

Species Profile...

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A Butterfly Announces Spring



My wife and I have been overanxious for the arrival of spring. When our naturalist friend, Bob Behrstock, called to say he had seen a falcate orangetip butterfly---a signal of spring--- we took off.

If any creature is a harbinger of spring, it is the one-inch wide falcate orangetip (*Paramidea midea*). The little butterfly emerges in late February when deciduous trees are still bare of their leaves, but flowering plants are beginning to bloom. In East Texas, the butterfly lives only through early March, and doesn't appear again until the following year.

John Tveten, a Houston naturalist and a leading expert on butterflies, explains that the falcate orangetip lays its eggs on the white flowers of the spring cress that blooms in February. The eggs hatch and the larvae eat the flowers and seeds. The larvae eventually crawl through the leaf litter, attach themselves to the twig of a plant, pupate into a chrysalis, and emerge into a butterfly the following February.

We drove up to Big Creek Scenic Area one recent morning to see this amazing butterfly. The woodland preserve is at the southern end of the Sam Houston National Forest in East Texas.

As we drove along the forest road toward the parking area, a goatweed leafwing butterfly flew up along the forest edge and American snouts rested on the dirt road. Good omen. The butterflies were out, and maybe we'd see the falcate orangetip.

Bird songs and calls rang out from the forest, as if announcing, spring is near, spring is near. Northern cardinals were singing their cheer-cheer song, pine warblers were letting forth their dulcet trill, and red-bellied, downy, and pileated woodpeckers were singing and drumming on trees. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a leaf falling through the air. My wife said, "There it is!"

What I thought was a leaf was a falcate orangetip gliding in the air. It landed on a chunk of concrete in the parking area, spread its wings, and basked in the morning sun. Its exquisite white wings, lightly edged above with brown and richly mottled below with green, made it look like a dainty spring flower somehow floating in the breeze.

The butterfly was a male because its wing tips were orange, hence the "orangetip" in its name. The word, "falcate," in its name comes from the hooked shape of the forewing. The tips of the forewing in both the male and female have prominent black markings, but the female does not have the orange colored accents.

As we scanned the parking area, we discovered two-dozen falcate orangetips flying in the sunlight. The butterflies are drawn to sunlight, and are not typically active on cloudy days. We wondered if this is how the little butterflies announce the coming of spring's sunny days.

We donned our daypacks---we never go hiking without water and snacks---grabbed our binoculars, and walked into the forest to

look for more falcate orangetips. As we walked over a footbridge that crossed the babbling brook known as Big Creek, we thought about the coming spring when the bamboo along the brook will be harboring scores of butterflies, damselflies, and dragonflies.

Raccoon and deer tracks were conspicuous in the sandbars along the creek. Not as conspicuous was a set of fox prints. Wouldn't it be fun, I mused, to see the goings on along the creek at night?

A large, fallen tree trunk lay near the creek. Big holes in the trunk had probably been chiseled out by pileated woodpeckers for nesting cavities. In turn, the holes probably served as nesting or roosting sites for screech-owls.

Just past the creek's footbridge, at the top of the hill, is a wooden sign showing a map of the trails. We headed for the Pine Loop Trail. The forest floor along the trail was bright with sunlight because trees such as water oak and sweetgum had not yet leafed out. Nonetheless, the green foliage of pine trees, southern magnolias, and yaupon shaded and dressed up the forest.

We heard a barred owl calling in the distance with its dog-like barking sound. We saw a red-shouldered hawk soaring overhead and calling in a shrill, high-pitched kreeeeee sound. However, we weren't after birds, we were after butterflies---we knew we'd be back in April to look for owls, hawks, and songbirds.

A question mark butterfly landed in front of us and spread its wings. We noticed it was the spring form of the species because of its orange forewings and black hindwings. Then, we saw a winter form with its darker orange coloration and sparse black markings on the hindwings. The two butterflies rested on the trail, representing a sort of transition from winter to spring.

Farther along the trail were flowering plants such as red trillium with lime-green buds, cherry laurel with shiny green leaves, and partridgeberry with bright red fruit. Nearby was a cluster of spring cress, the white flowers hosting 20 falcate orangetips.

We saw a female falcate orangetip land on a sprig of grass, spread her wings, and raise her abdomen to signal to a male her readiness to mate. We watched at least a dozen other females re-enact that mating ritual, for this was the season for these butterflies to lay eggs and ensures the continuance of the species. They only fly and mate a little while on the eve of springtime.

We saw dark clouds on the northwest horizon and felt the chill wind of an approaching cold front when we returned home in the late afternoon. "Give us your best shot," we said to the cold front. "A little butterfly told us that sunny spring days are coming to chase away the winter clouds."

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