Due to the pandemic, the Association’s nature walks on the C&O Canal, including the butterfly walk, were canceled this year. Other organizations made similar decisions. The group butterfly surveys in Howard County, Maryland that I’ve participated in during recent years were also canceled this year. Although outdoor activities are safer than indoor activities, they are not without risk. Additionally, butterfly activity in the region has been lower than normal in June and July. The prospect of seeing few butterflies during the outing made the decision easier to wait for better things in 2021.

My best butterfly outing on the towpath so far this year was in mid-May. It was my first outing to the park in the spring, when I decided to visit the park after the stay-at-home order in Maryland was relaxed. I am a level walker and support two levels in western Maryland. One of the levels is in Washington County about 3.5 miles upstream of Hancock. The other one is in Allegany County located about four miles downstream of the Paw Paw Tunnel. Based on my experience supporting those levels, I knew it’s much easier to practice social distancing in Western Maryland than at parks near my house. So, with bike and camera, I set out to observe nature while getting some exercise and fresh air.

It ended up being a great outing for observing nature. I saw four wood turtles on the towpath. American toads were calling. It was also a great day for viewing and photographing birds. I briefly chatted with a bird watcher who was excited to see an indigo bunting in the short time he had been out. I didn’t see an indigo bunting, but I saw and photographed other birds. They weren’t the stars of the day for me, however. The butterflies were. I saw at least sixteen species throughout the day. Since my outing didn’t involve a level walk, I didn’t take notes. I believe there were species that I saw that I didn’t get photos of, but I don’t recall what they were.

On many outings in the past, I’ve had good luck seeing butterflies around the Devils Alley camping area. On this outing they were very active in that area. In fact, the butterflies were numerous for a one mile stretch running upstream from that campground. That was the area where I saw the greatest variety of species on this trip. The butterflies were attracted to the dames rocket, in peak bloom, which lined that stretch of towpath. On my outbound journey, I decided to walk through that area. It was a beautiful day. I was in no hurry and there were a lot of great photos to be had. After the wildflowers and butterflies thinned out, I resumed my bike ride.
It quickly became apparent that I probably wouldn’t see another area comparable to it that afternoon. I originally planned on taking a longer bike ride, but I turned around and returned to it after only traveling one and a half miles upstream from it. I spent the bulk of the remainder of my outing enjoying the beautiful spring activity in that area. Bike riding seemed less important.

The butterfly species I confirmed seeing included cabbage white, cloudless sulphur, eastern tailed blue, monarch, painted lady, pearl crescent, pipevine swallowtail, sachem skipper, silver spotted skipper, spicebush swallowtail, sleepy orange, tiger swallowtail, wild indigo duskywing, Zabulon skipper, zebra swallowtail and a hairstreak of some kind. I may have seen others. I didn’t take notes, so I can only rely on the photos that I took that day for confirmation of which species were present.

Swallowtails were present in large numbers throughout the day. Spicebush swallowtails were the species most commonly seen overall. In Mile 143, a group of them puddled on the towpath to extract nutrients from it. They were also present anywhere wildflowers were blooming. I took many photos of them throughout the day. Without the photos, it would have been easy to miss the presence of a similar species such as the pipevine swallowtail. Note they only have one row of large orange spots where the spicebush swallowtails have two rows of orange spots. Sightings of tiger and zebra swallowtails were also common. They were also easy to photograph as a result.

Getting photos of some of the other butterflies could be challenging at times, but in a fun way. If I miss an opportunity for a photo, there’s always a chance that I’ll be successful at another time. Sometimes I only get one chance in an outing, but I only know for sure at the end of the day. And if I’m unsuccessful on a given day, maybe I learned something that will help me get that elusive photo the next time out.

I think I saw an orange sulphur flying around the camping area. It never landed in an area long enough for me to get its photo. It flew off any time I came close to getting it framed and the camera focused on it. That was a missed opportunity for the day. The photo that follows on the left is one of an unidentified hairstreak. It turned to face me by the time it got in focus with my camera. After I got a couple of photos of it looking directly at me I tried to move to try to get a photo of its markings on the side of a wing. Alas, that didn’t work out well. It flew off as soon as I moved. It was the only hairstreak that I saw that afternoon.

At other times I was a bit luckier. I got a photo of a sleepy orange and then, as luck would have it, the battery in my camera needed to be replaced. By the time that I got a spare battery out of my backpack and into my camera, the butterfly flew off. I didn’t see another one of that species the rest of the day, but at least I got the one photo. Earlier, I got a couple photos of a partially obscured monarch before a passing bicyclist caused it to fly off. It took a few hours, but fortunately I saw another one visiting the dames rocket near the Devils Alley camping area. I was able to get some great photos of that one.

It pays to be patient and to keep looking. Most of the eastern tailed blue butterflies I saw were too active to photograph. As I made the return trip to my car I happened to spot one puddling in the prism at mile 143.3. I ended up with some of the best photos of it that I could hope for. Sometimes it’s simply best to be at the right place at the right time.

It was a fun day. Getting photos of sixteen different species was better than I expected for a spring outing. At the time, the emergence of so many butterflies seemed to be a hopeful sign that things were returning to normal. It didn’t turn out that way since it looks like it’s going to be a longer and bumpier ride to normal times. In the meantime, observing butterflies will continue to be a pleasant diversion.
color means that the leaf continues to photosynthesize and therefore continues to manufacture food. The longer the leaf photosynthesizes, the longer the fungus receives nutrients. It seems the fungus is in no hurry to consume the leaf entirely. As time goes on, the green color steadily diminishes. The second picture shows a leaf that no longer is able to photosynthesize but still is not decayed enough to become leaf litter. It has probably been on the forest floor for at least two years.

Did you ever wonder why a fungal infection is so difficult to eradicate? Think of athlete’s foot, for example. Recent genetic studies have come up with an answer.

Way back in the history of our planet, plants, animals and fungi shared a common ancestor. About 1 billion years ago plants diverged from the common ancestor and continued their evolution apart. Animals and fungi continued evolving together until about 800 million years ago when animals and fungi diverged. This “close” relationship is accepted as the reason fungal infections are so hard to cure. 800 million years is a long time in our history, but only the blink of an eye on the evolutionary time scale.

We think of spring as the most dynamic time of year, but fall is equally dynamic. In spring we see the surge of new growth; in fall we see the recyclers at work preparing the products of the growing season for reuse. It will soon be a good time of year to see these changes.