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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Jerry Azevedo

A month ago when summer was still hard upon us, during the season of swarming termites and thistledown in the blackberries, I was out on the back porch with a visitor from down south at the tail-end of a heat-struck day. On this dry slope where I live, the band-winged grasshoppers had molted the week before to their final adult form, or *imago*, and a half dozen of them were showing off their new wings, bright yellow with a cinnamon margin, rattling and clattering like a playing card clothes-pinned to catch the circling spokes of a kid's bike. Nature can be so excessive when it comes to courtship. Take an nymphal insect with perfectly formed jumping legs and, just for the heck of it, give it a set of gaudy wings to go play the adult games of mating. It would be as if when we reached puberty we grew a pair of angel wings. So I was thinking about grasshopper romance while my friend must have been thinking about grasshopper folklore. 'Where do they go in the winter?' she asked. We all grew up with the story, didn't we: the insouciant Grasshopper fiddles away his happy-go-lucky summer and has to come shivering, hat in hand, to industrious Ant's doorstep, begging for a bit of sustenance, a moment's warmth by the cozy hearth. This little morality play instilled in us a proper work ethic; it was the end of our carefree childhood, the beginning of adult labors. And not even a pair of wings to show for it.

The fable was misleading, of course. Grasshoppers can fiddle all they want because they're not going to make it through the winter anyway, ant buddy or no ant

buddy. When they emerge from that final molt with those spiffy wings, they have about 50 days left to live. During that time, they'll rattle their colorful hindwings in courtship; they'll mate; the females will lay clusters of eggs in the dust; and when the first frosts come, they'll die.

But the question was intriguing: 'Where do they go in winter?' Where do all these animals we see all summer go when fall comes?

Like bats. All summer I had a family of Little Brown Bats circling the house in the evenings, gleaning fat moths attracted to warm light spilling from the windows. But with the longer nights now, I don't see them anymore. Where did they go? They would have migrated a short ways to a natural cave or abandoned mine shaft, some place cool and dark and dank, some place that stays above freezing, where they'll hibernate, the heart slowing down, lethargic, conserving energy. I trust they know what they're doing and have found a safe spot to overwinter, where they won't be disturbed and flushed out into the cold of winter's empty table. I trust they'll be back here at the house in the late spring when the moths come to the light.

The little Pacific Tree Frogs will be back too, though why they forsake the pond to come to this dry knoll I'll never know. During the summer a guy can hardly walk out the front door without a half dozen frog eyes blinking at him, frogs clinging to the door jam, frogs sitting on the shoes kicked off the night before, perplexed frogs who were wandering through the forest and ran into this strange tree that's flat and fifteen meters wide. So here they sit, somehow resigned, until they find the flower pot with it's blessed humidity that's salve to frog skin. But they're gone now, most of them. There's no standing water on this property,

but there's a pond and a wetland across the road, well within hopping distance. They've gone to their natal waters to lay eggs on clumps of water weeds and then hunker down for the winter. In the spring they'll spread out from the water, last year's adults and the youngsters recently divested of their tadpole tail, and cross the road again heading for dry ground, that doorway, that flower pot. We'll see them highlighted in car headlights, hopping across the asphalt on spring nights – hop, hop, hop. The road will take a toll.

Some of our summer birds disappear too. While we were watching those grasshoppers clack and cackle off the back porch, two Turkey Vultures were circling the house, catching the upslope drift of hot air rising from the oak meadow. The vultures hang out here all summer, practicing their soaring in the estival thermals, and then they're gone, headed south, true long-distance migrants. You can see them gathering in the late summer at the headlands west of Victoria, gaining altitude in lazy circles, higher ever higher, until at the right moment they'll commit to the long glide across the Strait of Juan de Fuca, so treacherous with its cold descending air. Once safely across, they'll just keep going, thermaling and gliding, thermaling and gliding, until they get to their winter grounds in Central and South America, hanging out in the tropics until spring, when they'll stream north again.

And do the grasshoppers and the bats and the frogs and the vultures look back at us quizzically and wonder where we go in the winter? Some of us are migrants, following the vultures south in search of balmy air. Others migrate shorter distances, just across the water to the lure of lights and bustle. And some of us look to the winter as a time of tranquility and repose, with the heart rate slowing, the composure of this

particular island form of hibernation and renewal.

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Natural Mysteries

Last month's mystery was: Some of the alders at Laughlin Lake have bright cyan fuzzy felt-like patches on the underside of the leaves. What's going on? The red fuzzy patch is called an *erineum* (plural *erinea*). The alder leaf produces this abnormal growth of 'hairs', a type of gall, in response to an infestation of eriophyid mites. These tiny mites, less than 0.2 mm in length, look like miniature slinky toys with two pairs of legs up front and a piercing mouth. The mites overwinter in crevices in the bark and come out in the spring. They feed on the developing leaves, causing the plant to form those velvety patches. The mites lay their eggs in these galls, and the resulting nymphs move to unaffected leaves and cause more *erinea*. The mites stop infesting new leaves in mid-summer. The alders tolerate a mite infestation with no serious consequences, and no control is necessary.

This month's Natural Mystery: Why do the seals in Georgeson Bay splash? Are they breaking fish apart? Having sex? Just having a good old time?

Have an answer? Send your thoughts to galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com. Have a Natural Mystery of your own? Let us know, and we'll try to answer it.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS are a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling, and sharing information about the natural world around us. Come join us. (galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com)