

# American Butterflies

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Sachems &  
Climate Change

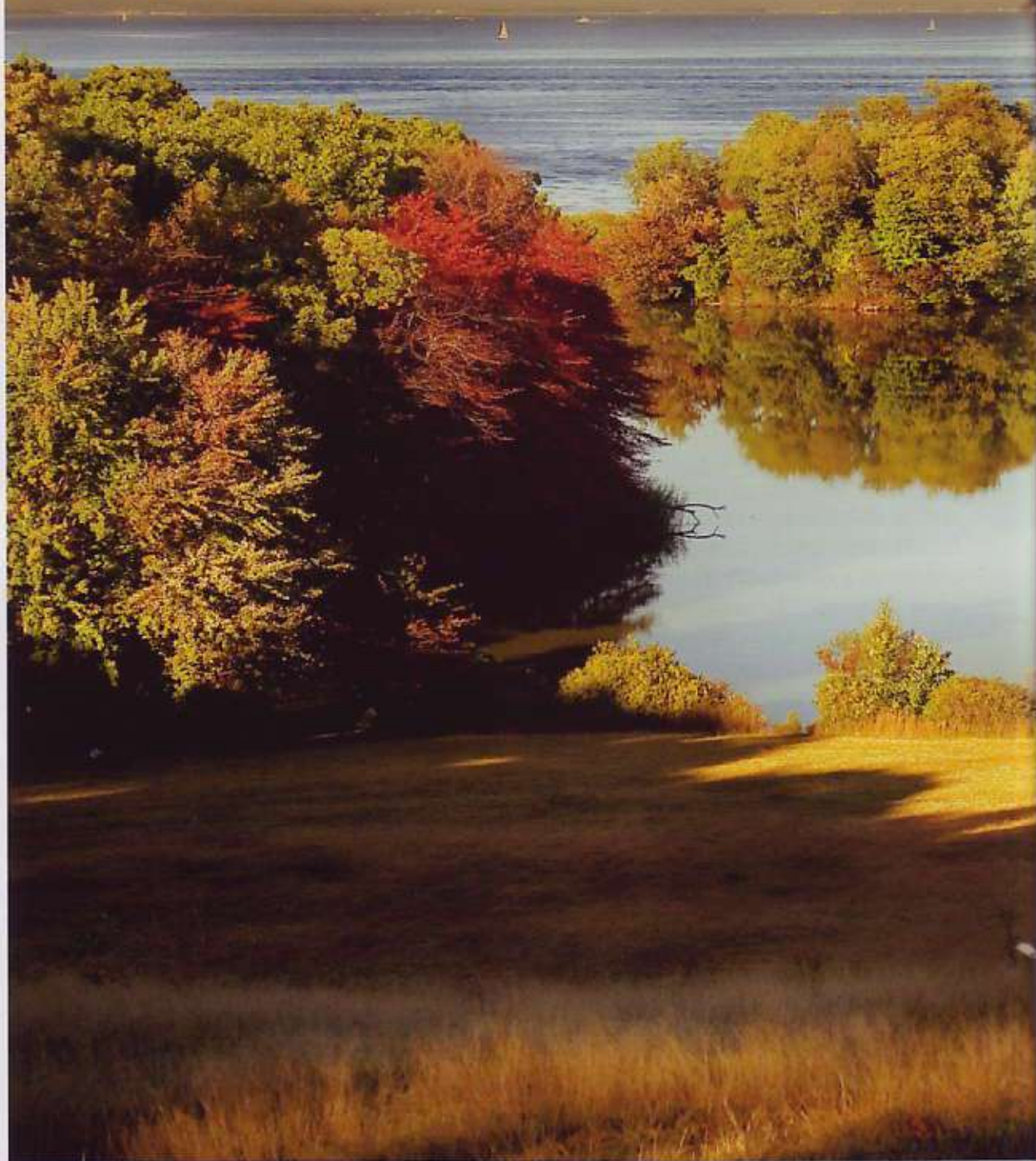
Mitchell's Satyr

Photographing Butterflies

Baltimore Checkerspots

Roadside Skipper Names

# Baltimore Checkerspots Recolonize Long Island, New York





## Baltimore Checkerspots

are brilliantly colored brushfoot butterflies that range from Nova Scotia west to Minnesota and south to northern Alabama. They are found throughout most of New York State, but in recent years have been conspicuously absent from Long Island. On Long Island, there have only been 4 records, each of single butterflies, in the last 40 years, including a span of about 17 years when none were recorded. Therefore, butterfly enthusiasts on Long Island were quite surprised when, in late June 2009, a large colony was discovered at Caumsett State Park, in northwestern Suffolk County.

In 1974 Arthur M. Shapiro, in *Butterflies and Skippers of New York State*, listed Baltimores as occurring throughout New York State, but made the comment (without any additional information) that they were, "Formerly abundant on the Coastal Plain, but now much reduced." Long Island is on the Coastal Plain. Three distribution "dots" are shown on Long Island, and roughly correspond to the Queens/Nassau County borderline, the Nassau/Suffolk County borderline, and western Suffolk County.

The other individual reports are as follows. Steve Rosenthal observed a Baltimore Checkerspot in a vacant lot in Westbury, Nassau County approximately 40 years ago. Steve Walter observed 2 separate individuals at Douglaston Marsh, northern Queens County in the early 1990s. And, most

*Left: One of the first Baltimore Checkerspots to call Caumsett State Park "home."*

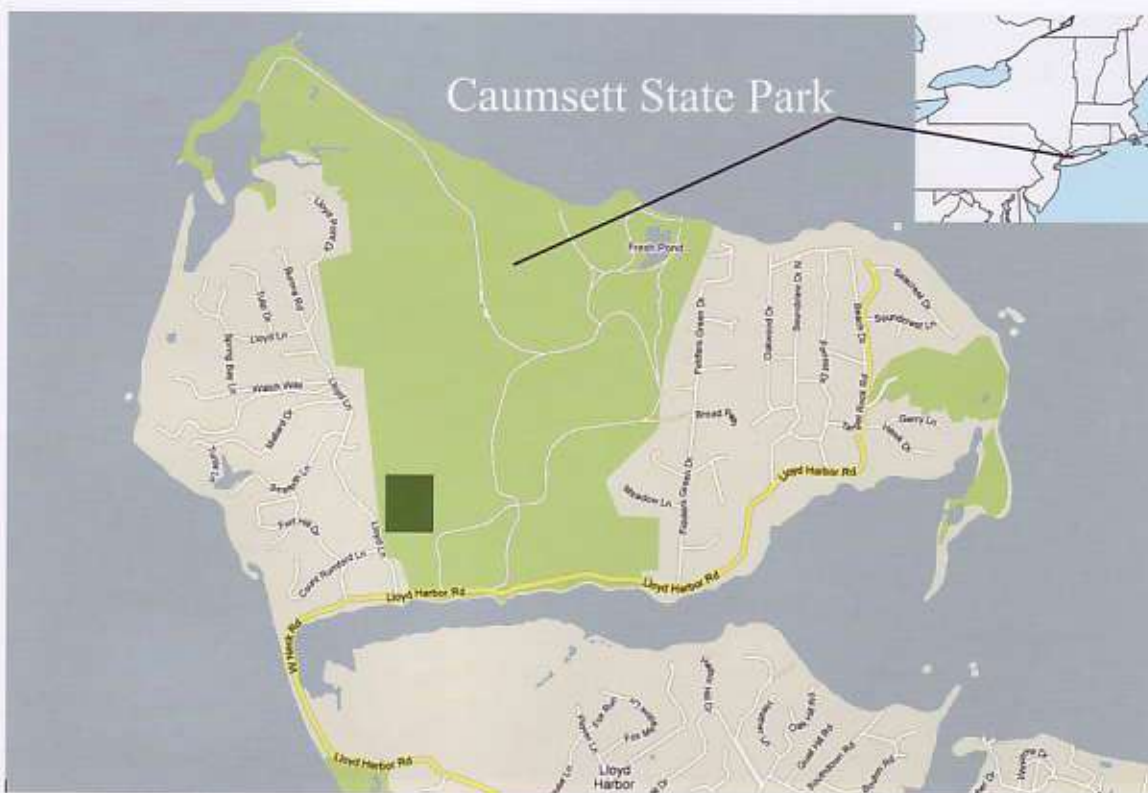
*July 3, 2009.*

*Overleaf: A view of Connecticut across Long Island Sound, taken from the north side of Caumsett State Park. Note the Baltimore Checkerspot flying behind the middle sailboat.*

recently, Matt Bayer observed one at Caumsett State Park, Suffolk County in 2008. Perhaps this individual, or others not noticed, was the start of things to come in 2009.

On June 30, 2009 Ken and Sue Feustel discovered the new colony of Baltimore Checkerspots at Caumsett State Park, and counted 31 individuals in a series of three early successional dry, upland "old fields." Some small trees and shrubs (cherries, sumacs) are coming in, which is the reason the Parks people mow them regularly. There are two borders around the fields. The adjacent borders are an assortment of low to medium height forbs. This is where the English plantain is most prevalent. The outer borders are mostly low grasses which get mowed quite often. Rich Kelly and Steve Rosenthal counted 53 individuals at this site on July 3rd. They were subsequently seen by Steve Walter, George Dadone, and other observers. The last observation was of a very worn individual by Dadone and David Kunstler on the Muttontown Fourth of July Count on July 18<sup>th</sup>.

How did the Baltimores get to Caumsett State Park? It's only conjecture, but the location of the park right on Long Island Sound must be an enabler to animals coming from the mainland. Caumsett State Park consists of 1500 acres — most of the historical Marshall Field estate — on a peninsula jutting into Long Island Sound. The shortest



*Caumsett State Park is located on the north shore of Long Island, New York. The dark green area is the location of fields inhabited by Baltimore Checkerspot populations.*

distance from Caumsett to any point of land in Connecticut is about 5 ½ miles. Larger animals do swim across the Sound to Long Island. Relatively recent occurrences of river otters in northern Nassau County are attributed to individuals who swam across the open water and white-tailed deer have been observed swimming in from the Sound and coming ashore at Caumsett. It must be a whole lot easier for a butterfly to get caught up in an air mass that is traveling from northwest to southeast, as much of the local weather moves, and make the crossing over Long Island Sound.

So, the status of Baltimore Checkerspots in Connecticut being relevant to this story, I turned to Larry Gall and Lenny Brown for information from the 1999 Connecticut butterfly atlas. These data indicate that, during the atlas, Baltimore Checkerspots were found at five locations in inland Fairfield County,

Connecticut — Sherman (two sites), Wilton, Redding, and New Fairfield. Although slightly inland and east of Caumsett — with the Wilton location being the closest to Caumsett (at a distance of about 17 miles) — butterflies from this general area, as well as from ephemeral colonies in Westchester County, New York, may have been the source of the pioneers to Caumsett. The only strictly coastal Connecticut atlas site from which Baltimores were recorded was at Old Lyme, which is far to the east of Caumsett.

Historically, Baltimore Checkerspots mainly have been reported to use white turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*) as their foodplant. This plant is usually found in wet or moist situations, so Baltimores are often associated with wet meadows. White turtlehead is somewhat rare on Long Island and is not known from Caumsett or from the general area nearby. Both the Feustels and George Dadone



*Above: The new home of Baltimore Checkerspot. Most of the reddish vegetation is Queen Anne's lace. Oct. 21, 2009.*

*Right: A spent head of an English plantain, the caterpillar foodplant for Baltimore Checkerspot at Caumsett. Oct. 21, 2009.*



observed Baltimores laying eggs on English plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) in the dry fields at Caumsett. Recent literature suggests that many populations of Baltimore Checkerspot are now using English plantain as their primary caterpillar foodplant.

The use of English plantain at Caumsett is great news for the butterfly in terms of adaptability, but caused some concern among naturalists for the future of this butterfly in a heavily used state park. White turtlehead habitats, being wet, are not likely to be mowed, but inhabiting English plantain fields at Caumsett puts the butterflies square in the path of the park maintenance batwing mowers. It should be pointed out that, in spite of a normal mowing regime since the Matt Bayer

observation in 2008, over 50 adult butterflies managed to emerge. One wonders how many more there might have survived with no mowing or a different mowing approach.

In October 2009 a management plan meeting was held with the Caumsett Superintendent, Len Krauss, and other representatives from the New York State Parks Department. Sue Feustel, who had been involved with this planning effort, got the subject of grassland birds put on the agenda, and invited me to speak about the Baltimore Checkerspot and butterflies in general. Al Lindberg, retired from the Nassau County Parks Department, was brought on board as well. Al had prior experience in land management and mowing techniques, and provided valuable

input to this planning process.

The Parks personnel were extremely open-minded and realized what a unique event had taken place at their site this year. They will be more aggressive in mowing selected fields in the hope of reducing woody plants and invasive plants so that grassland birds may find Caumsett more attractive in the future. A return to more of an open grassland habitat should be helpful to the butterfly fauna as a whole. Anecdotal evidence suggests that invasive plants have been hurting populations of formerly common local butterflies for quite a few years. A combined approach of using birds and butterflies to gain habitat improvement worked well in this case.

In terms of the Baltimores in particular, Parks personnel will reduce both the frequency and scope of their mowing in field perimeters where the caterpillars are likely to be on the foodplant. This will reduce the possibility of

the caterpillars being crushed by the mowing equipment. In addition, careful timing of the mowing will give the caterpillars the best chance at being below the level of the mowing blades, and will also prevent the habitat from become too overgrown for the foodplant. Given the often maniacal desire to mow, as seen in so many places, it was gratifying to see that a careful, logical discussion was met with such a reasonable response.

A side note is that at least three Common Ringlets were seen at Caumsett in 2008. Although there are several older Long Island records from the 1990s, Common Ringlet may be another species that has recently jumped the Long Island Sound. This is a species which has blasted its way south through New York and nearby states in recent years.

I'm looking forward to being at Caumsett State Park on or about July 1, 2010, to count Baltimores! 🦋



*Baltimore Checkerspots clearly can find new areas that are welcoming to them. Perhaps it is best to allow them to find their own way, rather than trying to control the process by moving them to areas from which they had been extirpated. July 3, 2009.*