

Common Milkweed – by Jim Saunders

The Milkweeds are so-called because all species except the Butterfly Milkweed, bleed a white, sticky latex when their tissues are damaged. According to "The Flora of New Brunswick" by Hal Hinds (second edition, 2000), the Common Milkweed is fairly common in the southwestern part of the province. It has been recently found in the Miramichi area west of the ViaRail station, across the road from the Paul Hayes water treatment plant, in the corner lot adjacent to the Wing on King Street and at the northern edge of the Wing parking area. Leonel Richard also reported some from the Castle Machine Works parking lot. Another patch was found this summer along the railway near the Beaverbrook Road just outside the city limits. Also there was a report of some being at the west end of the trail in Strawberry Marsh. This was checked and the plant there is Spreading Dogbane, which, like Common Milkweed, exudes a similar liquid when damaged.



Common Milkweed is one of the many species of Milkweed on which the eastern North American population of the Monarch butterfly lays its eggs. It is, according to The Flora of New Brunswick, "Ambrosia to Monarch butterfly larvae!". What is interesting about the plant is that the leaves don't have indications of insects feeding on them. There is a poisonous substance in the Common Milkweed and most other species of milkweed leaves that can be tolerated by the Monarch larva as well as the Milkweed Beetle. It accumulates in the larva and remains during the change into the adult. These chemicals repel most avian predators but there are some birds which have developed a tolerance for the poisons and prey on the butterflies in their over-wintering grounds in Mexico. The two main species are the Black-headed Grosbeak and the Black-backed Oriole which account for approximately 60% of the overwinter mortality. The Grosbeak, a western species, has been an occasional visitor to New Brunswick. The Oriole is native to Mexico. The Monarch adults that mature in the Miramichi and make it to Mexico and survive will start the cycle again in early 2011. Their parents will live out their lives here.



Honeybee gathering nectar



Monarch Larva feeding on Common Milkweed

There are three populations of Monarchs in North America. The eastern population originally migrated to the Great Plains where there were many species of Milkweed. Plowing of these areas reduced the numbers of Milkweeds. The Common Milkweed migrated eastward into areas that had been cleared of trees and the Monarch followed.



Immature Seeds and Floss



Immature Follicles

In many places farmers consider the Common Milkweed a nuisance. However at the University of Western Illinois, trials have been conducted into growing milkweed as a crop and in September, 2005, the first commercial milkweed was harvested in Illinois for Natural Fibers Corp. of Nebraska. The company uses the weed's floss to manufacture non-allergenic fill for pillows and comforters. The floss is reported to have a higher thermal rating than goose down. During WW II it was used as a substitute for material from the seed pods of the kapok tree to fill life preservers. Kapok is grown commercially in the rainforests of Asia. Recent research also indicates that the floss could be a viable product for oil adsorption. There is potential use of other parts of the plant for latex production and in the cosmetic industry. The seeds are also sold to gardeners to grow milkweed for butterfly habitat as well as being pressed for oil.