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By Ted Williams

Heavy Metal Beetle

When hardwood leaves unfurl, large beetles with metallic-green wing covers and metallic-blue or -purple heads and legs are on the prowl most everywhere in the contiguous United States. Called fiery searchers or, more aptly, caterpillar hunters, adults and juveniles prey on larvae of moths and butterflies, pursuing them into the highest treetops. Their fondness for gypsy moth caterpillars and tent caterpillars endears them to humankind, though it's doubtful that they effect much control. Like June beetles, they're attracted to light and sometimes congregate on porch screens. Pick one up carelessly and you may get an unwelcome nip from the heavy mandibles and an even more unwelcome dousing with vile-smelling predator repellent.

Butterfly Magnet

From Minnesota to Maine and south to Florida and Louisiana, wild lupine is enriching the earth, not just with its spectacular blue-violet blooms but with nitrogen it draws from air and fixes in soil. Look for this pea relative in poor, sandy, or fire-scorched terrain, where, in the northern part of its range, its leaves provide larvae of the endangered Karner blue butterfly with their only known food source. Find wild lupine and you may find Karner blues, quarter-size butterflies that skip around at knee level and are almost as brilliant as the blossoms of the plant that keeps them on this planet. Because lupine depends so much on fire and because our society has long been blasted by the mantra that wildfire needs to be “prevented,” both plant and butterfly are being driven from the landscape. Smokey, like Pooh, is “a bear of very little brain,” but the ancient farmers who named the plant lupine—it means “wolflike”—did him one better. Because they found wild lupine only in poor soil, they assumed that instead of providing nutrients, it had “wolfed” them down.

Fierce Fairies

If ruby-throated hummingbirds were the size of crows, they'd run every other bird out of the country. The only breeding hummers east of the Mississippi, they'll appear in your backyard around apple-blossom time, having ridden up from the sunny south on the backs of northbound geese (well, not really, but that wives' tale is too good to let fade). What they will do, though, is buzz past your ear like a Fourth of July pinwheel, swoop down to investigate anything red you might be wearing, including your nose, and, with saberlike bills, fence with every perceived interloper, from bee to Cooper's hawk. On wings that can beat 78 times per second, they swoop, hover, and fly backward with a swiftness and agility that protects them from almost all predators. During courtship a male may inscribe an aerial pendulum around a perched female. Hummers like to bathe, but they rarely, if ever, enter water. Instead they'll fly through dewy leaves or swoop through garden sprinklers or the spray of a handheld hose. True to their fairylike nature, females (which lack the ruby throat) construct walnut-size nests with lichen and gossamer.

Wolf Parts

Very rarely do you get a good look at wolves, and that's part of their magic. But put in your hours and you have a good chance of hearing their nocturnal dirges, especially if you learn to sing them. When there's snow on the ground, you have an even better chance of finding wolf spoor; and if you're truly lucky, you'll glimpse a silhouette flowing across a moonlit ridge. But in spring you can bring back more than just a memory from wolf country—the woolly fur: black, white, and all shades of gray and tan. Now, in lengthening daylight, wolves are shedding the winter coats that retained most of their body heat during brutal northern nights as they curled in snow, recycling even the heat from their lungs by breathing into their tails. Wolves are doing better than is commonly supposed. In Minnesota the population is expanding at a rate of 4.5 percent a year, and wolves have spilled over and populated northern Wisconsin and Michigan. In the Rocky Mountain West wolves are close to full recovery. In Alaska there may be as many as 10,000; in Canada, perhaps 60,000. Wolves also persist in about 40 nations of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

Marking the Spot

Look closely at those little painted turtles. They may actually be something else—smaller, but no less beautiful, spotted turtles. In the eastern and southern Great Lakes states and along the Atlantic seaboard from the bottom of Maine to the top of Florida, spring is the time to see these increasingly rare, semiterrestrial turtles; in a few weeks some will go into semidormancy to escape summer heat. Sometimes you can get close enough to these baskers to photograph them with a standard lens; at other times they'll spook at 100 yards. As their ponds shrink, females head for sunny areas to lay eggs. Watch for them along roads and rescue them from asphalt, where many are flattened by tires; but don't remove them from the general location, because they have specific habitat needs. If you encounter a spotted turtle moving through woods or meadow, follow at a distance and you may see her build her nest—a flask-shaped hole in which she'll position as many as eight eggs with her hind

feet, then bury them. Finally, like only a few other turtle species, she'll smooth the dirt with her plastron.

Streambed Jewels

Sometimes the most beautiful things in nature go unseen, and therefore unappreciated and unprotected. Such is the case with darters—pinky-size fish native to most of North America. Of about 150 species in three genera, none is more colorful than the rainbow darter. In spring, from Minnesota to Ontario and south to Alabama and Arkansas, males are in full spawning garb. Ease up to a warm, clear, gravel-bottomed stream and you'll see them glowing with impossible shades of green, blue, yellow, red, and orange, and hugging the bottom because they lack the well-developed swim bladders of their larger cousins—the walleye, sauger, and yellow perch. When a female selects a spawning site, she'll burrow into the gravel, where she'll be mounted by a male. No one fishes for darters, so no one speaks for them when their habitat is destroyed by dams, urban and agricultural runoff, mining subsidence, and channelization.