

WILD ONES JOURNAL  
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# WILD ONES®

A VOICE FOR THE NATURAL  
LANDSCAPING MOVEMENT



# A Message from Wild Ones Education and Program Coordinator



By Sara Rensing

In the cycle of seasons, spring is another season of change. Sure, you can see this in our gardens and landscapes, but as I write this, I'm reminded of the movie "Groundhog Day." This cinematic masterpiece uses the backdrop of an early spring day to explore themes of transformation and self-reflection, as the protagonist experiences change in a very literal sense through repeated days. As you will read in this issue of the Journal, transformation, movement and change are constant themes for Wild Ones.

Monarchs very literally embody transformation through metamorphosis. Read more in the latest installment of our butterfly and pollinator series, supported by Monarch Joint Venture, which can be found on [Page 10](#). Besa Schweitzer sheds light on the personal impact of tagging these remarkable insects with her mentor and the guidance of Monarch Watch, a community science initiative dedicated to the research, conservation and study of monarch butterflies.

Witness the subtle yet profound movements shaping our natural world, and incredible role ants play in the lifecycle of native wildflowers in "Ants are Superheroes in the World of Native Wildflowers" by Kim Strader, highlighted on [Page 30](#). Strader describes the symbiotic relationship between ants and plants, where ants, often unseen agents of change, help the movement and dispersal of seeds across forests and meadows.

On [Page 35](#), you will learn what it takes to be a "true" pollinator. A pollinator is an animal that moves pollen from the male anther of a flower to the female stigma of a flower. It is a process that is critical to species and ecosystem health and resilience.

And finally, you might notice a few changes in the Journal as well. In an effort to keep the Journal relevant and engaging for our readers, the scope and focus of the Journal has changed over time. Complete the [Journal Feedback Form](#) and help guide the direction. Members are always welcome to send their thoughts and comments to [support@wildones.org](mailto:support@wildones.org). And finally, we are always looking for contributors. You can read more about the [submission guidelines on our website](#).

What happens with all this movement? Seeds spread, new flowers bloom and Wild Ones continues to reshape our own and others' minds about natural landscaping. And of course, as we all know, the beauty of native plant gardens and landscapes stems from their ever-changing nature.

P.S. For those that don't follow the tradition, Punxsutawney Phil's prediction this February indicates an early spring, so you can look forward to a change in weather coming to your area soon.

*Sara is a biologist and administrator in higher education. She started part time at Wild Ones this past summer and supports the mission through her active involvement in the development, strategy, reporting and budgeting for programs such as the Lorrie Otto Seeds for Education Grants, Native Garden Designs, Wild for Monarchs, Wild Ones Journal and educational webinars.*



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Established in 1977, Wild Ones is a national nonprofit organization of members who teach the benefits of growing native plants and work together to grow and restore natural landscapes. Wild Ones' definition of a native plant: A native plant is a species that occurs naturally in a particular region, ecosystem and/or habitat and was present prior to European settlement.

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“Perfection”

Standing tall against dark green blades, the freshly opened Louisiana blue iris (*Iris giganteaerulea*) is queen of the wildflowers. Photo Contest submission

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**MONARCH**  
JOINT VENTURE

By Besa Schweitzer

Are you looking for new ways to help monarch butterflies beyond planting milkweed in your yard? Monarch Watch's butterfly tagging program could be the opportunity you are looking for. Tagging migrating monarchs is a way to participate in community science to help researchers learn more about monarch populations and migration. It is also a great activity to do with children to increase their participation in the garden or to bring out your own inner child.

My fifth-grade teacher, Gerald Axelbaum, now retired, was always looking for new ways to bring his students outside. In 1992, he heard about a new organization called Monarch Watch that was asking community members to help tag monarch butterflies in order to track their flight to Mexico. Axelbaum's class had participated in previous research projects studying acid rain and really enjoyed becoming part of an international project; this monarch project sounded like it would also be very interesting. Monarch Watch offered an opportunity to help with the research of tracking monarchs to Mexico, giving his students an opportunity to work with scientists in other countries, as well as learn about the lifecycle of an insect.

After responding to Monarch Watch and requesting materials, Axelbaum set about incorporating monarch tagging into his fifth-grade curriculum. Using a sewing machine, the students made their own butterfly nets out of coat hangers and cloth. He says the students "had pure fun building the nets." Net building was

A monarch begins its transformation from caterpillar into butterfly inside a chrysalis. It takes 8-10 days for the miracle to occur.

# Tagging monarchs with Monarch Watch

All photos by Besa Schweitzer



also a lesson for students in sewing, measuring and taking pride in their creation. Monarch Watch mailed the class a set of stickers to tag the monarchs with and asked them to record data on sex, date tagged and if the butterfly was wild. Because he loves to teach science, Axelbaum encouraged his students to collect additional data like wind speed, temperature and which direction the butterfly headed when it was released.

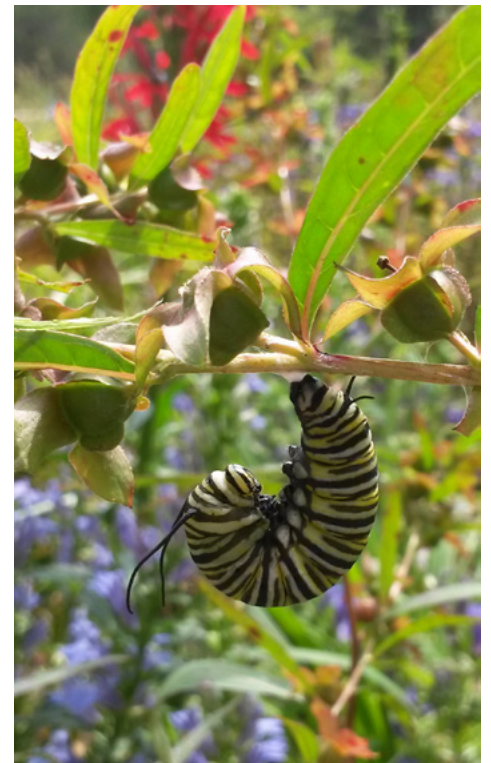
The fifth-grade class visited a nearby nature reserve to catch and tag their monarchs. Axelbaum remembers that when the project first started in the 1990s, it was common to see monarchs crossing the road in front of the school bus on the way to the nature reserve. Some days they would catch up to 120 monarchs and they would run out of tags. As the years passed, however, he said he noticed a decline in the number of monarchs available for his students to tag. It was very disappointing to have a class of excited fifth graders ready to catch monarchs when no monarchs were around.

To increase the number of monarchs available for his students to tag

and to learn more about their lifecycle through a hands-on experience, Axelbaum ordered larva that could be reared in the classroom from Monarch Watch. Caterpillar eggs were also collected off milkweed leaves in the garden to be reared indoors. The students quickly became bonded with their caterpillars as they cared for them, fed them and watched them molt five times as they grew bigger and bigger. Monarch caterpillars must be fed fresh milkweed leaves, so Axelbaum spent each morning biking around the neighborhood harvesting milkweed from abandoned ditches and fence lines. However, a few years in to rearing larva in the classroom, tragedy struck and all the larvae died from disease. Axelbaum learned there is a need to sanitize the caterpillars' containers and the surrounding environment, which is hard to do in a classroom.

"Sadly, there are so many ways for them to die before becoming adults, and the kids get bonded to their larva," he says. "It sometimes ends in tears." But when things went well, students had the opportunity to witness their monarch finally evolve

Above: As a monarch caterpillar sheds its exoskeleton for the final time, it forms a chrysalis. Inside the chrysalis, the caterpillar begins its transformation into a butterfly. Below: When a monarch caterpillar is fully grown, it finds a suitable place to make its chrysalis. It then attaches a wad of silk and hangs from it, upside down (in a "J" shape) for about 18 hours, before it forms a chrysalis.





into an adult butterfly, making all the hard work delightfully worth it.

Monarch tagging is a great activity to do with kids. It is captivating to let a monarch sit on the palm of your hand waiting for it to take flight after receiving a tag. This is also a wonderful time for photos. Speaking about his experience with his students over the years, Axelbaum says that “any touch of an insect makes them more familiar and comfortable,” creating more kids who have a lifelong connection to insects. The activity can be very exciting, but it is also a great responsibility since the child must be gentle with each insect

“There is a lovely freedom children experience as they run across the prairie with a net after a monarch,” says Axelbaum. They are hard to catch, and if you open the net without caution, they fly out and are gone. Catching a monarch takes skill.

Axelbaum recommends a method for successfully catching monarch butterflies. “Be like a batter; be cocked and ready to swing,” he says. “Wait for a monarch to perch on a flower to sip nectar. Swing your net well past the flower the butterfly is

perched on to get the butterfly all the way to the back and center of the net, keep the net moving to keep the butterfly inside. Then flip your wrist to fold the net over and close off the opening, and gently untangle from any plants. Next, hold the net up to the sunlight to find the butterfly, and while gently squeezing the wings closed from the outside of the net with one hand, reach inside with your other hand to gently grasp it and remove it, always gently pinching the leading edge of the wings together so it cannot fly or hurt itself.”

You can safely hold butterflies by their wings, even though they will lose a few scales, but not a damaging amount. You only get one chance to catch them; if they escape, they are off, flying up into the sky.

Axelbaum describes the 30 years he has spent with his students tagging monarchs as magical, thrilling and exciting. This is a great growth opportunity for children. One of the great resources of the Monarch Watch program is that you can see if any of your tagged monarchs has been recovered in Mexico. He is proud that, over the years, 20 or so of

These munching monarch caterpillars eat the same milkweed leaf.

his students’ monarchs have been recovered in Mexico, completing their great migration.

Whether you are a child or not, monarch tagging can be thrilling and engaging. If you plant milkweed in your garden, the monarchs will come. Be ready, and when you see the monarch butterflies traveling south in August and September, have your tags ready. You can [preorder your tags](#) from Monarch Watch in the spring, and they will be mailed to you in summer. Order early because supplies sometimes run out. While we impatiently await the return of the monarchs, we can also watch their progress on the [Journey North website](#) and report any monarchs arriving in our gardens.

*Besa Schweitzer is a native garden specialist with over 20 years’ experience gardening with native plants. She is also the author of “The Wildflower Garden Planner,” an interactive guidebook to native landscaping in Missouri. Besa is a member of the Wild Ones St. Louis Chapter.*