

Ranger Steve's Nature Niche Northern Blue Photographer John Wilkie

People connections from our past create joyous memories that live even when they are gone. John Wilkie was a Detroit foundry worker with whom I had not had contact but good fortune brought us together.

In the early 1980's I was participating in botanical research with Dr. Reznicek from the University of Michigan and Don Henson. They were exploring the Upper Peninsula for rare plants and I was along to learn what I could from the experts.

During field work, I was introduced to many plant species new to me. As we roved, I kept a watchful eye for various butterflies. Most were beauties commonly encountered like the Acadian Hairstreak, Baltimore Checkerspot, and Arctic Skipper. All were thrilling with somewhat obscure caterpillar host plants and showy wildflower nectar sources.



A small iridescent blue butterfly we had not seen elsewhere was abundant in one location. I excitedly caught it with my butterfly net. It was a Northern Blue butterfly. I kept an individual for scientific proof because it was not known to have breeding populations in Michigan. Mo Nielsen had found one individual at Isle Royale National Park in Lake Superior far from Michigan's mainland. It had been found in Minnesota north of the Great Lake and in northern Wisconsin. Some had drifted over the border from Wisconsin

into Michigan's Dickinson County but breeding colonies were not known in this site and I did not find any there when I visited.

While I was absorbed with the butterfly I found, Dr. Reznicek vocally burst with excitement. He found dwarf bilberry (*Vaccinium cespitosum*). It's a minute three-inch-tall heath in the blueberry family. Cecil Billington, in his 1949 book Shrubs of Michigan, listed the species for Michigan but had not collected a specimen for scientific proof. Now 30 some years later, Dr. Reznicek collected verifying evidence as a state record.

Surprisingly, the butterfly I had collected simultaneously 100 feet away in the central UP required that plant as a larval food host. The DNR listed both as state threatened because little was known about them. I was provided a grant for life history research. My study provided proof the caterpillar depended on the bilberry for survival.

When its presence became known, John Wilkie contacted me. He was trying to photograph every butterfly species known to Michigan. At the time, I lived in the upper peninsula and John, with camera, made the trip north. He stayed at our home and the next day, we visited the only known Northern Blue breeding colony in Michigan. He acquired the desired pictures and kindly sent me an 8X10 print.

It was a wonderful joy to share the discovery with an avid butterfly enthusiast and enjoy his company in the evening. He was elderly but full of youthful excitement that comes from pursuing the natural wonders that abound in back country wild areas that hold remnants of the unknown. Within weeks of driving home, processing his pictures, and sending me the print, he passed away. This was the last species he was able to capture on film. It was a pleasure to assist in his quest.

My work with Northern Blue research continued. More extensive study ensued for the presence of the bilberry and some new locations were discovered. I canvased sites in hopes of finding the butterfly. I went to the McCormick Wilderness I had wanted to visit but had never explored. I hiked its back country and happened upon a Northern Blue. It was female so I followed her expecting she might lead me the bilberry that was unknown in that location. The butterfly's plant search for egg laying, helped me discover a new location for this plant special to her and for the Michigan Natural Features Inventory.



On wilderness treks one can happen upon new discoveries of significance. Preservation of wilderness is essential to sustain unique nature niches. They also provide opportunity to develop new acquaintances with people like John Wilkie who enrich our lives. Though he is gone, he lives vividly in my experiences. Consider joining the West Michigan Butterfly Association and participating in field outings.

Natural history questions or topic suggestions can be directed to Ranger Steve (Mueller) at odybrook@chartermi.net - Ody Brook Nature Sanctuary, 13010 Northland Dr. Cedar Springs, MI 49319 or call 616-696-1753.