A Swarm of Butterflies

About the 1st of September, we received from Mr. W. B. Davis, Editor of the Wisconsin Farmer, two specimens of the butterfly, herewith illustrated. Accompanying the specimens was a description of their sudden appearance in vast swarms, in different parts of the city of Madison, Wisconsin. We subsequently received other specimens of the same species from Mr. Milo Barnard, of Manteno, Illinois, with similar accounts of its appearance in great multitudes.

The butterfly is the Danais archippus of Fabricius, and though one of our most common, is yet one of our most beautiful species. The caterpillar (Fig. 1) feeds upon the different kinds of milkweed (Asclepias) and attains its full growth about the end of August, when, after suspending itself by the hind legs to the under side of a leaf, it soon transforms to a beautiful green chrysalis, ornamented with black and gold spots (Fig. 2). Two weeks afterwards the butterfly (Fig. 3) emerges, leaving the transparent silvery chrysalis skin still attached to the leaf.

Vast flights of butterflies have often been noticed passing over the country in different parts of Europe, and as the following will show, such flocks seem to appear almost every year in some part of other of the United States:

A flock of butterflies four miles long, recently passed over one of the inland towns of California, for the North. — N.Y. Semi-weekly Tribune, July 25, 1865.

A friend informed us that when traveling through a portion of the country of York last summer, he met with immense swarms of these butterflies, all proceeding westward, and forming a column of three or four miles in length. He estimated their number at some millions. — Canada Farmer, March 1st, 1866, speaking of Cynthia cardui, a species whose larva feeds on the common thistle.

On the 19th of September 1867, P. B. Sibley, of St. Joseph, Mo., sent us a specimen of Danais archippus, with a statement that he saw millions of them filling the air to the height of three or four hundred feet, for several hours, flying from North to South, and quite as numerous as the locusts (grasshoppers) had been the year before.

The cause of their thus congregating in such numbers has hitherto remained, and probably ever will remain a mystery. Insects, otherwise solitary in their habits, sometimes congregate thus, for the purpose of emigration; but in the present instance, their being seen in such numbers may be accounted for by the weather of July and August being favorable to the wellbeing of the caterpillar.

No alarm need be felt at these hosts of butterflies, for they themselves are incapable of doing any injury, while their caterpillars cannot be considered injurious, feeding as they do on a useless weed. We found them plentiful last month on plants of the Asclepias curassavica that were being cultivated in a flower garden, but they were easily picked off.