



Seeing the Sourlands Milkweed and Monarch Butterflies

By July and August all the action is in the meadows. The forest has had its day; all the lovely spring ephemerals have bloomed and faded. The trees and shrubs have flowered and leafed out. The birds have mostly stopped singing because they have established their territory, mated and raised their babies. But when you walk through a meadow in the Sourlands in July and August life is all around you. Black-eyed daisies, Ironweed, Goldenrods and Asters, Fleabane and Mullein, Chicory and many grasses are all in flower. Insects, including wonderful butterflies like Monarchs, are busy sipping nectar from the flowering meadow plants. Spiders are spinning geometrically intricate webs to catch any unwary insect. Crickets and grasshoppers are hopping and flying. Birds are busy catching and eating insects.

Of all the flowering plants and insects none may be more beautiful and more interesting than common milkweed and Monarch butterflies. Let's start with the milkweed. The sap in the milkweed—a milky white color—is toxic to all other animals, and by eating the plant's leaves the Monarch larvae are protected from predation by becoming toxic themselves. One to two percent of the milkweed sap contains latex, the raw material that rubber is made from. During World War II the Japanese controlled the Pacific islands that had been the world's source of latex, so both Germany and the United States experimented with growing milkweed to replace the unavailable latex. Neither country found this effort worthwhile.

Milkweed is the only plant that Monarch butterfly larvae can eat. Until recently Monarchs were the most common butterfly in the region but their numbers are collapsing and now it is a rare treat to see one. The problem is that Milkweed once grew next to and even within some crop fields, but farmers have begun using seed that has been genetically modified so it is resistant to herbicides. This allows

farmers to broadcast herbicide in greater amounts than ever, killing the milkweed along with many other species of weeds.

This plant should be in your garden. It has a beautiful flower and it attracts several species of butterflies in addition to Monarchs. In the fall its seeds float about attached to silken parachutes and in winter its abandoned seedpods make interesting silhouettes. Finally it is critical in the life cycle of a beautiful insect that is disappearing from our landscape.