Wild Ones
NATIVE PLANTS, NATURAL LANDSCAPES

Volume 14: Issue 8

LEXINGTON CHAPTER — October, 2014

http://lexington.wildones.org

The Lexington chapter of *Wild Ones* meets the first Thursday of every month and at other times for special programs. Visitors welcome! Check our website **www.lexington.wildones.org** for details.

This newsletter is a publication of the Lexington chapter of *Wild Ones*. It is published nine times a year—March through November— as an electronic newsletter.

If you have any questions, suggestions, or information for future editions, contact Ann Bowe, chair of the Marketing and Communications Committee, at **annbowe@annbowedesigns.com** or Judy Johnson, newsletter editor, at **judylex@twc.com.**

President's Message…

It's been the season of the monarchs. At first the outlook was bleak with overwintering sites in Mexico once again significantly reduced from last year. I remember seeing my first tattered butterfly in June dancing around a swamp milkweed in a waystation garden I had made and thinking he may be the only one I would see all year. Then a landscape client called to report with great excitement that a monarch was hovering around the milkweeds I had planted in her garden. When I stopped by I saw the butterfly with my own eyes; she appeared to be a female laying eggs. My client spent weeks looking for caterpillars finding none until the day she reported that six fat ones were feasting on her plants. We saw a caterpillar hanging in a small birch tree, ready to shed its skin for the last time to reveal its chrysalis. Later my client and her granddaughter found a second chrysalis on a pussy willow. There could have been no better nature lesson!

At the end of this summer, 184 monarch waystations had been planted in Kentucky, 34 of which are in Lexington. It's been a hugely successful campaign for our chapter and the credit goes to Linda Porter, chair of the joint waystation committee whose second partner has been the Kentucky Garden Club under the leadership of Joanna Kirby. Linda and members of her committee travelled tirelessly throughout the state speaking to groups about waystations, encouraging their listeners to plant them and to register them through Monarch Watch. It has been immensely gratifying to see how the plight of the monarchs and the idea that we can do something about it have captured the public imagination.

Milkweed tussock moth caterpillar

Those of us who were already committed to the cause saw butterflies flutter about our gardens in August and watched caterpillars devour our lovingly planted milkweeds. We have also deepened our understanding of nature. Many visitors, or perhaps more accurately, predators came to our waystations: the inevitable aphids sucking the juice out of milkweed leaves, often disfiguring them but still leaving the plants alive. Then, suddenly, out of nowhere, the milkweed tussock moth caterpillars appeared looking a bit like miniature poodles. They are capable of devouring all the leaves on a butterfly milkweed in a day, leaving nothing to eat for the unlucky monarchs whose mother has chosen to lay her eggs on that plant. Then came a variety of beetles, including the beautiful large milkweed bug with its striking orange and black markings, hovering in clusters on the seedpods.

Milkweed seedpods send forth the seeds for next year's plants.

When the pods finally opened, it was a marvel to behold the neat and ordered arrangement of the seeds before the silk-like appendage of each, the coma, fluffed out for the wind to pick it up and send it toward next year's germination site. Swamp and butterfly milkweed germinate readily from seed and are easily transplanted when young, which is to say that many more gardens can be prepared for next year's generations of monarchs.

Beate Popkin

Falling Leaves and Wildflower Seeds: So Much to Offer Wildlife!

By Ann Bowe

In the fall there is this urge to make our gardens look tidy, to wrap things up and declare a visible end to the gardening season. I have a suggestion for you: do less. Be a little less tidy. Even though you may be finished gardening, the work of the garden is not yet done.

Goldfinch with tasty meal of seeds (Photo by Betty Hall)

At this time of year many people ask, "When should I cut back my native grasses and wildflowers?" My response: wait. Many butterflies and insects spend the winter on those dried plant stalks. Remove them and you risk throwing away some of next year's bounty of beneficial insects. Furthermore, the seed-heads are a buffet for wildlife. And dried plants and grasses look so beautiful in the winter garden with a dusting of snow.

Small branches and twigs can stay in the garden, too. A stick or brush pile in an out of the way place will offer welcoming winter cover for wildlife. Logs also provide good hiding places.

Consider leaf litter. Nature wastes nothing and that includes those fallen leaves that we seem intent upon viewing as garbage that must be disposed of. Leaf litter is part of the cycle of life— we destroy wildlife habitat and lose an opportunity to enrich our soil when we remove these fallen leaves.

Many butterflies, whether in egg, pupal or adult form, find shelter in leaf litter where they wait to emerge in the spring. A vast army of tiny decomposers and scavengers – so called beneficial insects - also live here, working away to turn leaves into soil. Spiders, an essential element in keeping pest insect populations in balance, find a home in deeper leaf litter. You'll also find lady bugs, toads and other predators of pest insects. In the spring, leaf litter is prime hunting ground for birds in search of a tasty meal.

But there is more to consider in the "to rake or not to rake?" decision. Leaf litter does need to be reduced in some parts of the garden. You can't let the leaves lie sodden and heavy on your lawn for very long before they smother the grass and invite disease. And a heavy layer of leaves can cause some perennials to rot. Also, some garden plants (generally non-natives) are quite susceptible to such problems as fungal disease and insect damage. All of these issues can overwinter in the warmth and protection of leaf litter. Snails and slugs also like to lay their eggs in fallen leaves.

What to do? Between "let the leaves stay where they fall" and "rake up every last one of them" there is a useful middle ground. Carefully remove leaves that are on top of any plants, including any matted clumps that have settled on shrubs. Remove the leaves from around any plants that have had pest or disease problems or that you know are susceptible to such problems. Also, remove leaves from around plants that are susceptible to snail or slug damage.

The leaves on your lawn can be cut into tiny pieces with a mulching lawn mower. I run mine over the leaves a couple of times then put the bag on the mower to collect the pieces for easy distribution. These shredded leaves can be spread under trees and around shrubs. You could also put leaves on your vegetable garden plot. Or they can be piled in an inconspicuous spot to rot into leaf mold, which you can later use as mulch. (Oak leaves contain chemicals that make them slower to break down. Better to shred them with your mulching mower then let them rot in a compost pile for a year or two to break them down before spreading them on your gardens.)

If you have a smaller property you may well still have more leaves than you can use. The middle ground solution is to be aware of the importance of leaf litter as wildlife habitat and use as much as possible on your gardens.

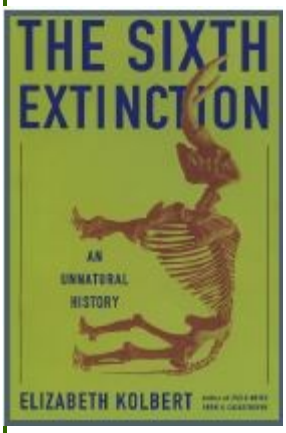
Rethinking your fall cleanup chores is a step in the right direction towards beautiful gardens that are also wildlife habitats.

Winter gardens can provide shelter for small animals. (Photo by Betty Hall)

Book Review

The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History by Elizabeth Kolbert

Reviewed by Gabriel Popkin. Reprinted with permission of *Science News*. This review first appeared in the February 22, 2014 issue of the magazine.



Almost nothing in nature is so rare as a mass extinction. On only five occasions in Earth's long history has a large fraction of the planet's biodiversity disappeared in a geological instant. But, journalist Kolbert reminds us in her new book, we are well on our way to making it six.

A lesser writer tackling this subject might offer up a dreary list of dead and dying species; Kolbert instead tells a scientific thriller. The tale begins in 1739, when strange bones turned up near the Ohio River. Stumped, the French scientist Georges Cuvier declared they must belong to a mammal that no longer exists, which he called the mastodon. As evidence for such archaic forms piled up, Cuvier went further, proposing that Earth's history is full of lost species, and sometimes they wink out in large numbers.

Not until the last few decades did paleontologists fully accept this "catastrophism." Most scientists now believe a meteor impact did in the dinosaurs, as well as the ammonites, extinct mollusks to which Kolbert devotes a loving chapter. That meteor had nothing on the earlier Permian extinction, though, which nearly wiped out multicellular life.

Humans are the new catastrophe. Large mammals are now mostly gone or headed that way, and we are pushing out other biota through habitat destruction and species introductions, Kolbert writes. Ecologists are feverishly studying these phenomena; Kolbert follows them to fragmented tropical rainforests in Panama and Peru, caves of bats stricken with white-nose syndrome in New York and acidifying coral islands on Australia's Great Barrier Reef. These modern eco-disasters are depressingly familiar, but united by Kolbert's masterful reporting, they gain a new urgency.

The scientists Kolbert meets also offer a glimmer of hope. We are, if perhaps a singularly destructive species, also unique in systematically gathering and preserving knowledge about our world. The big question, which Kolbert leaves open, is whether we can use this knowledge to avoid dooming much of the rest of life on Earth — and with it, possibly ourselves.

Henry Holt, $28.

Gabriel Popkin, a Lexington native, is a freelance science and ecology writer based in the Washington DC area. His website is www.gabrielpopkin.com.

PLANT PUZZLE

. . . a devilish challenge for the curious posed by Deborah Holloway

What member of the aster family was introduced to scientists in 1817, seems a bright candle in our autumn meadows and has a mild fragrance? The British called it the"Plain-Weed." According to the Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia, an early farmer/writer referred to it as "that accursed stinking flower….which is the torment of the neighboring farmer."

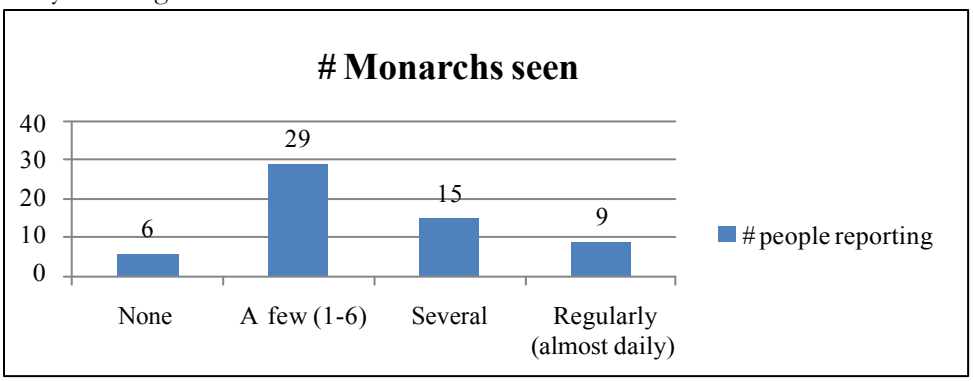
Can you name this now very popular addition to butterfly flower gardens?

(Check page 5 for the answer.)

Monarch Report

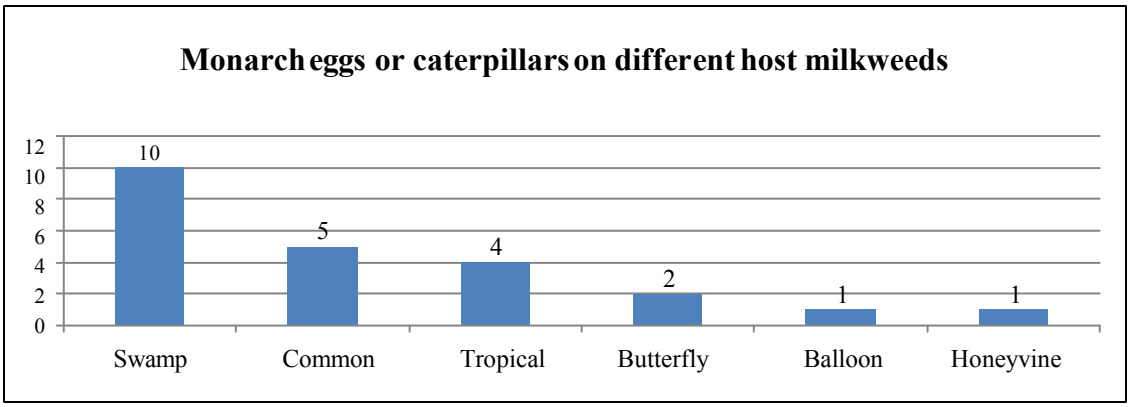
Monarch survey results from 50 *Wild Ones* members – August 2014

1. Are you seeing monarchs?



2. Are you finding any monarch eggs or caterpillars? 13 people said "yes."

3. If so, what milkweeds are you finding them on?



It's still too early to know how the monarchs are doing but I am glad they were seen in this area. I am impressed that folks looked for monarch eggs or caterpillars and that 13 people found them. Several people commented that they have seen more monarchs this year than last year and that is encouraging.

I sympathize with people who have not seen any butterflies, especially those who have planted milkweeds. To some degree, seeing monarchs is a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Finding eggs is challenging unless you see the butterfly laying them and caterpillars are quite good at hiding. So monarchs may have visited your garden even if you haven't seen them or found eggs or caterpillars.

Follow the monarch migration on the Journey North website (**www.learner.org/jnorth/monarch/**). The site provides weekly updates and includes a link to a petition to declare the monarch an endangered species.

Betty Hall

Wild Ones Learn about Phenology

By Deborah Holloway

Word of the month: Phenology! This word comes from the Latin "*phainos*" meaning to appear or come into view and "*logos,*" to study. At the September meeting *Wild Ones* members not only learned the meaning of the word but a variety of ways to become data gatherers for scientists studying it.

Our guest for the evening was Roberta Burnes, environmental education specialist at the Kentucky Division for Air Quality. She explained that phenology is nothing more than being tuned to the rhythm of the seasons and making observations about what happens to plants, insects or mammals during the change of those seasons.

Robert Marsham, an English naturalist who lived in the 1700s, is recognized as the "Father of Phenology." His best known work is *Indications of Spring*, a collection of his seasonal observations. Another well-known phenologist was Elizabeth "Betty" Losey. From 1947 until her death in 2005, she tracked and surveyed birds at Seney National Refuge in the Upper Peninsula in Michigan. Just as Smithsonian research verified that certain flowers are blooming earlier in the 21st century, Betty documented the increasingly early arrival of migrating birds.

Roberta then went on to show us many ways in which **we** can join in what is known as "citizen science." The National Phenology Network at **usanpn.org** is a rich source of information and assistance for beginning nature observations. Project BudBurst at **budburst.org** provides an organized system for collecting and entering observations. Many people are already involved with Journey North through its Monarch Migration page, but there are also opportunities to track other plant, animal and climate changes. Its website is **www.learner.org/jnorth**. And don't forget Cornell Lab's Great Backyard Bird Count **gbbc.birdcount.org** and Audubon's Christmas Bird Count **birds.audubon.org/Christmas-bird-count,** popular ways for anyone to take part in collecting data. Key to all of this is that even the smallest observation, such as keeping track of just one plant in your garden on a regular basis and sharing that information, has real value to scientists.

Thanks to Roberta Burnes for introducing a new word to our vocabulary and for the invitation to begin collecting data as citizen scientists.

October Wild Ones Meeting

Wild Ones members will gather at 7 p.m. on Thursday, October 2 at St. Michael's Church to discuss rare plant conservation with Deborah White, Executive Director of Woods and Waters Land Trust. The evening's program will look at issues related to collecting wild endangered plants and their use in landscaping from a conservation perspective.

There will be an informal plant exchange prior to the meeting. Just bring your extras looking for new homes in small pots clearly identified. Trade for plants you might want to add to your garden. This is not a fundraiser, just a way to clear some space in overcrowded sections of your garden.

September Calendar

Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest

Fri., Oct. 24 and Sat., Oct. 25—KY BOTANICAL SYMPOSIUM presented by the KY Native Plant Society. Many speakers, field trips and native plant nursery displays of interest to *Wild Ones* members. Full details at knps.org. Fee per day $10 for KNPS members; $25 for non-members. Advance registration recommended; pay at the door.

Raven Run Nature Sanctuary

Sun., Oct. 12 at 1:00 p.m.—Fall Wildflowers—This program focuses on the wildflowers of the meadows, insects and folklore connected to these flowers. **FREE but call 859-272-6105 to register.**

Fri., Oct. 17 at 7:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m.—Halloween at Raven Run: Mysteries of the Night—Travel down darkened trails in search of unusual animals and plants. Parade of Pumpkins. Ghost stories. Free spooky prizes for all young participants. **FREE but must call to register for one of the times. 859-272-6105.**

UK Arboretum

Sun., Oct. 12 from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.—Trees, Trails and Creatures—Parents and children can talk with amazing animals as they tour the Children's Garden. Many other activities include apple tasting, pumpkin decorating and leaf printing. **$3 per person.**

Fri., Oct. 17 from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. and Sat., Oct. 18 from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.—A Cat's Tale Literacy Festival. UK student groups will bring story books to life. **$5 per child; 1 adult per child FREE.**

Tues., Oct. 21 at 4:00 p.m.—Use of Urban Forests to Improve Water Quality—tree selection, planting and maintenance. **FREE. Pre-register at 859-257-6955.**

PLANT PUZZLE ANSWER: Showy goldenrod (*Solidago speciosa*) which stands 2-4 feet tall and is bushy with full yellow spikes. It is deer resistant and a real draw for bees, butterflies and goldfinches.