

Turtlehead, Chelone, Vital to the The Baltimore Checkerspot

The Baltimore Checkerspot (*Euphydryas phaeton*) is the Maryland State Insect, officially designated in 1973. (Chapter 253, Acts of 1973; Code State Government Article, sec. 13-301(a)) This butterfly uses ONLY the Chelone (rhymes with "baloney") *glabra*, commonly known as the Turtlehead, as a host plant.

Chelone or "Khelônê" means tortoise in Greek. Chelone was a nymph in Greek mythology who either refused to attend the marriage of Zeus to Hera or was disrespectful to them (the story varies). Big Mistake! Zeus turned Chelone into a turtle for her insulting behavior. Then, the turtle was the symbol for silence, so Chelone was condemned to eternal silence.

The blooms of the Chelone look similar to a turtle with its head popping out from its shell. It likes sunny, wet areas and is a late bloomer producing flowers in the Fall. In late July or early August the female Baltimore Checkerspot lays clusters of eggs (often several hundred eggs) on the undersides of the leaves of the Chelone. The eggs hatch producing tiny caterpillars that crawl to the top of the turtlehead and spin a communal web around the leaves they will eat. They feed as a group, overwinter as half-grown caterpillars, and then complete their life cycle the next spring.

Disappearing habitat is threatening the existence of the Baltimore Checkerspot, like many other creatures of nature. Wet meadows and ditches commonly support the Chelone. The decline in Baltimore Checkerspots is attributed, in part, to deer browsing its host plant, the Chelone, effectively killing the larvae in the process. In June 2004, the Baltimore Zoo began the Baltimore Checkerspot Butterfly Restoration Project.

Here is a short article by the State of Maryland on the Baltimore Checkerspot:
<http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/mdmanual/01glance/html/symbols/insect.html>

Links to photos of the Chelone:

<http://www.ct-botanical-society.org/galleries/cheloneglab.html>

Baltimore Checkerspot restoration project:

<http://users.sitestar.net/butterfly/Checkerspots.html>

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