

The Miramichi Naturalist: Butterflies by Deana and Peter Gadd

“If you grow it they will come”- that is what I thought as we went looking for Monarch butterflies in a patch of milkweed and they were THERE. The large (3 to 4 inch wingspan) orange Monarch is the best known North American butterfly but it is not common in the Miramichi region. Its life cycle is closely linked to the milkweed plant and we had never seen milkweed here, but a Miramichi Naturalist Club member reported seeing milkweed growing near the VIA rail station and that is where we found the Monarchs. After a second visit with a camera we were able to confirm that it was a Monarch and not the similar looking but smaller Viceroy, a Monarch “mimic”. The Monarch is a species of concern under Canada’s Species at Risk Act so although not “protected” it usually should not be collected or have its habitat destroyed. It is possible that in this case, the milkweed plant seeds were distributed by passing rail cars. The Monarchs followed!



Monarch Butterflies

Several members of the Miramichi Naturalists Club are looking at butterflies more closely this year following a presentation to the club by John Klymko, a zoologist based in Sackville. Mr. Klymko is in charge of the Maritime Butterfly Atlas, a 5 year project that will collect information about butterflies in the Maritime Provinces. The project is surveying for the presence of butterflies along with information about where they are seen and existing conditions - temperature, cloud cover etc. The butterfly need not be identified (there are many species in New Brunswick) but a “voucher” is required, either a good quality photo or a collected specimen. Anyone can submit data and if you are interested, visit the project’s web site by entering “Maritime Butterfly Atlas” in a search engine such as Google.

Once we started looking for butterflies we were seeing them everywhere. We started too late in the season to see the early ones like the Mourning Cloak which is often seen when there is still snow on the ground. Each butterfly has a certain period when it is flying as an adult butterfly. The other stages in their life are egg (4 days for Monarch), larva or caterpillar (2 weeks for Monarch) and pupa (2 weeks for Monarch). The Monarch is well-known for migrating north and south from Mexico each year but no one individual makes the entire trip - it will be 3 or 4 generations. The female lays her eggs on the milkweed plant and the caterpillars which emerge a few days later feed on the plant

picking up a chemical compound as they feed that makes them somewhat toxic to predators - some birds have adapted to this and do prey on Monarchs. It is thought that the navigational knowledge to return to the same wintering spot in Mexico must be instinctive.



Red Admiral



Canadian Tiger Swallowtail

The most common butterfly we have seen has been the Red Admiral. It is brown and black with white spots and a red-orange band. We have seen it in wildflowers and in our garden in May through July - we have probably seen a few generations. Some of the ones we saw earlier had ragged wings and lately we have seen a mixture of older ones and fresh ones. Another common species is the Canadian Tiger Swallowtail which is a large yellow butterfly with a long hindwing.

In the Maritimes we can see about 85 species of butterflies. You can tell you are seeing a butterfly and not a “daytime-flying” moth by looking at the antennae, which in a butterfly ends in a small knob or “club” and on the moth, is straight, feathery or fringed. You are more likely to see butterflies on a sunny day that is not too windy. Butterflies are more active after about 10am. You should have no trouble seeing butterflies feeding on wildflowers or garden flowers. This is called nectaring. You may also see males patrolling an area looking for females.

Planting flower gardens to attract butterflies is increasingly popular. You can look up online to find which flowers we can grow in the Miramichi region that butterflies like to get nectar from. You can also take it further by planting flowers that a butterfly will lay her eggs on (usually very species specific) and that her caterpillars will feed on. You should not use pesticides so you will have to put up with a few chewed leaves but you will enjoy watching the life-cycle and the beauty of butterflies large and small.