

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

Milkweeds

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Some plant species are difficult to get excited about, especially if they lack flashy blooms or interesting biology. Today's group of plants is sure to get you excited, with not only flashy blooms, but important and interesting biology. For our 39th installment of Bogdiversity Thursday, let's take a look at milkweeds!

Milkweeds are an interesting group of plants that have developed a sticky, noxious sap to help protect the plant from herbivores and insect predators. Their sap contains cardiac glycosides, which can be harmful to humans and other creatures if consumed. However, some insects have found a way around this defense and have adapted to eat this plant and utilize the toxins within the sap for their own protection.

The flowers of milkweeds are quite distinct, with odd hooded flowers in large clusters. Full of nectar, these flowers attract a wide range of pollinators. Pollination for milkweeds is an elaborate, multi-step process, not simply a brushing off of pollen to fertilize the plant. The pollen structure on milkweeds is called a

pollonia, a large and very sticky sac. These pollonia are found within each hooded flower and can only be accessed if an insect's leg falls into a slit in the flower. Once the insect's leg has come into contact with the pollonia, the same process must occur on another plant for fertilization to occur. A lot of work to produce seeds!

We have two species of milkweed in the Sax-Zim Bog: Common and Swamp Milkweed! Both species are fairly easy to find along the vast roadsides of the region. Milkweeds are important host plants, as well as nectar sources. Dozens of species of butterfly might nectar off of these plants at one time! They also play a critical role in the life cycle of Monarchs and their relatives, as well as a number of beetle species. These attractive species are easy to maintain and a great first step in planting native species to attract a wide range of pollinators in your yard, wherever it might be!

More information about these plants and their importance to insects below!

(Photos of milkweeds and Monarch egg by Head Naturalist Clinton, photo of Swamp Milkweed Leaf Beetle by Jerry McCormick)



Each milkweed flower on a cluster has abundant nectar and beautiful structure. They also have odd, horn like structures that lead to the sticky pollinia inside the flower.



Swamp Milkweed is perhaps the most attractive milkweed of them all! The narrow, lance-shaped leaves and the bright flowers make this plant stand out, especially when it is hiding within the wetland grasses and sedges of the habitats it prefers.



Common Milkweed is robust, with large rounded leaves and huge clusters of beautiful pinkish flowers. This species can be found along roadsides, in old fields, in shaded woodlands and is very adaptable to disturbance.



If you have a milkweed patch in your area, it is not difficult to find signs of use by Monarchs! The largeish, white eggs stand out against new or old leaves.



Swamp Milkweed Leaf Beetle is an interesting species that uses milkweeds as a host plant, not unlike Monarchs! These multicolored beetles larvae eat the leaves of this plant before dropping off to pupate on the ground below the plant. A stunning beetle to be sure!