

Nature in the Neighborhood – September 2024 – Butterflies and Snakes

Butterflies and Snakes

September is when I notice more monarch butterflies passing through my garden. You can't miss them. Not with their brilliant orange and black wing pattern. *Danaus plexippus* is perhaps the best known of all the butterflies, one that everyone can readily identify as they flutter by.

I imagine that they are beginning their long journey from our neighborhood to the mountain forests in central Mexico where they will overwinter. This migratory trek of thousands of miles is, to say the least, impressive -- especially for so delicate and ephemeral a creature.

The monarchs I'm seeing in late August through September have a darker orange color and larger wings and are known as the "super" or "Methuselah" generation of monarchs. Unlike earlier generations that have only a two-to-six-week life span, these monarchs can live up to eight months, thereby enabling them to complete the migratory journey to Mexico, where they essentially hibernate until the following spring. For a breathtaking video of their story and a very cool looking drone, check out: www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWOySU_hAz0 .

In February and March, the overwintering monarchs mate and begin the journey back north. They soon die, but not before laying eggs on milkweed plants along the migration route. The shorter-lived generation that emerges from these eggs continues the journey north, also laying eggs on milkweed plants as they go. Two to three generations of monarchs complete the migration north, with some eventually ending up in our neighborhood where a few will lay eggs on the milkweed plants in my garden. From those eggs emerge the super monarchs that will continue this incredible multi-generational migratory cycle.

If you didn't catch it, milkweed (*Asclepias*) plays an important role in the life cycle of monarchs. That's because milkweed is the only plant family that the hatchling caterpillars feed on. Without milkweed, there would be no monarchs.

According to the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), the monarch population in North America has plummeted. And one of the biggest factors in their decline has been the increasing scarcity of milkweed, the caterpillar's host plant. As a result, NWF has launched a comprehensive campaign to help save the monarch. Visit: blog.nwf.org/2015/02/saving-monarchs/ for ways that individuals and groups can get involved in the campaign – planting milkweed in your garden being a good start.

For the past several years, in the late summer, I have collected a milkweed leaf with a monarch egg on it from my garden and placed it in a small tank in my kitchen. Then I've watched it go from being an egg no bigger than a pinhead, to a striking black, white, and yellow striped caterpillar, to a small, green, spindle-shaped chrysalis, and finally to a full-fledged monarch butterfly ready to start its journey south. It's an amazing transformation to watch unfold. The ability to change from the crawling caterpillar to the flying butterfly is nothing short of magical and likely the reason the

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butterfly commonly symbolizes rebirth, renewal, transformation, and hope in cultures around the globe.

So, if you see a monarch flutter by in our neighborhood this month heading south, be sure to wish it safe travels!

If you are like Indiana Jones and suffer from ophidiophobia, you may wish to skip the rest of this article because it's going to be about the snakes in our neighborhood. Massachusetts is home to fourteen native snake species, the more common ones include garter snakes, milk snakes, and northern water snakes -- all nonvenomous. (Yes, there are species of venomous snakes in our state but just two, and both are found in western, not eastern, Massachusetts: the timber rattlesnake and the copperhead.)

You may be interested to know that the garter snake (of the genus *Thamnophis*) was named the official state reptile in 2006. This honor was the result of two Kingston elementary school students promoting the idea to their local representatives after discovering that the Commonwealth -- while having, among other symbols, an official state bird, tree, flower, and even donut (the Chickadee, American Elm, Mayflower, and Boston Crème, respectively) -- lacked an official state reptile.

There are two native species in this genus: the common garter snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*), which is the one you're most likely to come across, and the rarer ribbon snake (*Thamnophis sauritus*). And since you may see a garter snake while gardening, they're often mistakenly called "garden" snakes, but their name actually comes from the garters that men once used to hold up their socks that, because of the three stripes on the snake's back, they resemble.

The common garter snake has long yellow stripes down the length of its body, which is typically green, brown, or even black, and averages about 20 to 22" in length. Like the garter snake, ribbon snakes have long yellow stripes against their dark body, but they also have a white mark just in front of their eyes. They are also more slender and have longer tails that account for about one-third of their bodies.

Garter snakes are fairly ubiquitous and can be found in marshes, grasslands, woodlands and, as noted, suburban gardens. They are not too particular about what they eat, and their diet consists mainly of small vertebrates such as frogs, toads, fish, and rodents but they are also known to consume earthworms, slugs, and insects. Given their appetite for many a garden pest, they can be considered a gardener's best friend -- though sufferers of ophidiophobia may think differently.

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Garter snakes are ovoviviparous, meaning that they give birth to live young instead of laying eggs as some other snakes do. This is an advantage when living in the cooler northeast climate where the ground may not be warm enough for egg incubation.

If you're wondering what happens to the snakes in our neighborhood when the weather does get cold, they undergo a form of hibernation known as brumation. They seek shelter, sometimes communally, in rock crevices, hollow logs, or underground burrows where they can conserve energy until the spring and warmer weather returns.

So, while you might be startled if you come across a garter snake in your garden next spring, remember that they are harmless and that their presence contributes to a healthy and balanced ecosystem.

For photos of the snakes found in Massachusetts, go to mass.gov/info-details/snakes-of-massachusetts . But if you want to see some native snakes close and upfront, the Swampscott Conservancy will be hosting an exhibit by the Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team (CAVPT) (www.capeannvernalpondteam.org) called "Snakes of New England and the World" at the Swampscott Farmers Market. Rick Roth, local snake expert and Director of CAVPT, will share some of his favorite snakes and talk about their lives and habits in this live animal presentation. If you want to see the kind of snakes that might be living in the woods near your house, or want the opportunity to hold a snake, come down to the Town Hall Lawn off Monument Ave on **Sunday September 8 (rain date Sept. 15) from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm.**

Hope to see you there!