



CHRIS GRONDAHL



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*Black swallowtail butterfly and black swallowtail caterpillars (inset).*

## Helpful Host

You are what you eat, the saying goes. Turns out, that's a good thing for the black swallowtail butterfly in its early stages of life.

When the black swallowtail is in the caterpillar stage, it feeds on the leaves of plants such as carrot, parsley, dill and fennel. The toxins absorbed from these host plants, scientists tell us, make the caterpillar taste bad to birds and other predators.

The caterpillar also sports an osmeterium, which sort of looks like an orange snake's tongue located behind its head. When the caterpillar is threatened, the osmeterium reveals itself and releases an odor that is unpleasant to predators.

The black swallowtail butterfly is a common visitor to North Dakota gardens, open spaces and prairie hilltops. Like other butterflies, it has four clear stages in its life – egg, caterpillar, pupa and adult. Peak flights for adults in the state are May and July.

The first adults emerge in spring, after spending winter in the pupa stage. Females lay round eggs on the leaves of host plants. Caterpillars chew their way out of the eggs and leave little to waste as they eat what remains. When they first hatch, black swallowtail caterpillars are black with a white band around their middle. They could pass for bird droppings at this point, which apparently is what they're going for with so many predators about.

Adult swallowtail butterflies have wingspans of 3 ½-4 ½ inches. They are mostly black with yellow spots on top that form two bands across the wings. Below, the wings feature two rows of orange spots with blue between. The swallowtail gets its name from tail-like projections extending from its hindwings.

It's been said that there is nothing in a caterpillar that tells you it's going to be a butterfly. That's hard to argue as the pedestrian would have a difficult time looking at the showy, green and black caterpillar and imagining the end result – one of North America's biggest butterflies that is quite fetching to the eye.

It takes some doing to go from egg to adult butterfly, including molting several times. As a noted comedian once said, the caterpillar does all the work, but the butterfly gets all the publicity.

*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*