

way station

noun

1. a stopping point on a journey.
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To make a banquet fit for traveling royalty,
It takes sun and rain, and
Milkweeds.
Monarchs take notice of such hospitality.

Give them the best of the summer wines --
Vintages from wildflowers with
Complex aromas and opulent colors.

The royal procession moves quickly
From palatial compounds in Mexico to Canada and back again
In a single year, winging it from flower to flower,
Way station to way station.

The Monarch Way Station on the Andover portion of the Rail Trail was proposed by the Andover Conservation Commission and approved by the Board of Selectmen in Fall 2020 (see proposal). The installation event, on May 12, 2021, was sponsored by the Andover Public Library.

Volunteers gathered with shovels, trowels, and watering cans to set out milkweed seedlings – Common Milkweed and Butterfly Weed. Monarch butterflies lay their eggs on the undersides of the leaves of milkweed (*Asclepias*) species only. No other genus of plants will do; the exclusive relationship between ovipositing Monarch and Milkweeds goes back thousands of years. The larvae will grow only with a steady diet of milkweed leaves.

The volunteers also set out Purple Coneflower, Lavender Hyssop, Mountain Mint, Red Salvia, and Woodland Sunflower seedlings, whose nectar will provide a season-long feast for adult Monarchs, as well as many other species of butterflies, bees, wasps, and other pollinators.



Volunteer Ellen Repay transplanting Purple Coneflower, May 12



Town Manager Eric Anderson installing the Monarch Way Station sign



Conservation Commission Chair Mike Palazzi watering in the Way Station seedlings

A long, narrow meadow was marked using flags donated by Naturescape. For the rest of Summer 2021, this area is to be allowed to grow without being mowed. The naturalized flowering plants that have taken root here over the years will flower and provide pollen and nectar for many species of pollinators.



The Monarch Way Station will be allowed to grow up inside the flagged area; the rest will be mowed.

The first insect visitors to the Way Station (that I noticed) were the field crickets, which started their summer music festival around May 22. The next were the bumblebees; they quickly discovered the Red Clover, which started blooming on May 26.



Bumblebee nectaring on Red Clover, May 26

The next insect visitor that I noticed was the Pearl Crescent butterfly. It is quite likely that it overwintered as a larva on one of the many asters that grow on this stretch of the rail trail.¹ This was the right time of the spring for it to be patrolling the area for potential mates – and conveniently, there were a few flowers in bloom for nourishment.



Pearl Crescent sunning on a stone in the Monarch Way Station, May 26

¹ Unlike the migratory Monarchs and some migratory dragonflies, most of the insects that we'll see in the Way Station are not long-distance travelers. They'll spend their summer within a radius of about 3 miles of their hatching place.

I noticed about this time that in addition to the milkweed seedlings we'd planted, common milkweeds were sprouting in the Way Station. The area has been mowed for so long, who knew what would pop up?



Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) volunteers

Maybe these plants will turn out to be more vigorous than the transplants this year, and be the main attraction for the Monarchs. The transplants are putting on new growth, but they are still recovering from transplant shock.

By June 2, more weeds were beginning to flower:²



Smooth Bedstraw (*Galium mollugo*)

² Many of the plant species that come up in this patch of soil are in fact weedy, nonnative, and even invasive. You wouldn't want them in your yard or garden. But most produce nectar, and some serve as hosts for caterpillars of various butterfly and moth species. In the context of the Monarch Way Station – a site that was formerly part of the Railroad Station and then a parking lot for a business -- they're part of the food court. It will be interesting to see how much pollinator activity they attract when they're allowed to flower.



Birdsfoot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*)

By June 6, Crown Vetch was beginning to flower --



Crown Vetch (*Securigera varia*, formerly *Coronilla varia*)

-- and Common Speedwell:



Common Speedwell (*Veronica officinalis*)

In this photo, in addition to the blue speedwell flowers, you can also see leaves of Sourgrass, White Woodland Aster, and Virginia Creeper. So much to attract Monarchs and other pollinators! I will be visiting the Way Station periodically, and reporting on what I find there throughout the summer.

If you happen to be walking or biking on the Rail Trail, take a look yourself, and see if you can find any insect festivities going on – and always keep an eye out for the brilliant flash of Monarch wings. I saw my first-of-year Monarch flitting through our yard this week; it stopped on the Canada Anemone for a few sips of nectar, and flew on.



Monarch on Canada Anemone (*Anemone canadensis*), June 9