

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

Aztek couple leads a colorful life

by Jim Pesta

DR. JEFF MARCUS IS A GENETICIST

who seems to know the answer before you ask the question. His mind works faster than you can say Lepidoptera — butterflies and moths; an apt topic considering Jeff has dedicated his life's work to studying those winged wonders.

Joanne Seiff, Jeff's wife, spins tales and art. She's a published author who helps spread the word that the traditional spinning wheel is not a dying tool of the craftsman's trade, but an excellent way to get away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, and to create fiber art.

The couple, along with their dog Harry, regularly hop in their 2003 Aztek and head to the 671-acre Upper Green

River Biological Preserve near Western Kentucky University, where Jeff is an Assistant Professor. At the preserve, he unpacks his equipment and she unloads hers, and they both go to work. Jeff has been tapped to categorize all the moths and butterflies that inhabit the area, charting their reaction when various conditions change in the newly commissioned preserve. Joanne spends her time in nature at the spinning wheel, crafting award-winning yarn that she sells to artists or uses in fiber arts of her own creation.

Jeff knows his work is a bit "out there." Much like the insects he studies, Jeff knew early on he wanted to spread his wings and explore the

world. "Early on, I found it interesting as to how new structures and patterns were built in plants and animals," notes Jeff, who believes there's much to be learned about nature from butterflies.

"We know the ecology of colors in butterflies and how they use various hues to camouflage against predators and attract mates," explains Jeff. "Even though we see butterfly colors in 3D, they're actually only two dimensional. In fact, the colors are just a complex overlapping pattern that can be manipulated at the gene level in the lab, mimicking what happens naturally for research purposes. The color genes can be turned on and off like light switches."

Joanne sees an array of colors every time she gets situated behind the portable spinning wheel at the rear of her mobile Aztek studio. As she whirls away on her latest creation, Joanne lets the sounds of Dave Matthews and Diana Krall serve as her muse: "So much in spinning, knitting and writing is a state of mind. The music allows me to enjoy the experience that much more while Jeff is doing fieldwork."

To learn more about the world of butterflies and moths, visit the North American Butterfly Association at www.naba.org. And to read Joanne's arts articles, or to glean more about spinning and fiber art in general, go to interweave.com and handspinners.com.

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

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editor@myGMmagazine.com



OWNER CAPTION owner caption to come

GROW IT AND THEY WILL COME

Nearly anyone can have the pleasure of having their own mini butterfly preserve in their backyard. "One of the best plants for a backyard butterfly preserve is milkweed," suggests Jeff. "This is the food plant for monarch butterfly caterpillars, and the flowers are attractive to many other species of butterflies. It's easy to grow, can be purchased as bedding plants or seeds, and will do well almost anywhere in the country. Dill and parsley are not only tasty for people; they're also the food plants for black and anise swallowtail caterpillars — beautiful as both larvae and adults."

He makes clear that all of these plants would be suitable for a three-foot-square garden area, but for people who have a little more space (at least a five-foot square), there's also room for an attractive butterfly bush. Butterflies look for areas with lots of food plants close together, rather than isolated plants here and there — that way they can hop from flower to flower while minimizing flight time. "In general, the larger the space devoted to butterfly-attracting plants, the more butterflies, and the more kinds of butterflies," claims Jeff.

Of corresponding note: Several General Motors facilities — including two manufacturing plants that used gardens to attract butterflies and other pollinators — were recently honored by the Wildlife Habitat Council for outstanding environmental activities.



Cornell/Cambridge/Duke-educated biologist Jeff Marcus relates his most amazing experience: "On a recent research trip to Florida, I visited one of my favorite butterfly spots: Oslo River Conservation Area in Vero Beach. Hurricanes had come through just a few weeks before and fallen trees were blocking the trails. After many hours of bushwhacking my way through, no butterflies were to be found. So I made my way back, despondent. When I got to the road, the sun broke out from behind a cloud, and literally hundreds of butterflies exploded from the undergrowth. Like magic, they were everywhere!"