

A Place for Pollinators

By Mirka Zapletal, Newfound Lake Region Association



As the days lengthen and weather warms, some among us (myself included) are counting down until we're surrounded by flowers, singing birds, and butterflies. Pollinators like bees, beetles, and butterflies are incredibly important parts of our local ecosystems, helping ensure that fruits and seeds that feed us as well as local wildlife are produced each year—we can thank pollinators for the blueberries we enjoy in the summer, the rose hips turning red each fall, the milkweed seeds floating through the air—and, ultimately, supporting species in the larger community food web.

Given how important pollinators are, it's worrying that so many have declining populations. In New Hampshire one bumblebee species is endangered and three more are of special concern; four butterfly species are endangered, two butterflies and one moth are threatened, and a further nine species are of special concern. Last summer monarch butterflies were listed as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and in 2020 the US Fish & Wildlife Service determined that listing monarchs as endangered was warranted, but did not take precedence over listing other species—its status is currently reviewed each year.

There are a number of factors that contributed to these population declines, including pesticides and disease, but the biggest issue is habitat loss—as land is cleared and “weeds” cut down, pollinators have more and more trouble finding the food they need. Adding climate change to the mix doesn't help. It's even more complicated with migratory species like monarch butterflies—habitat from northern Mexico into Canada is vital to their survival. The good news for monarchs and other pollinators is that people are aware of their plight and have options to support them.

Depending on where you live, one of the best ways for you to help pollinators may be to do nothing: don't use pesticides, don't clear land, don't mow the lawn often, don't over-till the soil—just take the summer off, sit back, and give pollinators the time and space they need to use

your habitat. This will limit the toxins they encounter, give wild flowers a chance to grow and bloom, and ensure that ground-nesting bees (most bees!) can find safe shelter. If you want something a bit more active, you could install a bee hotel or plant a pollinator garden. Creating secure productive habitat supports the pollinators that we depend on.

At Grey Rocks Conservation Area, Newfoundland Lake Region Association (NLRA) has made space for pollinators in a variety of ways. While some areas are mowed or tended regularly, the majority of plants are allowed to grow freely with the result that wildflowers bloom by the water, along trails, at ground level and arching over shrubs, throughout the many different plant communities covering the property. There are pollinator gardens with plants such as bee balm (*Monarda fistula*) and blazing star (*Liatris* spp.) that bloom profusely and offer both small and large landing spots for pollinators. Timing can be key when it comes to pollinator-plant relationships, so providing a range of bloom times can give pollinators food over the whole season- at Grey Rocks, common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), swamp milkweed (*A. incarnata*), and butterfly weed (*A. tuberosa*) are scattered throughout the space and their overlapping but not identical life cycles ensure that monarchs and other members of the milkweed community have food May through October. To help researchers better understand the role of milkweed in its habitat, NLRA staff and volunteers are collecting data at Grey Rocks as part of a national look at which creatures are eating milkweed and when.

Given the global decline of pollinators, pollinators need everyone to do their part and everyone has a role to play. By making your space pollinator-friendly, whether it's acres of field and forest or some potted plants by the outside door, you're giving pollinators more habitat and support. Each new person that takes these steps helps ensure that pollinators continue to be present around us.