

A Celebration of Monarch Butterflies in Newton

What's the big deal about a small creature like the monarch butterfly? It may have something to do with the monarch being the favorite butterfly of most people and that the migrating population was recently declared "endangered" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (iucn.org).



PHOTO: MARGARET MALLORY

Monarch butterfly in Wellington Park

Monarchs (*Danaus plexippus*) are unique among New England butterflies in that they migrate such long distances. Those in the last brood of the season do not mate but instead attempt an amazing but perilous journey of many thousands of miles to a few scant areas high up in the oyamel fir (*Abies religiosa*) forested mountains of central Mexico, a place they have never seen, where they huddle and spend the winter. The following spring, they begin a trip making it as far north as Texas and mate. In a relay race, their children and grandchildren fly farther north — mate and die — until a few of the earliest ones arrive in Massachusetts around the end of May and in greater numbers in early July.

The eastern population of monarchs dropped by 84% from 1996 to 2014 due to several factors, while the western population fell almost to the point of extinction (through last year). Monarchs depend on their host plant — native milkweeds — on which to lay their eggs and for food for their larvae. No milkweed — no monarchs! Even a small patch of native milkweed can be helpful to migrating monarchs. And their beautiful flowers provide nectar not only to butterflies but to all sorts of other pollinator insects. It's important to plant milkweed native to the local area. In Newton these include common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), or butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), all beautiful in their own way.

The use of pesticides in lawn treatments and mosquito spraying can be deadly to both caterpillars and butterflies. Pesticide use in big agriculture has also killed off milkweed in the important migratory routes used by monarchs. And the invasive black swallow-wort (*Cynanchum louiseae*) tricks monarchs into laying eggs on their leaves, which the larvae don't identify as food and die. To make matters worse, there is a deadly parasite OE (*Ophryocystis elektroscirrha*) whose spores cause monarch eggs to fail to emerge or not develop fully.

Climate change can also have an impact on migrating populations. Just imagine flocks of migrating monarchs getting caught up in a hurricane, or a severe winter storm hitting the overwintering sites wiping out large segments of the monarch population. Add to that illegal logging pressure and deforestation on the oyamel trees in Mexico — local farmer activists have even been killed protecting the trees.



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Leaves and seed pods of black swallow-wort

Monarchs have been of particular concern to Newton Conservators over the past several years with workshops, articles, a webinar, milkweed seed giveaways, and as a feature in our booths at fairs and village days. In 2021, our inaugural Monarch Festival served to bring together a lot of monarch enthusiasts in Newton for the first time — in particular, those who grew milkweed, had established monarch waystations, or raised monarchs

responsibly (from locally found eggs, outdoors, and in small numbers.)

The Second Annual Monarch



PHOTOS: TED KUKLINSKI



PHOTO: TED KUKLINSKI
Volunteer monarch raisers Kim Devoe, Kate Kauch, and Brenda Walker Homan

Festival, however, far exceeded expectations when over two hundred people showed up at Wellington Park in West Newton on a beautifully sunny Saturday morning this mid-September — a peak time for monarch migration through Newton. This year, in addition to Newton Conservators, the festival was cosponsored by the Newton Parks, Recreation, & Culture Department and the Friends of Wellington Park (wellingtonpark.org) to help raise awareness of the monarchs' plight and what steps can be taken locally to help. Appropriately, the festival activities were adjacent to the "Monarch Butterfly Garden" at Wellington Park.

monarchs' perilous journey from Newton to Mexico and back amid the sparsity of suitable pollinator and milkweed plants.



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Parents and children create butterfly art at the festival.

Kids seem to have a natural affinity for butterflies. There were five tables worth of kid's butterfly activities and arts and crafts under the supervision of Channon Ames from

Newton Parks, Recreation, and Culture. With scissors, yarn, crayons, colorful markers, glue, paper, and games, children and parents created their own butterfly art and learned much about the monarch's life cycle from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly.



Life cycle of a monarch butterfly from egg through caterpillar, chrysalis, and adult

Anna Sulewski, a student at Newton North explained the life cycle of the monarch with a magical puppet that could transform from a caterpillar to a chrysalis and finally to a butterfly. And there was a very popular "Monarch Migration Game" organized by Barbara Bates,

board member and co-leader of our Conservators' kids walks. Children drew colorful flowers and milkweed plants with chalk, using the adjacent basketball court as their canvas, before jumping from one to another, simulating the



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Newton Conservator director and naturalist Barbara Bates directs a game illustrating the migration of monarch butterflies.

Mark Feldhusen, a member of the Newton Parks and Recreation Commission and Friends of Wellington Park,



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Mark Feldhusen of Friends of Wellington Park leads a tour of a pollinator garden.

led a tour of the park's Monarch Butterfly Garden, a special 4' x 50' sunny plot utilizing previously unused space between a paved walkway and the fence of the adjacent

tennis court. The garden started ten years ago with a few milkweed plants, but Mark's efforts now feature multiple native milkweeds as well as a beautiful variety of other flowering plants. It lives up to its designation as an official monarch waystation (one of seven in Newton) with visiting butterflies, bees, and other pollinators throughout the summer and early fall.

Ann Dorfman, a certified master gardener, has been overseeing gardening volunteer and cleanup programs at Wellington Park for over two decades. She led a tour of Wellington Park's extensive original garden along the park border on Kilburn Road that features colorful flowering plants and shrubs throughout the entire season.

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Monarch-savvy local volunteers provided free native milkweed plants, seed packets, and pods from their gardens; included were instructions on planting and growing milkweed as well as raising monarchs from local eggs. Marcia Cooper brought Green Newton's monarch decorated green bicycle, and city councilors Alicia Bowman, Andreae Downs, Pam Wright, and Bill Humphrey were also in attendance.



PHOTO: TED KUKLINSKI
Councilors Pam Wright, Alicia Bowman, Bill Humphrey, and Andrea Downs

One of the goals for the festival was to be able to show monarchs at all life stages. Everyone was fascinated by the tiny late-season egg discovered by one of the children on the underside of a milkweed leaf in the monarch garden.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF TED KUKLINSKI
Audrey Benevento helps Ted Kuklinski with release of a monarch butterfly.

brought two butterflies that had emerged before the festival and displayed them in a mesh enclosure for all to inspect up close. Before release, a crowd gathered around to watch as a small round sticker with a coded number was attached to one of the monarch's wings to help track its migration.

Brought by our volunteers, we also had very hungry caterpillars as well as a chrysalis that was on the verge of emerging as a butterfly during the festival. It finally did pop out of its chrysalis about an hour after the festival ended and was the star of our booth the following day at Newtonville Village Day and then released later at Wellington Park!

Heeding our call for butterflies, volunteer Audrey Benevento



PHOTO: TED KUKLINSKI
Butterfly tag

The tags were provided by the Monarch Watch Organization (monarchwatch.org), which has been tracking monarchs by tagging for 30 years.

Highlights of the event were the butterfly releases at the festival. The monarchs were named by child volunteers who reached into the enclosure where a monarch would readily climb onto their finger. One of the butterflies took its first flight of freedom to the top of a nearby tree to the cheers of the crowd. The second was content to be placed on one of the blooming flowers in the monarch garden before it eventually flew off on the first leg of its Mexican adventure.



PHOTO: TED KUKLINSKI
Butterfly release into monarch garden

What can you do to help the monarchs? Plant native milkweed and other native flowering species, don't use pesticides, report sightings, be a climate advocate, and spread the word. You can find further resources on the Newton Conservators' monarchs & milkweed web page (newtonconservators.org/monarchs-milkweed). Be sure to join us in September 2023 for the Third Annual Newton Monarch Festival. ♦

🍃 Ted Kuklinski