

No Butterfly Nets, Please

By Kim Smith

Early one morning this past week, I was at Eastern Point peacefully sketching and photographing the flora and fauna and patiently waiting for the butterflies to awaken. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed two large vans pulling into the lighthouse parking lot. A dozen or more children tumbled out, along with two adults—Moms, I am assuming. My first thought was how delightful, two families from New Hampshire traveling to Gloucester to observe the Monarchs. They quickly armed themselves with butterfly nets and official-looking clipboards and proceeded to tear across the marsh surrounding the culvert, trampling the seaside goldenrod, which is the primary source of nectar for the Monarchs traveling through Cape Ann at this time of year. One of the Mothers yelled, “don’t disturb the lady taking pictures,” but of course it was too late. The Monarchs quickly departed their little sanctuary. Amidst the screams of “I Got One,” there was much tagging of butterflies taking place. The tribe next headed to the clump of goldenrod growing along the rocky crest, leaving behind one of the youngest of their group; he couldn’t have been more than five years old. The little loner sat perched above the waters edge throwing stones and I felt compelled to stay and watch him as it was high tide and he could have easily lost his footing, fallen in the culvert and drowned. After no less than half an hour they discovered him missing. From out of sight came the calls “Joseph... Joseph...” He didn’t seem to hear. The calls became urgent, then frantic; he came out of his peaceful reverie and ran to catch up with the others.

Without the most conscientious training, how could the children, ranging in age from four to sixteen, possibly tag the butterflies without damaging their wings? The great majority of Monarchs that successfully make the 3,000-mile journey to central Mexico arrive in near perfect condition. They need both pairs of wings fully functioning to glide and take advantage of the tailwinds. Not only that, but the Methuselah Monarchs born at this time of year weigh more by the time they reach their winter sanctuary. They are intently nectaring to build their fat reserves for the long winter months.

Early the following morning before heading to work, I returned to the marsh to make a quick sketch. Taking a short walk along the stretch of land from the culvert to the marsh to the rocky shoreline path, I found three Monarchs on the ground, literally struggling to death. All three were tagged, with the little tag placed on the large mitten-shaped discal cell of the hindwing. The problem was not the tag, but that their forewings were in various states of mangledness. When a butterfly has been snipped by a bird, it leaves a triangular V-shape cut out of the wing. Despite their hindwings in various stages of snipping I have observed many butterflies in our garden live for weeks and weeks. Monarch bodies are tough and flexible and designed to withstand an attack from a predator. If a bird is tempted to take a bite, poisonous chemicals from the milkweed ingested by the caterpillar are released, a warning to the predator of their toxicity. The injuries on these butterflies were like none I had seen before.

Watching a butterfly, or any creature, struggle to death from an injury is painful to observe. Not really knowing what to do, I placed the first injured Monarch under a nearby clump of asters. The second tagged butterfly, missing his entire right forewing, was struggling to get back on a stem of goldenrod and I placed him there. The third tagged butterfly was flopping around on the pavement, with more than half of his left forewing torn away and dangling. I carried him to my car, drove home and placed him in our freezer. This is a relatively quick way

to kill an injured butterfly or moth, the cold quiets them and soon they are put out of their misery.

I am reminded of one of my and my sibling's favorite books from childhood, "What if Everybody Did." My illustrated page is of thousands of people racing around with butterfly nets, flattened wildflowers beneath their feet, and no butterflies to be found.

Perhaps the children could be taught a better focusing lens in which to view the Monarchs. No doubt there is need for increased scientific literacy. But I couldn't find anywhere on the Monarch Watch website, which sponsors the tagging program, information on how to carefully handle the butterflies; possibly it comes with the kit supplied. It is not my intention to disparage Monarch Watch and I urge readers to investigate their website—a wealth of information is provided about the Monarchs. The University of Minnesota recently sponsored a program to monitor Monarch butterfly larvae. The goal of this project was to not only learn more about the breeding phase of the Monarchs, but also to create a link between children, educators, and citizen scientists with institutions such as universities and nature and environmental centers. After completing the thorough trainer/trainee program, the participants had learned how to identify milkweed plants, Monarch egg and larvae in various stages and also how to record, and the importance of collecting, the data. The monitoring kit supplied included an apron for holding tools, a hand lens/magnifier for distinguishing eggs and tiny larvae, folding ruler, an outdoor thermometer and Monarch life cycle ID cards.

The following day I gave an informal talk about Monarchs to our local Eastern Point Day School third and fourth grade class. The children were extraordinarily interested and eager to learn as much as we could possibly talk about in the time afforded. The vocabulary of these very bright students included the phrase "a kaleidoscope of patterns" and they had been taught about Batesian mimicry. One young boy enthusiastically pronounced upon my arrival, "I see you brought some seaside goldenrod!" We not only talked about the life cycle of the Monarchs, their annual migration, nectar and larval food plants, but also about lessening our footprint when we study and observe wildlife in their habitats. It was a delight to meet the children and their teacher and to be provided with the opportunity to share information. When visitors brush past the Monarchs, the butterflies are only mildly disturbed and quickly resume nectaring. I have observed many people observing the Monarchs, some peacefully walking through the sanctuary, some photographing, and some simply enjoying this phenomenon of which we are all so very privileged to view.

Kim Smith is an interior and garden designer residing in Gloucester with her husband and two children. Preorders for her forthcoming book, *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities! ~ Notes from a Gloucester Garden*, are available through her website at www.kimsmithdesigns.com and Toad Hall Bookstore at www.toadhallbooks.org. Kim will be happy to respond to readers' questions and comments at kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com.

Tagged Monarch

