

Percy Gregson

(Adapted from an article by Michael Dawe in Red Deer Express, June 26, 2006)

Two interesting and influential pioneer naturalists in Central Alberta were Percy and Douglas Gregson. They were born in Sussex, England and grew up next door to Charles Darwin. Percy went on to study law. Darwinian influence was negligible as they did not associate very much with their famous neighbour.

Douglas was the first to arrive in Central Alberta. He selected land at the confluence of the Blindman and Red Deer Rivers. He was keenly interested in bird, fossils and insects. He is sometimes credited with the discovery in Alberta of a black swallowtail butterfly, *papilio nitra*. Agriculture Canada refers to it as Anise Swallowtail *Papilio zelicaon*.)



Papilio zelicaon.

Percy followed his brother to the Blackfalds area in the early 1890's and took up a homestead nearby. Percy was a lawyer and practiced as such for many years. He also started Blackfalds' first and only newspaper, *The Mercury* in 1903.

Percy was interested in entomology. The first meeting of the Northwest Entomological Society was held at his house in 1899. This was the first organization of this kind in Western Canada. He was elected President and Douglas became the Secretary-treasurer and librarian.

Percy helped to establish the Territorial Natural History Society in 1902, and again served as the first President. In 1903, he set up one of Western Canada's first natural history museums at Blackfalds. He also worked hard to improve the level of scientific study in the schools.

Percy's greatest call to fame is for his study of fleas. The brothers were friends of Charles Rothschild and collected specimens for him. They would often wrap dead animals in a white sheet and then extract the fleas that had left the cooling body of the host animals and attached themselves to the sheet. They were so successful that they discovered fifteen new species of fleas. Their efforts led some to refer to Central Alberta as the flea capital of North America. The Rothschild collection of 60,000 fleas now resides in the British Museum.

The Gregsons were active in the community. Both Percy and Douglas were Justices of the Peace and they were active members of the Alberta Natural History Society, formed in 1906. About the time of World War I, Percy returned to England.