Could Bugging be the New Birding? (Part 1)

Editor's Note: This article is in two parts, the first here in the fall 2025 newsletter and the second in the winter 2025-26 newsletter that will follow.

Henshaw Haven front yard pollinator garden

Birding is one of the most popular leisure activities in the United States; a 2024 study[1] indicated that approximately 96 million people participate in some form of it. What makes birding so appealing? People enjoy immersing themselves in a relaxing natural environment. Birding is an accessible activity suitable for all ages, pursuable anywhere, whether alone or in a group, and it doesn't necessitate extensive equipment. It actively engages and challenges one's senses in the quest to find and identify birds. Numerous resources, including apps and printed guides, are available to assist, and many birders take pleasure in documenting their discoveries. Furthermore, birds are beautiful creatures whose songs can be a true musical delight. One certainly doesn't need to be an ornithologist to enjoy birding.

For many birding enthusiasts, the peak excitement occurs in early to mid-May, when native birds such as catbirds, swifts, and orioles return from their wintering grounds, and colorful warblers pass through on their northward journey. However, for me, a sense of disappointment arises toward the end of May as the number of migrating birds dwindles. During the pandemic, I realized that another similar outdoor nature pursuit had many of the same advantages as birding. As the spring flowers started blooming, insects of all types that may have been unnoticed in past years appeared in our front yard garden, which was awakening week by week. A new pastime was born — bugging!

Northern Cardinal
Cardinalis cardinalis

Red Milkweed Beetle
Tetraopes tetrophthalmus

Colorful creatures in both birding and bugging

In recent decades, both bird and insect populations have faced severe declines, largely due to pesticides and habitat loss. Land birds are heavily reliant on insects for sustenance, especially larvae such as caterpillars. Correspondingly, many native insects depend on native plants for food, including their leaves, pollen, and nectar. This is particularly true for pollinators like bees, butterflies, and moths. In turn, native plants depend on these pollinating insects to transfer pollen. This forms an interdependent web of life that many of us are unaware of. Consequently, fewer pollinator plants lead to fewer insects, which ultimately means fewer birds.

A meticulously maintained green lawn, especially one marked with yellow pesticide warning signs, represents a desolate and unwelcoming space for other living things.

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Also, many gardeners opt for non-native flowering plants based on their vibrant appearance, overlooking the fact that these often hold little to no attraction for native insects, even when lovely and colorful native alternatives are available. By allowing our front lawn to be overtaken by more native plants and not using pesticides, it has transformed into a far more inviting environment for both birds and insects — Henshaw Haven.

As a result, we've had many bird species nest in or around our yard, including cardinals, orioles, wrens, catbirds, nuthatches, mockingbirds, finches, and woodpeckers. Moreover, our yard's bug list now significantly surpasses our bird list, with new insect visitors being discovered frequently. Our front yard garden is situated on the north side of the house, receiving sun for only about half the day. Despite these conditions, native plants such as cat-mint, milkweeds, false sunflower, beebalm, goldenrod, and aster bloom successively throughout the season, creating a bustling hub of activity for our insect friends, especially when the sun shines on them. The few non-natives draw little traffic.

Our anchor plant is common milkweed, which originally arrived on the wind and is now interspersed throughout our front yard. It consistently draws monarch butterflies, which readily lay their eggs on the undersides of the leaves. Milkweed also serves as a significant attractant for leafhoppers, other butterflies, moths, beetles, flies, and various tiny critters. Unlike maintaining a bird feeder and purchasing seed, such plants naturally fulfill the role of a "bug feeder." Native plants can typically thrive on natural rainfall, except during very dry summers. Imagine bidding farewell to mowing and lawn sprinklers! One advantage of converting your yard into a native habitat is that you don't have to venture far to go bugging.

Bumble bee on milkweed

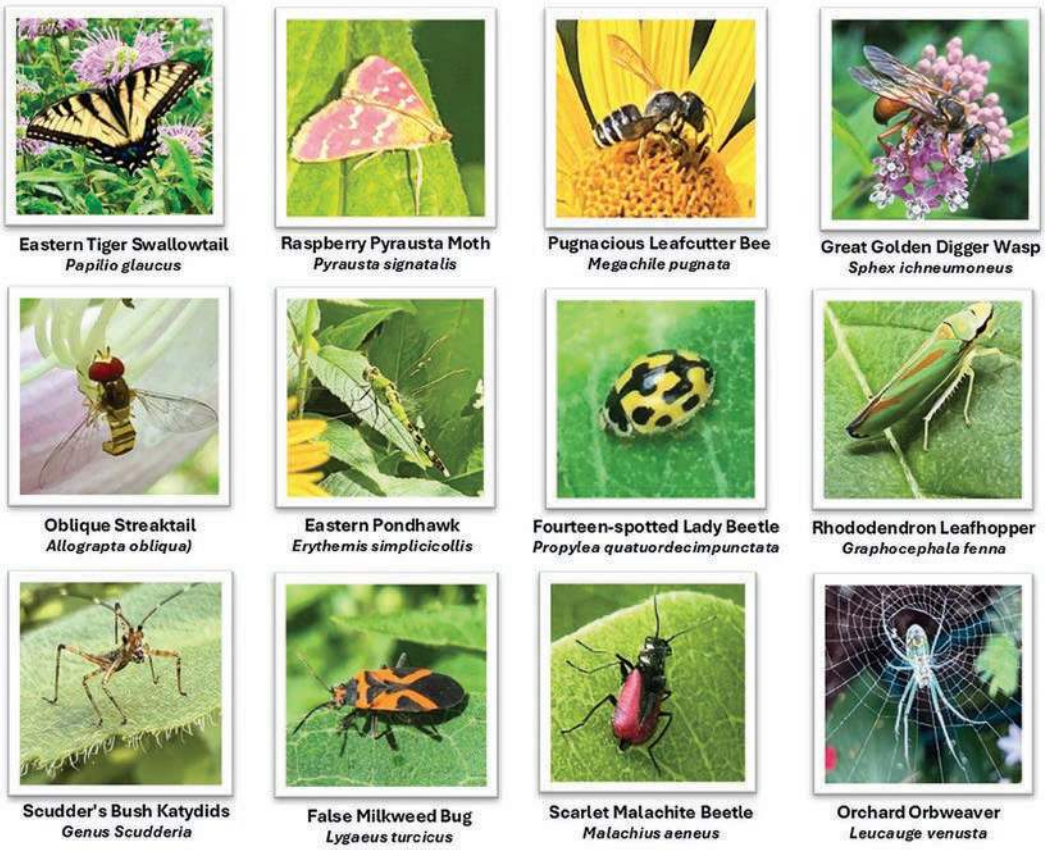
Monarch butterfly on purple coneflower

Of course, much like birding, you can search for bugs wherever you happen to be, particularly in locations abundant with native plants and flowers. While binoculars are perhaps the most common tool for birding, you probably already possess the handiest tool for bugging: your smartphone, which is likely equipped with a highly capable camera. You can utilize built-in zoom lenses for distant subjects and macro lenses for close-ups, which may kick in automatically as you zoom in or out. If your phone lacks these features, consider investing in inexpensive clip-on lenses. You can get good results from using the built-in camera app on your phone. And of course, an SLR camera with a macro lens could work too.


Binoculars for birding and smartphone camera for bugging

Good lighting, such as full sunlight, is ideal for photographing bugs, and you'll observe that sunny pollinator plants are significantly more active. Position yourself carefully to avoid casting a shadow, as this might startle the insect. While you can turn off the shutter sound, most insects don't seem to be bothered by it. Bees and wasps are often preoccupied with feeding and may ignore your close presence; however, always exercise caution.

Insects exhibit varied activity levels; some remain still, while others are skittish, elusive, or prone to hiding. Upon spotting an insect, take an initial photo immediately, even if from a distance, as you can always crop it later. If the insect remains, slowly move closer or zoom in, continually checking your focus and taking more pictures. Capture photos from multiple perspectives if you can — top, side, front, and back — and at different scales, including both close-ups and shots from farther away. Include a shot that shows the insect in its context, for instance, on its host plant. To indicate size, some people include a common object, such as a coin or a finger, in a shot, or use a small ruler. Achieving sharp focus can be challenging; use your phone's tap-to-focus feature on the insect. Take numerous photos, as at least some are likely to be well-focused and at a good angle; you can delete the extras later. For fast-moving insects, try using video or slow-motion video mode. You can subsequently capture still frames from the video with a screen grab. Some camera apps



Representative members of some of the "bug" families found at Henshaw Haven

offer a burst mode that takes a short video and selects the best frame. Use your phones's camera app to crop images and adjust brightness, contrast, and sharpness as needed. If location services are enabled, smartphones record the location of each photo in addition to the date and time, which is useful for submitting to identification apps such as iNaturalist[2].

As plants bloom throughout the season, different bugs come to visit, creating a sense of adventure as you anticipate what strange new creature will appear. Just as in the bird world, you will learn which bugs are common, allowing you to recognize and get excited about an unfamiliar one. Like birds, bugs exhibit a wide variety of shapes, sizes, colors, behaviors, preferred habitats, and seasonal appearance patterns. Similar to distinguishing bird families, you will learn to differentiate among butterflies, moths, bees, wasps, flies, beetles, leafhoppers, and many more.

When identifying birds, you observe shapes, wings, color patterns, movement, and the relative size of their parts. For insect identification, these physical characteristics are also paramount. Some insects are large, like mantises or luna moths, while others can be tiny, such as springtails or whirligig mites. Pay attention to body segments and the number of legs: insects have six legs, while spiders have eight. Note how many wings are present; bees possess four, whereas flies have only two. Examine the antennae: some are beaded or smooth, some have a knob at the end (butterflies), others are feathered (moths), and some are striped. The bug world also contains fascinating mimics, with flies disguising themselves as bees through yellow and black patterns or hairy bodies, spiders posing as ants, or Viceroy butterflies looking like monarchs.

Did you know that a lot of pollination is done at night by moths? There's another whole world of insect activity to explore that most people don't see except maybe around their porch light. I recently attended a special "Moth Ball" event in the evening, where lighted sheets were set up to attract moths and other nighttime fliers, and it was amazing to see how many insect visitors came to the party.

Part 2 of this article (coming in the next issue) will discuss in detail how to easily identify the bugs you have found and show you a few of my favorite ones. Meanwhile, try getting out with your camera on your own bugging adventure! ◆

A fly mimicking a bee and a spider mimicking an ant

References:

1. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Birding is Soaring in Popularity with Sky-High Impact, https://www.fws.gov/story/2024-12/birdwatching-america.

2. iNaturalist app, https://www.inaturalist.org/.

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