

Although the idea of having a Big Year was kindled by reading about Dave Amadio's incredible accomplishment seeing 102 species in 2013, I did not begin planning my big year until two years ago. My work collating the SJBP for 2015 and 2016 required hundreds of hours of going through the log's data. That task furthered my knowledge of the butterfly landscape in terms of places and times in NJ's eight southern counties. Additionally, my time spent on the SJBP log led me to spending time with the NABA North Jersey Butterfly Club log where I learned about times and locations for our northern species. By December of 2016, I felt that it was possible for me to see 100 species in NJ during the course of a year.



Two-Spotted Skipper



Bog Hunter



Georgia Satyr

A key element in my planning was to contact Wade Wander, a veteran expert on all things that fly in NJ whether they be bug or bird. I met Wade during the NABA club's visit to Lizard Tail in May 2016. Later in August, he invited me to come north to search for Leonard's Skipper. Through these experiences, I came to realize that I had a wonderful resource in Wade to help me with some northern species with which I lacked familiarity. Early in 2017, I sent Wade an email with a list of species I hoped to see in North Jersey. Not only did he respond in a generous and helpful manner, he connected me to Tom Halliwell and Jim Springer. With the help of these three experts, I began the year thinking that my goal of 100 species was achievable.

I did not make long-range plans. Instead, my year was planned around not leaving NJ for more than a few days at a time and being conscious of the historical times, durations and locations of NJ's resident, migrant and accidental species. There was not much to think about in scheduling for SJ butterflies: I was secure in my knowledge of most SJ species' times and locations. Northern NJ presented more challenges. Most key locations are three to four hours from Cape May county. I thought that I would spend time camping at Worthington St Forest like I had in the past, but for various reasons ended up staying a couple of times in a hotel on route 206 near Newton. This turned out to be an excellent choice as it put me within an hour's reach of North Jersey's prime butterfly spots.



Pepper and Salt Skipper



Dreamy Duskywing



Common Roadside Skipper

I decided early on that I was not going to “chase” reports; therefore, I had to plan trips weeks in advance and hope that the weather would be favorable and the bugs cooperative (I did end up chasing Milbert’s Tortoiseshell when Wade emailed to inform me that they were present in North Jersey). My flexible schedule allowed for last minute changes of a day or so. Even so, one of my early trips north started out dismally. I left at 6:00 am on May 31 and drove north to Mountainside Park in a 50-degree drizzle. I had little hope of seeing much, and sure enough I only saw 4 butterflies as I walked the entire length of the Park. As I walked back, the drizzle stopped and I saw my first ever Indian skipper and other lovely things. Later that day the weather improved, and in different locations I saw other firsts for the year including Long Dash, Common Ringlet, Giant Swallowtail and my only Hoary-edge of my year. A trip that began in rain turned out to be one of my most enjoyable days.



Indian Skipper



Dotted Skipper



Long Dash

Most of my best moments this year were as much about the people I was with as the butterflies seen. Although nearly impossible to choose from so many wonderful experiences, my year’s highlight was the five-mile hike Jim Springer led me on in a successful search for Common (Ha!) Roadside Skipper which was only reported from one other area (which is not open to the public). A May 16 trip with Jim set the new early date for Pepper and Salt Skipper and gave me my first looks at Hobomok Skippers, Dreamy Duskywings and Appalachian Azures. It was a great joy to be afield with Jim this year! Another moment that especially sticks with me was seeing my first butterfly of the year, an Orange Sulphur early on New Year’s Day, with my son Matthew. Two trips with Brian Johnson stand out: on a cool cloudy May 20th, we saw at least 75 Dusted Skippers, and on another outing, we counted Georgia Satyrs and Two-spotted Skippers after I almost stepped on a huge rattlesnake. Another highlight was listening to Wade and Sharon Wander discuss the complex factors needed to sustain a colony of Northern Metalmarks as we hacked our way to one of the few remaining sites where that species can be found in NJ. My most comfortable observation of a new species came while drinking a beer with Clay Sutton in his backyard and having a long-awaited (for me) Hackberry Emperor touch down. Seeing my first Brazilian Skipper with Harvey Tomlinson, Steve Glynn, and Beth Polvino at Beth’s butterfly-devoted garden was a perfect example of good luck, as I was just leaving when the bug finally appeared. Lastly, finding a Milbert’s tortoiseshell with Wade on October 27 (my last new butterfly of the year) was a wonderful and humorous event. Early in the winter when I gave Wade my list of northern species I hoped to see, he gave me hope for seeing all but one: Milbert’s Tortoiseshell. Of that bug he simply wrote “forget it.”

Some memorable moments when I was by myself include finding a snout and an Azure within a five-minute stretch on February 8th. In June, I discovered a previously unknown colony of Georgia Satyrs and Two-spotted Skippers (don’t ask as I won’t tell where). Two experiences I had were especially magical: the first was on a trip north when I was enveloped by Baltimore Checkerspot as the early morning sun made its first appearance of the day after a day and

night of torrential rains; the other occasion was when I was bushwhacking through an area in Cape May County and came to a small grassy clearing and discovered a colony of Dion Skippers. A last special occasion worth mentioning occurred in CMC where I spent close to an hour observing what I am convinced were Southern Broken Dashes.

The missed species that most often comes to mind is Harvester. Over the course of three months, I searched for them at Chestnut Branch Park on ten occasions. Although I cannot report seeing Harvesters, but I certainly came to know Wooley Aphids. Compton's Tortoiseshell, which was not seen in NJ this year, was another species I searched for a handful of times. This also was not the year for Oak Hairstreak, Hickory Hairstreak or Clouded Skipper. I missed Aphrodite Fritillary even though on one occasion I was in a field where one had been reported the previous day. I had another search for them end abruptly when I turned a corner and realized (fortunately they did not) that I was within forty yards of a large mother bear and her two cubs. On the one-year anniversary of seeing a handful of Leonard's Skippers, I went to the same spot and failed to see any. Unfortunately, this was the only dedicated trip for them I could plan.



Northern Pearly Eye



Northern Metalmark



Baltimore Checkerspot

There were a number of surprises for me this year. A few species like Snout, Painted Lady, Dusted Skipper, Dion Skipper, and Bog Copper I found in great numbers in many locations. Other species that I am used to seeing multiple times like Cobweb Skipper, Long-tailed Skipper and Banded Hairstreak almost eluded me. After putting the binoculars on 100's of Gray Hairstreaks during the year, it was not until September 21 that I saw my first and only White M.

Although there are few things I would change about my approach to the year, there are some learnings that are worth sharing. One notable point for someone who considering such an endeavor is that unless you want to spend hours crawling around on your stomach or kneeling motionlessly until your legs cramp, invest in a good camera. My point-and-shoot and I mostly got along fine because I had time and patience, and I like close observation. On the downside, my camera sometimes failed me completely like the time its limitations kept me from getting photos of the Southern Broken Dashes. An aspect of the year that I was not adequately prepared for was the consuming nature of a Big Year. I was surprised to find that some people are apparently immune to the excitement that spying a Question Mark at the hardware store could generate in me. I found that I was not prepared for the blank looks I received upon stating "I would love to go, but I will be searching for Hessel's Hairstreak that week." As for adventures, some like the rattlesnake and bear episodes were exciting and fun, while others, like wondering if I could make it back to truck before being destroyed by deerflies, were not.

The following breakdown may be of interest to some: I saw 77 species in Cape May County; when joining Cumberland County with CMC, the number climbs to 84. The number of species seen in South Jersey was 91. North Jersey provided me with 17 species I could not find in SJ.

My hope was to see 100 species in 2017, but thanks to the assistance of many friends and a huge amount of luck, I ended up seeing 108. I had the great fortune to see species like Northern Metalmark and Baltimore Checkerspot, although those experiences are tinged with my feeling that my invasion into those delicate habitats, despite being mindful of every step, was needless and selfish. These are places that I will most likely not return to despite their incredible draw. The previous point leads to my biggest frustration of the year which is the problem of what information to share. For example, the Two-spotted Skipper has only appeared on the SJBP log six times since 2011 and was not recorded this year. Yet, a number of people saw that species this year but choose not to log their finds because of a variety of possible threats to the colonies and their habitat if their locations are revealed. Protecting butterfly species is not priority in NJ.

I mostly have positive thoughts and memories about the year; nevertheless, some sadness is associated with it. Due to a variety of factors which include habitat degradation and loss, mismanagement of existing crucial niches, global warming, and misguided human collectors, it is clear that some species will soon disappear from NJ. For example, it seems possible that Cobweb Skipper will soon disappear from South Jersey for reasons that are not yet understood. Although we can exert some influence on saving some species from needless extirpation, some population changes are now inevitable; as Sleepy Oranges and Fiery Skippers move north, other species like Artic Skippers are not likely to be seen again in NJ.

This year was a greater success and more fun than I imagined it would be. My satisfaction is complete.

Jack Miller