

Tortoiseshell butterflies make a colorful appearance

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affected the tortoiseshells.

“During the five-year drought that ended three years ago, there were virtually none in the area of my transect,” Shapiro said. “They disappeared from this area. There were some near Vacaville. They didn’t breed there at all for three to four years. We don’t really know where they were, but they survived the drought somewhere.”

Forister said, “We know butterflies in the mountains are becoming less common because of drought years. This year’s (burst) shows some butterflies have the capacity to rebound. It tells us nothing beyond that.”

The abundance of chaparral in many locations provides food for the tortoiseshells. They also consume nectar from a variety of plants.

Water and salt are two other needs of these insects. They feast on overripe fruit like honeydew, as well. Torties can

get nutrients out of mud, which is also a source of salt.

“They are people friendly. They love to perch around people’s heads and drink your sweat,” Shapiro said.

This could be the reason so many butterflies were seen on tennis courts during the summer — a lot of sweaty bodies to feast on.

Kathryn Reed is a freelance writer.

Tortoiseshell butterfly facts:

- Wingspan is 1.25 to 2.75 inches.
- Females and males have the same coloring.
- They are part of the Nymphalidae family.

Art Shapiro of UC Davis has more information online:

<http://butterfly.ucdavis.edu/butterfly/Nymphalis/californica>



Photo: Matt Forister

Scientists are still trying to figure out why tortoiseshell butterflies have population booms.