

Conservation Connection:

MONARCH BUTTERFLIES AND COMMON MILKWEED

By Michele Grzenda, Weston Conservation Administrator

Monarch butterflies are thought of as one of the most colorful New England Butterflies. A visit to Weston's fields or meadows in summer would often guarantee you an opportunity to see this stunning orange, black, and white delicate creature flutter by. But over the last several years, fewer monarchs have been seen throughout the US. Fortunately, this year shows a glimmer of hope for this remarkable species.

Due to the complex life cycle of this migratory butterfly, survivorship of this species relies on a unique recipe which includes an immense patchwork of food resources for both larvae (caterpillars) and adults to feed on along its 2,500 mile journey from the U.S. to Mexico. Increase use of herbicides & pesticides, loss of natural butterfly habitat, and too much wind or rain during migration is literally a recipe for monarch butterfly disaster.

Unfortunately this is exactly what has happened in recent years. Over 120 million acres of native butterfly habitat has been converted farmland. Numerous pesticides and herbicides are used on the corn and soybean farmland in the Midwest. 2013-2014 saw extreme weather patterns during the peak monarch migration period. As a result, experts observed record low numbers of overwintering monarchs in Mexico in 2014.

This year, there's some good news: Monarchs seem to be rebounding. The butterfly's wintering ground covered approximately 10 acres of forest, compared with 2.79 acres in 2014.

While good weather seems to be the cause of the surge in monarch numbers this year, efforts to provide the insects with habitat along their migration corridor have also picked up. The Mexican government has stopped intensive logging which was a major concern in the Monarch butterflies overwintering ground. In addition, butterfly and conservation groups are advocating for protection and replanting of milkweed habitat throughout the Midwest, as well as educating farmers of effects of pesticides and herbicides on butterflies and other insects.

What you can do to help the Monarch Butterflies in Weston?

- The Common milkweed*, *Asclepias syriaca*, is a wonderful native plant the butterflies. But it should be planted ONLY where it can have the run of the place. It is a thug that spreads from underground runners. It is a perfect plant to turn over part of the lawn to - leaving a mow strip on all sides - or to encourage along the edges of woodlands or fields, any situation where it can't colonize cultivated gardens.
- Plant butterfly loving plants to provide monarchs and other insects with nectar. If you want to attract butterflies but your property does not have a large area to turn over to wild plants, then choose the better behaved *asclepias* - swamp, purple and butterfly weed - all natives that help sustain the butterflies. Many butterfly gardeners plant several types of milkweed and let the butterflies choose (because butterfly preferences can vary from garden to garden). This also allows them to have "back-up" milkweed to feed

the caterpillars if they run out of their primary milkweed choice. All the milkweeds are attractive to a large range of adult butterfly species as a nectar plant, not just egg-laying Monarchs.

- If you own a meadow avoid mowing the milkweed plants until early October, after the caterpillars have metamorphosed into adults.
- Learn to identify and remove black swallow-wort, *Cynanchum louiseae*, the European relative of milkweed. This viney plant has similar looking pods to milkweed, but is toxic to butterflies. The butterflies can't distinguish it from the milkweeds, lay their eggs on it, and when the larva hatch and eat the leaves, they die. The leaves are opposite and shiny, and there are populations in Lincoln. Removing it requires determination and a strong back - the roots have to all be excavated.

Go on a Milkweed Scavenger Hunt! Print [Mass Audubon Society's Milkweed checklist](#) and head outside with the family in search of Monarch butterflies:

Did you know... Not all monarch butterflies migrate; only the 4th generation of monarchs can migrate each year. The first three generations hatch from their cocoon state (also known as the chrysalis) & live for up to six weeks. But the 4th generation, the ones that we see in Weston, continues to live on for up to six or eight months so that they can migrate to warmer climate, hibernate, & then start a new first generation in the spring.



Monarch butterflies are specific to milkweed plants; this is the only type of plant on which the eggs are laid and the larvae will feed and matures into a chrysalis