

ANOTHER BLACK WITCH MOTH RECORD FOR SASKATCHEWAN

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The article by Cedric Gillott in *Blue Jay* 79.2 has encouraged me to report another sighting of a black witch moth, although it was more than 10 years ago near Stranraer, a tiny village in the Herschel Hills about 20 miles west of Rosetown. There is quite a tale behind this sighting.

Young Dorothy Stratillo grew up on the family farm at the top of the Herschel Hills, where she began collecting and recording flowers and things of interest to her. She became a teacher, music teacher, photographer, historian, butterfly collector, local history buff, and wrote many articles about the settlement history there. She married Dave Siebold and raised a family. Hundreds of her photographs have been displayed at Ancient Echoes Interpretive Centre (AEIC), which replaced the former school there. The centre focuses on the native petroglyphs and recent excavations of several species of dinosaur in the Coal Mine Creek valley. When she retired from teaching, she found her true calling as a volunteer.

On 24 June 2013, I was volunteering at AEIC, doing some studies of rock alignments around Herschel. Michael Williams, geologist and keen birder, was helping me while we also kept our eyes peeled for butterflies up in the high country. As we prepared to go there, a black butterfly, obviously a swallowtail, flashed by on the breeze. We went to the petroglyphs, on a very high hill, and encountered another swallowtail (possibly the same one). Michael had thoughtfully brought his net. We captured it and hustled back to our house to get some photos of it and to call Dorothy Siebold in Stranraer, because it was a new species for the area and she was mounting a display of her collection of butterflies the next morning (we sent photos to Anna Leighton, who identified



Dorothy Siebold's picture of the Black Witch moth observed in August 2011.

our specimen as an Anise Swallowtail).

The next morning, Dorothy mounted her display in the AEIC gallery. The first photo was a Tiger Swallowtail, and the second was the butterfly we captured the day before. Talk about speed! Then I looked at a third picture. It was a giant among moths. My first Black Witch (*Ascalapha odorata*). We were ecstatic! And from little ol' Herschel (and Stranraer). But just how she captured it made an even better yarn.

The previous year, in late August, there was a family wedding at her farm. A large tent was erected to house the guests for evening visitors. At some point, after dark, something large and brown flew into the tent. It created quite a stir. Some thought it might be a bat. But not Dorothy. She ran for her net and her camera. She caught the creature, which was that black witch moth, photographed it and released it, and everyone continued the party. A remarkable capture and release of a male moth, possibly strayed from much further south.

But that was not to be the end of this tale. Since then, over three different years, I have personally sighted these black species of swallowtails at five locations in the hills and further north in the high hills above and north of Plenty, fluttering along the steep pinnacles of those hills, all on windy days. I was always with friends and, on one occasion in the Toft Pasture near Stranraer, where



Dorothy Siebold (holding camera) and Dave and Sue Neufeld. Photo credit: Muriel Carlson.

a group of four butterflies were newly hatched on a Missouri Currant plant less than 20 feet away. These specimens were deeply coloured, with deep yellow bands on the outer wing. We observed them for several minutes but had no camera with us. I believe this indicates that there is a viable population there.

So schedule a trip out there in late June. Book a couple of rooms at the Respite House and make a weekend of it. Great birds, butterflies and Coal Mine Creek deserves a second look too, we developed a checklist of birds there as well. There may be more surprises!

Dorothy Siebold is no longer among us. She succumbed to pancreatic cancer several years ago, but her pictures still echo. I wonder how many other records she may have found. Some of her butterfly and moth photos are presently on display at AEIC. 🐦