state on the heels of the powerful south winds that raced across the state a week ago. The immense numbers of this year are unusual. In many years the Red Admiral is not seen in Ohio at all.

Many butterflies will over winter in either the egg or the pupa stage of their life cycle. A few face the cold weather as caterpillars and even fewer hibernate as adults. The Red Admiral is one of those that go through the winter as an adult. Only a handful of butterflies can successfully hibernate as adults in Ohio and the Red Admiral is not a member of this select group. It must be in warmer climes to survive the winter.

Every now and then conditions in the south favor the Red Admiral and huge numbers emerge from hibernation in the spring. It is in such years that vast numbers will move north. These movements happen most often in the month of May and this year is no exception.

Once they have arrived the males begin to compete for the females. There are huge gaps in our understanding of butterfly behavior. But, it is generally believed that some butterflies defend territories and that the males engage in helical shaped combat flights in an effort to obtain or defend the best real estate. I have seen many such flights in the last few days in which up to ten Red Admirals have been involved.

After mating, the females will lay eggs on nettles and the hatched caterpillars begin feeding. This summer brood will be on the wing in July. The Red Admirals of the summer brood are larger and have more vibrant colors than the generation that goes through the winter. The difference is striking.

The summer brood then repeats the breeding cycle and the next generation will go through the winter. The winter broods that hatch in Ohio and points further north must deal with weather that is more severe than what they are adapted to.

While the evidence is sketchy, it appears that at least some of the Butterflies from the winter brood that hatch in Ohio will migrate south. Those that try to hibernate here are probably doomed. More research is clearly needed. (Naturalist note: see color insert for photo.)