

High Country News

The wandering lepidopterist

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It's a sadly typical spring day in Seattle, all scudding clouds and spitting rain even though the forecast promised sun. On top of that, Dr. Robert Michael Pyle has some bad news. "Marsha won't be joining us," he says. I'm sorry to hear it. Marsha has been at Pyle's side for more than 30 years, and sometimes he refers to her as his second wife. I'd looked forward to meeting her, but it appears that I'll have to wait. Why? "She's a little torn up," Pyle says.

Marsha, by way of introduction, is a butterfly net, and she has been working unusually hard lately. But even if she deserves a brief rest, Pyle can't afford one, so we race to catch a ferry. We're off to the Olympic Peninsula in search of four species of small brown butterflies called elfins: the brown, the hoary, Moss' elfin, and the pine. These four are among the approximately 800 species of butterflies in the United States and Canada. This year, Pyle -- author, naturalist and Yale-trained lepidopterist -- is trying to see them all.

A Big Year, as this sort of esoteric escapade is known, was until recently the sole province of birders. The concept is simple: From Jan. 1 until Dec. 31, a person tries to see as many of the birds (or, in this case, butterflies) that live north of the Rio Grande as is fiscally and physically possible. It sounds like a simple goal, but it's soon overwhelmed by the staggering amount of planning that's required. Maps must be pored over, local experts consulted, and scouts deployed. And while a Big Year is, at its root, ultimately a kind of contest, Pyle is less concerned with racking up rare sightings than with witnessing the changes that butterflies, their habitats and ranges have undergone in recent years. After he's finished, he'll write about his adventures in what will be his fifteenth book, tentatively titled *Swallowtail Seasons: The First Butterfly Big Year*.

Pyle, 60, has studied butterflies since his childhood in Aurora, Colo. He's one of those

fortunate types who turned a youthful fancy into his life's pursuit. Butterfly work has taken him to England and Papua New Guinea, among other places. In 1971, he founded the Xerces Society, the first U.S. organization dedicated to butterfly conservation. (The society is named after the Xerces blue -- the first butterfly known to have become extinct because of human activities.) As he rose through the conservation ranks, however, Pyle began to feel rootless. In 1979, he moved to Gray's River, Wash., a town that is wet and cold much of the year and doesn't have a lot of butterflies. But once there, Pyle started writing about the creatures, and, more broadly, about the relationship human beings have with nature.

When I catch up with him, he has driven well over 17,000 miles in Powdermilk, his 1982 Honda Civic. He began the year with a trip to California in pursuit of monarchs, and has since been to Florida and back, with stops in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. He has seen 172 species, or, as he puts it, "One-fifth of the species in one-third of the time, so I'm right on track."

A friend once described Pyle as a glass-is-one-eighth-full kind of optimist. Pyle, who, with his full white beard and great good humor, looks like Santa Claus, says that he has to be. Butterflies are in trouble across North America. Currently, 19 species in the Western states are either endangered or threatened -- 13 in California alone. Blame the usual suspects: habitat loss, or climate change, which can make even the last semi-pristine places inhospitable (even as it may open new areas of habitat).

All this has left its mark on Pyle's journeys. The Uncompahgre fritillary, which lives high in the Colorado Rockies, is retreating up the peaks, Pyle and his scouts have found. In the Southeast, he has discovered other species well outside their original ranges. Some of them might be idiosyncratic wanderers. But Pyle thinks they may indicate more profound range shifts -- butterflies leaving their old homes because they've become too hot or too dry, unable to stay in the shrinking geography of once-suitable climes.

The elfin butterflies Pyle seeks today produce just one generation each year and fly only in the spring, so this might be his only chance to see them. The big challenge, he says, has been matching his travels with each species' seasonal cycle. Butterfly emergence is highly dependent on weather and climate, he explains. "Normally this would be a good time to look for elfins, but spring has been late this year. So we'll see."

With Marsha indisposed, Pyle has brought along his backup, Akito. Although the slick, aluminum and eminently portable Akito may be more technically gifted, it lacks Marsha's seasoned charm and grace. Its mere presence is a sign of a mild disagreement among butterfly enthusiasts. They tend to be an affable bunch, but there is a long-simmering debate among them as to whether they should collect (i.e., kill) butterflies. Pyle blames himself for this schism. In 1974, he published his first book, *Watching Washington Butterflies*, and later, in 1984, *The Audubon Handbook for Butterfly Watchers*. The field guides opened butterflying to a new breed of appreciator, who in turn started to question the prevailing ethos of catch, kill and collect (or study).

Pyle is both a watcher and netter, because he sees benefits to both. "I know a lot of lepidopterists who don't use binoculars, and they miss out," he says. "And I know a lot of watchers who don't use nets, and they miss out, too. But feelings can get pretty strong on both sides."

Strong indeed. After a recent meeting of the Washington Butterfly Association, when Pyle and a few others remained, University of Washington student and WABA stalwart David Droppers read aloud from his poem, "Ode to the Butterfly Net." An excerpt:

To the net, to the hand,

And to the butterfly swift,

I am very grateful

For a most generous gift. ...

They say that you hurt,

And they say that you harm,

You, butterfly net,

The extension of my arm. ...

"David was a big watcher at first," Pyle tells me now. "I'd have never imagined him taking to the net as he has."

This explains a lot. At first, I thought the poem was just a shy, sweet tribute to Pyle as an elder statesman. Now I appreciate it for what it really was: a war hymn of the net underground.

Pyle and I spend most of the morning tooling around old Forest Service roads near Lake Cushman. I drive slowly as he scans for patches of stonecrop, a succulent in the genus *Sedum* in which Moss' elfins prefer to lay their eggs. When he sees some, we get out and poke around, but the weather's cold and gloomy, and the elfins refuse to show themselves.

After hours of fruitless searching, we return to Highway 101. We have yet to see a single butterfly. Pyle doesn't seem particularly bothered, although he hopes for my sake that we don't get skunked. Many of his days are butterfly-free, he says; he wouldn't want people romanticizing his journey.

The road climbs to Mount Walker, one of the peninsula's small peaks. We've passed the exit for its summit when Pyle gives a start.

"Stop! Look at all the *Sedum*!" he exclaims, thumping the window with his forefinger. "Pull over!"

The clouds have broken and the sun streams down: If one is feeling generous, it might even be called hot. We get out of the car, cross the road, and wave our nets, trying to

provoke a territorial elfin into a stout defense of its honor and station. As we do, a pickup full of rowdies races by. One of them bays something out the window as they thunder past.

"This isn't always the wilderness experience that it could be," Pyle muses.

Then something small and blue shoots from the grass. Akito flashes out and gathers the thing in its mesh, and in one swift movement Pyle flips the net around on itself. He traps the butterfly in a small pocket, pulls out a pair of tweezers, reaches into the net and grasps the helpless creature gently by the base of its delicate, trembling wings. He withdraws it, holds it out.

"*Celestrina echo*," he says. "An echo azure. Take a look, it's beautiful." He hands me his binoculars reversed. The azure is still now, resigned to whatever fate awaits it. I peer at its giant, magnified head. It has black compound eyes, thin black-and-white striped antennae, and small gray crescents on its hindwings, which flash like silver foil.

Satisfied, Pyle opens the tweezers and the azure flies off. "Isn't it wonderful?" he breathes. The echo azure is one of the most common butterflies in the state; Pyle has already crossed it off his list after seeing one in his own backyard. That does nothing to diminish the wonder for him, though, as he gazes after a warbler, or crouches low to take a long, deep sniff of a black cottonwood's pungently sweet scent. "Any butterfly is a big deal," he says.

We resume our search for elfins, and not two minutes later another azure flushes at my feet. I flail at it, but the net is hardly an extension of my arm -- it's more like my cloddish ham-fist -- and the azure easily eludes me and starts across the road just as another pickup comes flying around the corner. Pyle and I stand rooted, aghast, as butterfly and truck converge in time and space. It seems we're about to watch the last butterfly we'll see all day get smashed into a powdery blue smear on the grill of some speed racer. But the truck is going so fast that it creates a strong cushion of air, which sweeps the azure up. In a second, the truck has barreled on underneath it, and the azure tumbles about, buffeted in the backwash. It rights itself and bounces on, a fragile thing tripping off into a dark stand of firs, and then it, too, is gone.

Eric Wagner freelances from Seattle, Washington, where he has until now been solely a birdwatcher.