

Gosselink's "Satan Death-Fly" More Common Than He Thinks!



Last week, John Gosselink, in his "Stumbling Forward" column (which I thoroughly enjoy, by the way) was funnier, though more speculative, than usual. Maybe it was just funnier to me because he mentioned (but then misspelled) my name, but it's also possible that I'm just giddy from being awake far too long because I'm afraid that John is really an alien pod-person just waiting for me to fall asleep at the switch.

In any case, John—you poor, poor man—what you've been seeing and misidentifying as "Houston" Toads (why haven't these been renamed "Lost Pines" Toads or

something anyway—I defy anyone to find one of these in Houston) are most likely really Gulf Coast Toads. This of course, assumes that you can tell the difference between a toad and a Grey Treefrog. If they're small, young ones, then frankly I have my own problems telling them apart, so don't feel too bad.

There are hundreds, more likely thousands or even millions, of baby frogs and toads out there right now. This rainy year has been a fantastic recovery year for amphibian populations and anyone who takes a walk just about anywhere would be hard-pressed not

to encounter these tiny critters jumping to get out from under our big feet!

Did anyone else notice that John went to a great deal of trouble to describe toad guts, and roads paved thereof, but didn't describe his "death-fly" butterfly? For shame! Perhaps he was going for the shock value and describing a butterfly, even a drab little one (though I suspect they were really bright, party-colored ones that he couldn't ignore), just wasn't going to fill the bill. Not to worry, since what kind of butterfly it was doesn't really matter.

Regular readers of this column will already know that butterflies love to feed at a wide variety of things, many of which we consider disgusting and unmentionable. Carrion and corpses fall into both categories, along with dung, poop, crap, cow patties, bird droppings, nitrogenous liquid waste (I'll let you think about that one), slug slime, and other even less attractive things.

Anyone who wants to learn more about these less-than-usual butterfly foods should see my first book (*A World for Butterflies*, 2000, Firefly Books) or the article I had in "Natural History" (Vol. 110(6), July/August 2001, pp. 46-49) called "Butterfly Buffet." They also need salt, many love smelly rotting fruit or tree sap and some even visit dead plant carcasses and grasses (see www.sbs.utexas.edu/philjs/Stengl/LPNN and look at columns 22, 25, 42 and 82 for previous mentions of these proclivities in this column).

In the interests of keeping your dinner down, I've forgone using any of the hundreds of photos that I have of butterflies visiting these, ahem, unappetizing foodstuffs (you can thank me later) and instead, I offer a pair of photos of Houston and Gulf Coast Toads so folks can learn to tell the difference. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to take a little nap....zzzzzz....no! No! John, don't, I swear I'll nev.....



Houston (left) and Gulf Coast (right) Toads, and a Grey Treefrog (center) compared. Denizens of the Lost Pines should be able to tell the difference in case a tourist asks "what do you pave your roads with?"