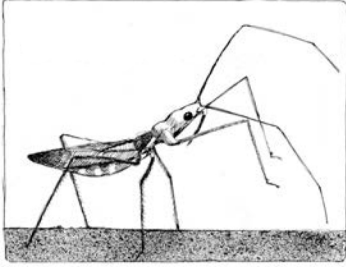


# The Outside Story



## See What's in the Milkweed Patch

By: Barbara Mackay

Eight or so years ago I collected milkweed seeds and painstakingly buried them one at a time under leaf debris at the back edge of my yard, hoping they would mature and attract more monarch butterflies to my home. The project has been wildly successful, but recently the monarch population has declined. So far this year I have seen only one.

Still, milkweed is a valuable perennial. Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca* L.) is a sweet haven for a diversity of organisms. Visit a patch along the road or in a field and see for yourself the variety of wildlife that uses this unique wildflower.

As we near the end of summer, you are likely to notice the milkweed tussock moth caterpillar. Its appearance makes it a good candidate for a science fiction movie. It is orangey-brown, with black and white bristles and tufts sticking out in all directions. About one inch long, it often curls into a comma shape on a leaf, and will roll up in a ball if disturbed.

A dozen tussock eggs are laid together, hatch together, and move about as a group, called a colony. They communally devour a leaf, leaving behind droopy, skeletonized, green threads. Surprisingly, a milkweed plant can usually recover from the damage caused by a colony of tussock moth larvae. As they mature, they split up and feed individually.

The red milkweed beetle is a conspicuous milkweed resident. It looks a bit like an elongated ladybug. It has a slim red body with black spots on its back. It sports antennae that seem disproportionately long for its size. If you don't see the beetle itself, you might see evidence of it having been there: it eats the tapered point of the leaves. It also eats the buds and flowers.

Another insect to discover is the milkweed bug. It has a dark body with an orange X across its back, and a line of orange across where you imagine its neck would be if it had one. Milkweed bugs can live their entire lives, from egg to nymph to adult, on their namesake plant. They are common enough that you might even see a mating pair. You have time: they stay attached (end-to-end) for up to thirty minutes.