

Field Notes—July 11, 2022  
Carrie Crompton

### **Milkweed Café**

The Milkweed Café, which opened this spring with thirteen sturdy-looking plants, is now down to three. Someone with a weed whacker cut down the other ten plants inside the circle of flags I'd set up to define the perimeter of the Café. I do hope that that the whacked plants are able to regenerate next year, though I see no signs of that happening this season. The three survivors were all in bloom as of June 17, emitting a very sweet fragrance. The flowers produce a lot of nectar, and appeal to a wide variety of pollinators, but only the larger insects can get inside the reproductive parts of the flower (adjacent to the showy nectaries) and make it out alive. Evidently, some bumble bees, wasps, and/or beetles were able to get in and out of the flowers on our three plants—



**Bumble bee at Milkweed Café, June 25**

—and now the seedpods are starting to form.



**Milkweed flowers gone by, seed pods forming, July 11 (The pink flowers are bouncing bet.)**

Last year, I saw my first Monarch at the Café on July 11. As of yesterday (July 11, 2022), I see no evidence of Monarch visitation to this patch of three plants – no eggs, no larvae. I *am* seeing Monarchs in my own yard, and have seen them fluttering near the Café, but so far, all the leaves on these plants appear to be intact. We'll know the Monarchs have taken an interest when we start to see holes in the leaves.



## Monarch Way Station

The Way Station is looking colorful, with coreopsis, cleome, lavender hyssop, bee balm, mountain mint, and zinnias in bloom right now. I would not characterize the bee population there as abundant, but they are present. One thing I've noticed about bees is that they tend to keep fairly constant distances between themselves as they work. If there is more than a two-foot distance between any two bees, I think of the population as small. If they're closer than one foot, I think of them as abundant. I used to try to count them as they moved around – so many per square meter – but this “method” is much easier, given that all I want is a sense of relative abundance.



**Monarch Way Station, July 11**



## **Bee Pasture**

The Bee Pasture on Riverside Drive was supposed to have been allowed to grow and flower this year, but it was mowed recently, and it is looking parched. Clover is starting to rebloom, and some honey bees and bumble bees are present – but I see them roughly three feet apart from each other.



**Bee Pasture on Riverside Drive, July 11**



On the other side of Riverside Drive, there is much more plant and insect life. The town has been allowing the meadows around the ball field to grow without mowing so far. Spotted knapweed (*Centaurea maculosa*) is starting to bloom. This plant is on the CT Invasive Plant list, but I have to say, it is not worthless to the pollinators. Every patch is full of honey bees – only inches apart from each other.



**Spotted Knapweed near Hop River Homes, July 11**



I've been seeing American Copper butterflies in this meadow since June 23. According to *The Connecticut Butterfly Atlas*, these are among the fifteen most common butterflies in Connecticut, because their habitat and hostplant requirements are "quite general."<sup>1</sup> They're small and fast-moving, so it's hard to get a good photo – but the wings are lovely, like stained glass.



**American Copper butterfly nectaring on white clover on Riverside Drive, July 11, 2022**

I've also been seeing quite a few Eastern Tailed Blues at this site. They're about the same size as the American Coppers, and also found wherever clover is allowed to bloom.

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<sup>1</sup> Janice E. O'Donnell, Lawrence F. Gall, and David L. Wagner, *The Connecticut Butterfly Atlas*, DEEP, 2007.





**Eastern Tailed Blue, Riverside Drive, June 23**

## **Pollinators in Our Yards**

I was perplexed all spring by the fact that I saw much more nectaring than pollen collection by the bees in our yard – and also on trails where I walked.

I am still seeing a great deal more nectaring than active pollen collection. But my reading tells me that the active pollen collectors, like honeys and bumbles, fine-tune their collection schedules to meet the needs of their hives and nests. <sup>2</sup> On a given foraging trip, a honey bee will collect

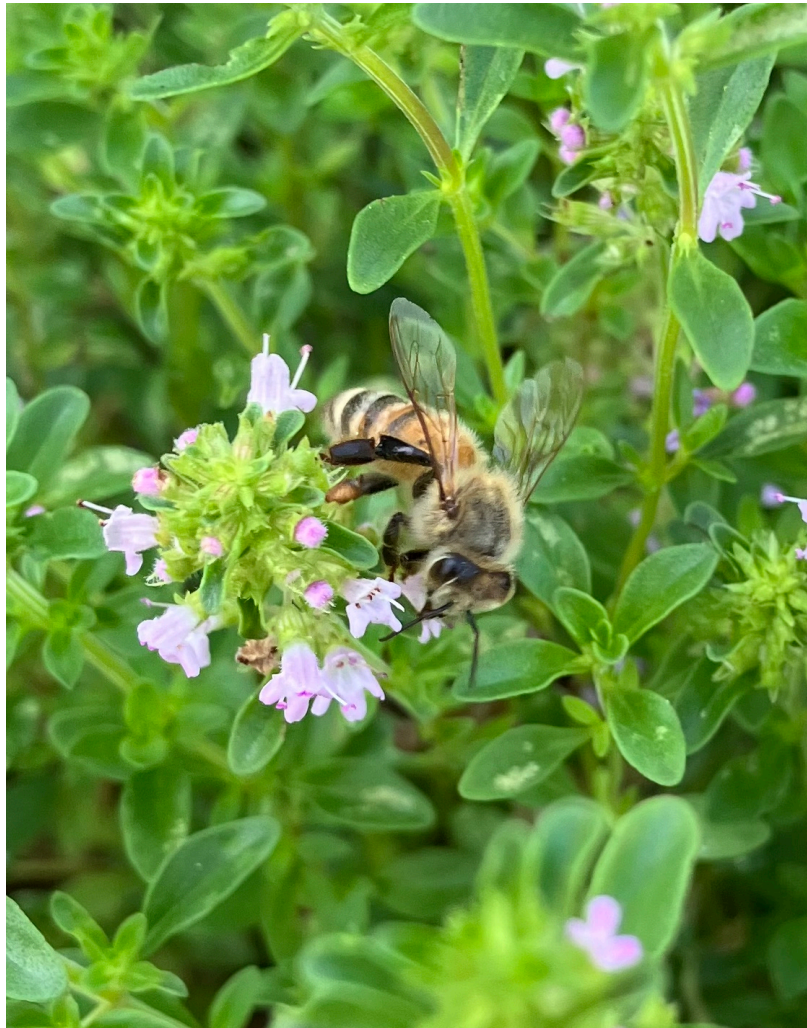
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<sup>2</sup> Thomas James Wood et al., “Wild Bee Pollen Diets Reveal Patterns of Seasonal Foraging Resources for Honey Bees” <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fevo.2018.00210/full>



pollen in the corbiculae *or* nectar in the “honey stomach,” but not both at the same time. The bumble bees collect a greater variety of pollen types in May than in subsequent months. They might be on a different schedule for collection this summer than they were last summer, but they know what they are doing.<sup>3</sup> I find the research reassuring – and the presence of the “pollies” themselves is reassuring.<sup>4</sup> I see the numbers increasing, and now the unintended effects of their work are appearing, too – berries and fruits.

Here are a few of my favorite bee photos from the past few weeks.



**Honey bee on thyme flowers**

I see four or five honey bees per square foot of thyme these days.

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<sup>3</sup> “Why Are My Bees Not Collecting Pollen?” <https://www.beekeeping-101.com/why-are-my-bees-not-collecting-pollen/>

<sup>4</sup> In the most recent volume of *Connecticut Gardener* magazine, editor Anne Rowlands says that she is tired of saying and writing the word *pollinator* and is going to call them “pollies” henceforth. I agree!



Here's an image that makes me think of Georgia O'Keeffe. But as far as I know, she never painted insects on her flowers!



**Honey bee on Poppy, June 4**

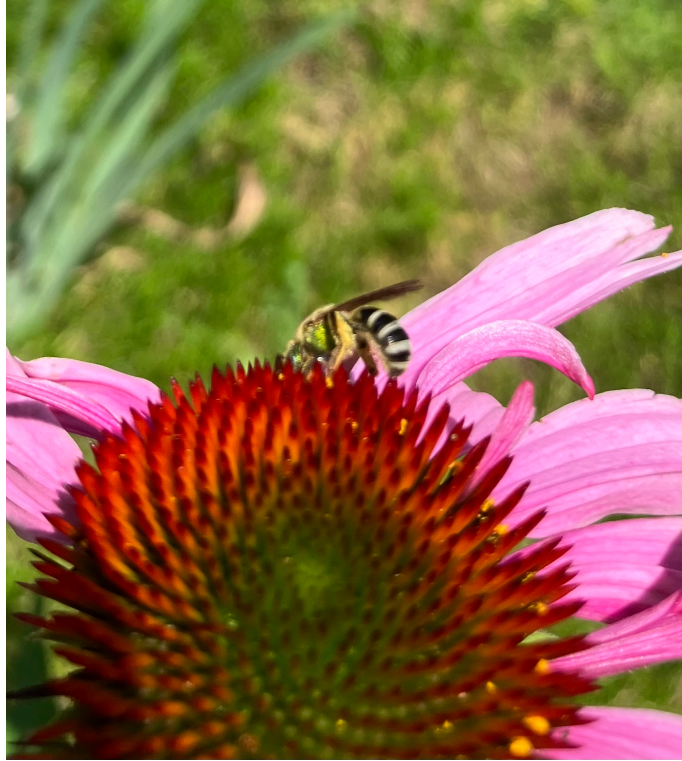


Sometimes, there are three or four honey bees crawling all over the stamens in the center of one poppy flower. It looks as though one fell off its perch in this one!



**A tumbling crowd of honey bees, July 4**





**Bi-colored Striped Sweat Bee on Coneflower, July 10**



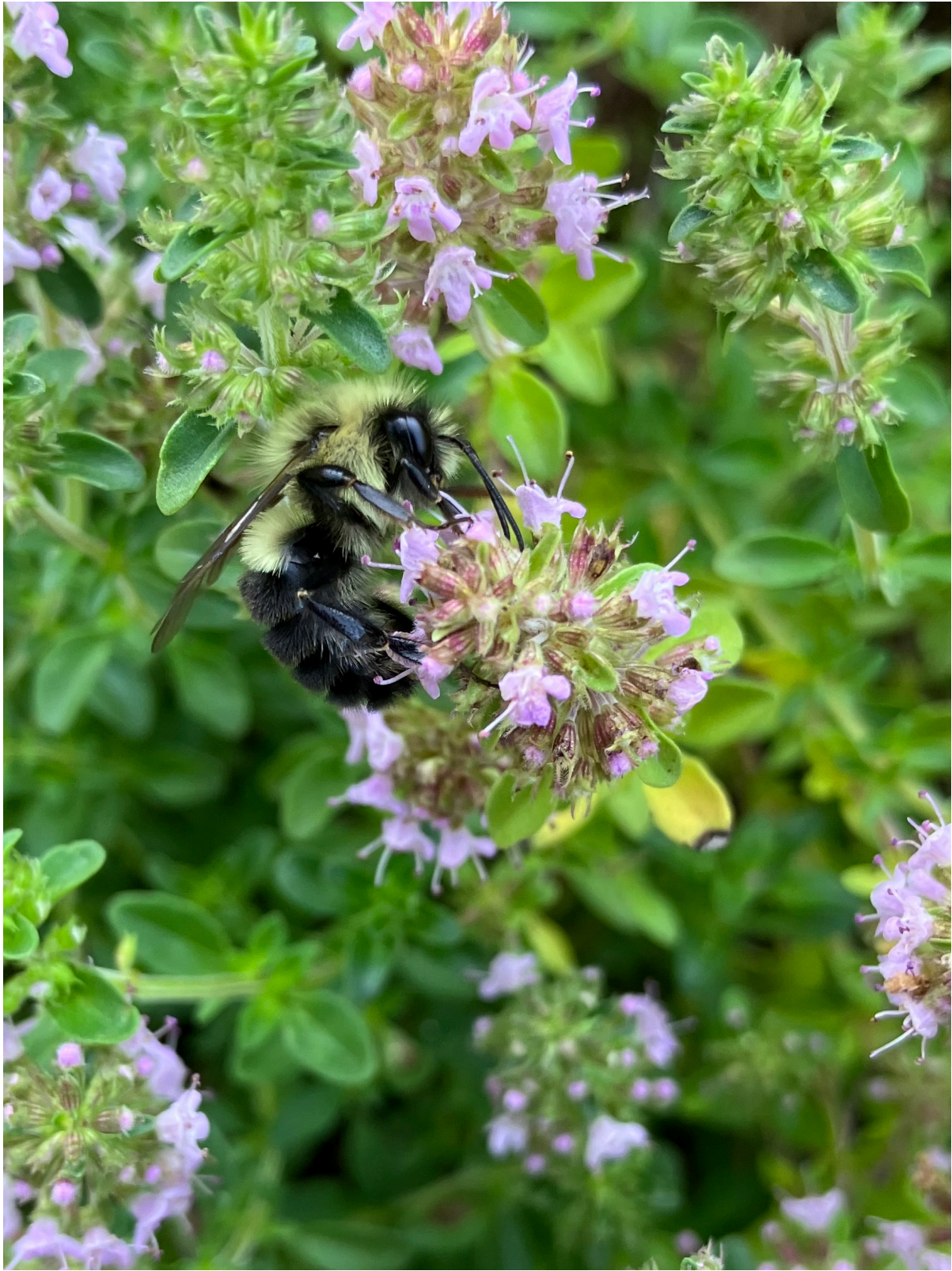
**Bumble bee collecting pollen on nicotiana, July 10**





**Bumble bee on cleome, July 10 – not collecting**





**Bumble bee on thyme flowers, July 10 – not collecting**



Yesterday afternoon, I noticed two Monarchs, one male, one female, in our front yard.<sup>5</sup> They weren't sailing gracefully through the yard, sampling nectar; they alternated between manic flight and rest. They seemed to be circling our patch of butterfly weed, a relative of common milkweed that is also used by Monarchs as larval food – always aware of each other's presence.



**Monarch on Butterfly Weed, July 8**

Every now and then, they would fly toward each other very fast and then spiral up into the sky.

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<sup>5</sup> It's possible to tell them apart while they rest – the male has two spots on his hind wing that the female doesn't have. The one in the photo is the female.



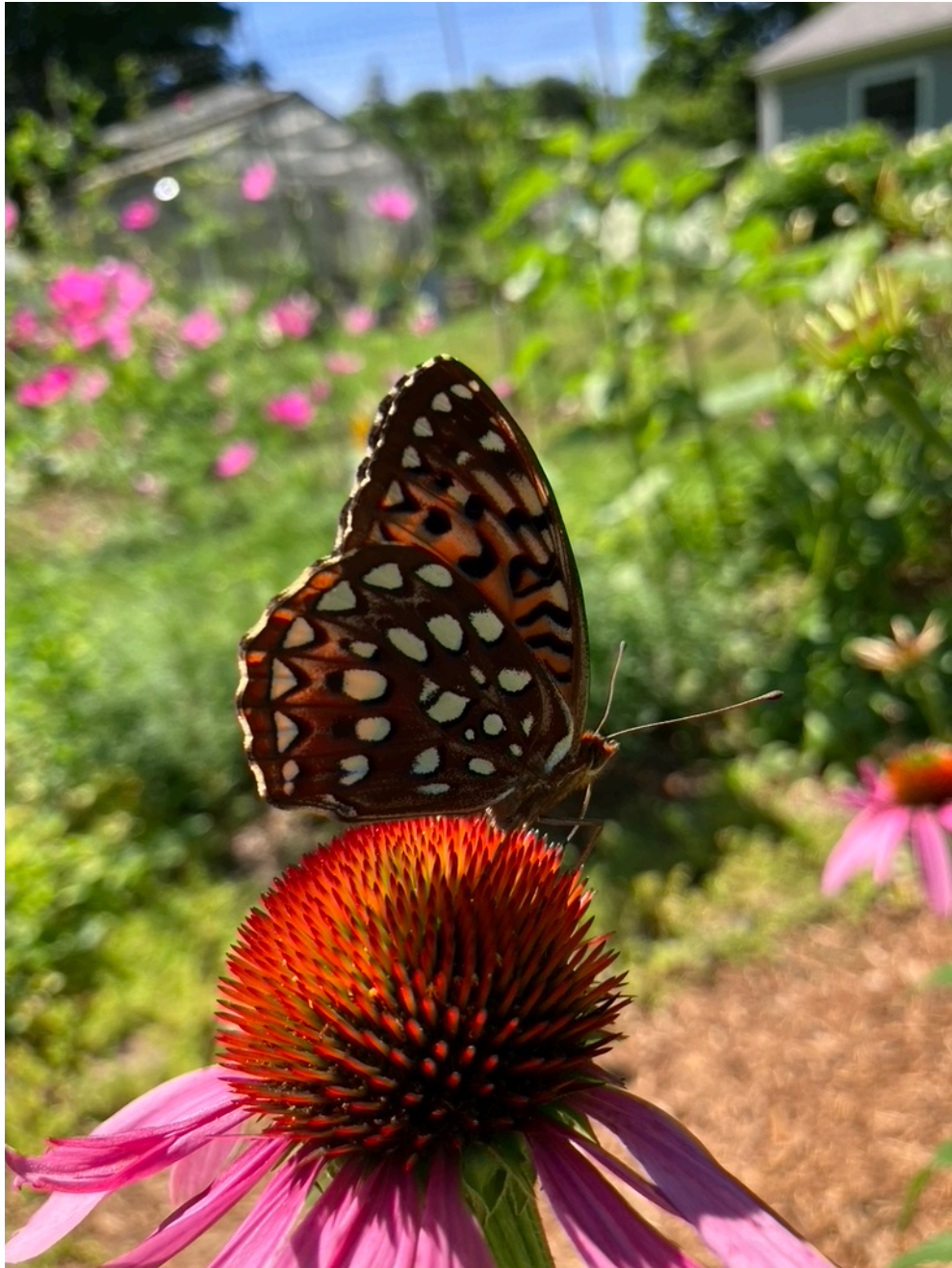


**Monarch courtship flight, July 11**

This was a courtship dance! After they came down again, they'd rest in different parts of the yard, not moving, for a few minutes. Then they'd start the dance again. It went on for hours. I sat still and watched for about an hour, then needed to tear myself away . . . but every time I looked at the yard for the rest of the day, there they were, moving together or resting separately.



In the back yard, the Great Spangled Fritillaries were flitting and nectaring. They are wonderful to watch, because the two sides of their wings are both beautiful, but quite different.



**Great Spangled Fritillary inner wing pattern**

The inner wing is spangled with white spots (the way the American flag is spangled with white stars).





**Great Spangled Fritillary outer wing pattern**

The outer wings are marked with black spots at the edges, shadowed toward the center. The Fritillary's wing is like a reversible garment made with two completely different fabrics.



The front-page (below-the-fold) article in today's *Hartford Courant*, titled "Sound of Silence," is about the loss of insect biomass in CT in recent years. It quotes David Wagner, one of the authors of *The Connecticut Butterfly Atlas*:

"The butterfly population has been the most affected. We've seen great declines in populations over the last few decades. At this point we're losing about half of a butterfly species a year. While this may seem marginal, it is a noticeable decline over several years."

Habitat, habitat! Most insect species are declining due to a loss of habitat. We can all make more pollie-friendly habitat in our own back yards by mowing less and planting more flowering trees, shrubs, and perennials (especially native ones) and minimizing the use of pesticides.

Where flowers bloom, insects find them, and you have humming, feasting, dancing, and courtship flights in your yard.