

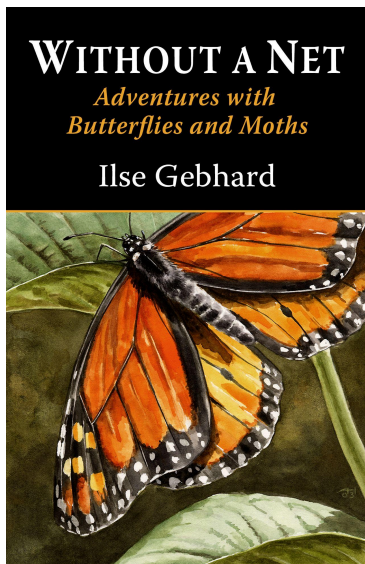
SEEDLINGS - Kalamazoo Area Wild Ones Newsletter - April 2026

"There can be no purpose more enspiriting than to begin the age of restoration, reweaving the wondrous diversity of life that still surrounds us."
—E.O. Wilson



Dear friend,

The smiling faces above warm my heart every time I look at them. These are the volunteer mentors (photographed by Quyen Edwards) who help other KAWO members decide what to plant on their land. If you haven't had a site visit yet and would like to arrange one, please contact Kira Griggs (kliparijordan@gmail.com).



I'm also thrilled to announce a new KAWO publication! We've collected over eighty of Ilse Gebhard's essays in a digital book, *Without a Net: Adventures with Butterflies and Moths*. It includes hundreds of images by mostly local photographers, an introduction by the author, and more. You can find out more about [the book and how to buy it on our website](#).

Also in this newsletter: Tom Small's introduction to his upcoming presentation, a report on volunteering with Plaster Creek Stewards, an article on wild columbine, news about overwintering monarch populations, a native fauna ID quiz, and a list of community events this month. Happy reading!

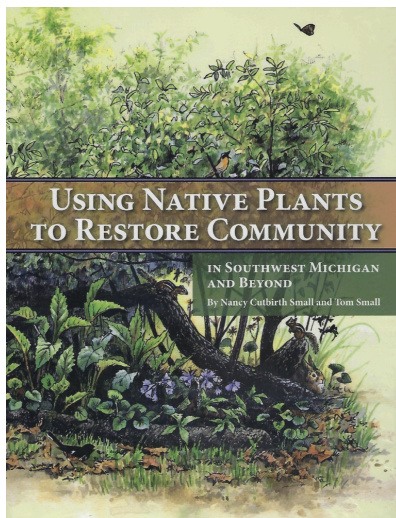
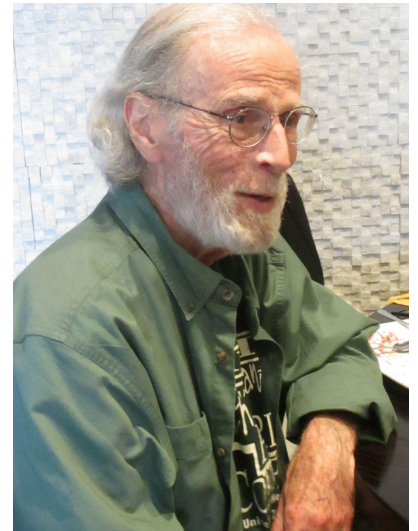
Beth Bradburn, Editor

April Program with Tom Small: Looking Back, Looking Forward, Listening to the Land

In his attempt to provide an overview of his 30 years with Wild Ones and his own 93 years on earth, Tom Small, co-founder of Kalamazoo Area Wild Ones, will first of all offer some of his many reasons for gratitude—for the people, for their vision, and for the land as teacher.

As Tom unfolds his understanding of what it means to “listen to the land,” he will focus on the quotation from Michel de Montaigne that he and his deceased wife Nancy (the other co-founder of KAWO) emblazoned on the 1999 leaflet advertising the new chapter: “Let us permit nature to have her way. She understands her business better than we do.”

Tom will discuss why it is important to learn the stories that the land tells us—the process that Robin Wall Kimmerer calls “Restoryation.” As he looks forward to the future, Tom will speak about the need for Wild Ones to broaden and deepen the original, founding vision. He will touch on implications of the new science of plant intelligence, problems with the language that we use in our work, and all that we must now include and welcome as members of the full community.



Tom will touch on the importance to the native-plant community of such movements as Land Back, Rights of Nature, Territories of Life, and Robin Kimmerer’s “Plant, Baby, Plant.” He will suggest that the native-plant movement needs to take greater care to avoid and resist the insidious legacies of colonialism and enclosure of the commons.

In brief, Tom will offer his thoughts about some of the wonderful strengths of the native-plant movement and Kalamazoo Area Wild Ones as well as the uncertainties and challenges we face now and in the future.

Wednesday, April 22, 6:30pm, at Portage District Library. Visit [the event web page](#).

Wild Columbine: A Lovely Late Spring/Early Summer Wildflower

by Ilse Gebhard

People ooh and aah over our native orchids but I think our wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*) is just as beautiful with its bright colors and unusual shape. Our orchids grow only in very specific, uncommon habitats, making them rare and not amenable to grow in our gardens. It is in our gardens that wild columbine shines.



Books call the wild columbine's color red but it is a light red, and under certain light conditions, it can have pink or orange hues. The flower has five red petals fading to pale yellow at the tip. The petals elongate to nectar-bearing spurs at the top. Alternating with the petals are five downward pointing petal-like red sepals. The flower is nodding, with the spurs pointing up and its bright yellow stamens hanging downward.

Wild columbine (R. Schipper)

The leaves of the wild columbine are divided into three parts, with each part again divided into three lobed leaflets, making them look very intricate. The leaves toward the tops of the stems are less divided. The shiny black seeds of the wild columbine develop inside elongated capsules, which, when ripe, pop open to disperse their seeds. Plants are so clever!

The flowers of the wild columbine are mostly pollinated by hummingbirds, whose long tongues can reach the spurs. Some flowers are pollinated by insects that forage for pollen. The anthers on the stamens release pollen, which is then carried by the pollinator to the stigmas of other flowers. There is evidence that some insects make small holes in the spurs of the flower and rob the flower of nectar without providing pollination services in return.

Wild columbine is the host plant for several insect species. A common sign of insect presence are winding white trails on the leaves. They are the feeding tunnel of the larval stage of the columbine leafminer (*Phytomyza miniscula*), a tiny fly. As native plant gardeners, we should not call it a pest, but welcome the biodiversity in our gardens.

Tunnels of the columbine leaf miner ([U-W Extension](#))



If you notice some defoliation of your wild columbine, look for tiny green larvae with green heads on the edges of the remaining leaves or on the stems. They blend in really well, and are the larvae of the columbine sawfly (*Pristiphora rufipes*), a non-native sawfly species. Sawflies are not really flies but wasp-like insects in the same order as wasps, bees and ants. The last larval



stage is only three-quarters of an inch long, but with the help of a magnifying glass you will be able to see the legs along the whole length of the larva with no break between the front three pairs of legs and the aft five or fewer pairs. (Such a break is commonly found on butterfly or moth caterpillars; note its absence in the photo at left.) I have to admit that since it is a non-native insect species, I've smushed a few of those tiny green larvae attacking one of my favorite wildflowers.

Columbine sawfly larva (U-W Extension)

If you find some leaves of your wild columbine that are rolled up, they might harbor the yellowish-green caterpillar of the columbine duskywing butterfly (*Erynnis lucilius*) that feeds on the leaves. Its black head (visible in the photo at right) can be used to distinguish it from the green head of the sawfly larva. *Michigan Butterflies and Skippers* by Mogens C. Nielson shows the butterfly having been observed in Allegan and St. Joseph counties but not in Kalamazoo.



Columbine duskywing caterpillar (USDA)

iNaturalist shows sixteen occurrences in Michigan but none for Kalamazoo. *Caterpillars in the Field and Garden: A Field Guide to the Butterfly Caterpillars of North America* by Thomas J. Allen, Jim P. Brock, and Jeffrey Glassberg states that if you live within its very limited range, plant wild columbine and hope, and I concur.

[See wild columbine growing conditions at MSU Extension.](#)

Volunteering with Plaster Creek Stewards

by Quyen Edwards

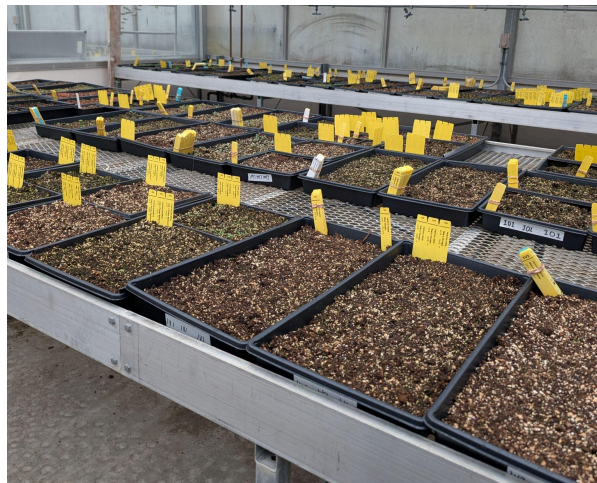


After months of gray skies and frozen ground, Cameron Lockwood and I were anxious to get our hands in the soil and see something green growing again. That's when we learned about an opportunity to volunteer with Plaster Creek Stewards—and finally get a little dirt under our fingernails.

Organized by Benjamin (Benji) Steenwyk, Program Assistant with Plaster Creek Stewards, the volunteer effort focuses on propagating native plants for restoration projects throughout the Plaster Creek watershed in Grand Rapids. In the spring and summer, individuals and groups are invited to work in the greenhouse, helping grow the thousands of plants needed to restore habitats across the region.

The greenhouse—partially heated for those still-chilly early spring days—offers a welcoming and practical space to work. Volunteers have access to a sink and bathrooms on site, making it easy to spend a few hours up-potting native seedlings. No experience is needed. Benji provided all the supplies and tips to get started.

Plaster Creek Stewards partners with the Calvin Ecosystem Preserve and Native Gardens, strengthening the connection between restoration work and community education. The scale of their effort is impressive: Benji shared that this year alone they are propagating more than 500 species of native plants. About 80% of these plants will go directly into restoration projects across the watershed, helping rebuild ecosystems and improve water quality. The remaining 20% will be sold to support and fund their ongoing work.



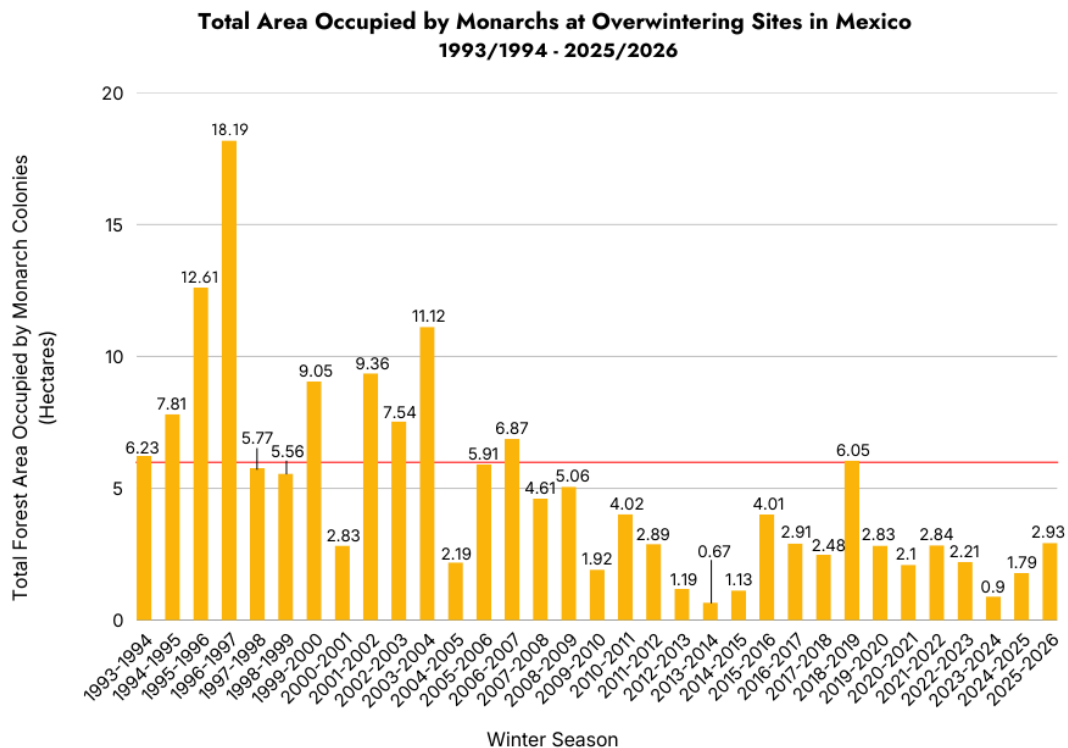
For those eager to welcome spring in a meaningful way, volunteering offers more than just time in the greenhouse. It's an opportunity to contribute to long-term environmental restoration, learn about native species, and become part of a community working toward healthier landscapes.

[Plaster Creek Stewards volunteer sign-up here.](#)

Eastern Monarch Overwintering Population: Increase from Last Year

from the [Monarch Joint Venture blog](#)

The eastern monarch butterfly population overwintering in Mexico's oyamel fir forests occupied 2.93 hectares during the 2025-2026 overwintering season, according to the latest survey released by the World Wildlife Fund–Telmex Telcel Foundation Alliance (WWF) and Mexico's National Commission of Protected Natural Areas (CONANP). This represents about a 64% increase compared to last year's estimate of 1.79 hectares.



Scientists estimate a minimum of 6 hectares of overwintering monarchs is needed to sustain the eastern populations (Semmens et al., 2016)

Data from 1994-2003 were collected by personnel of the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve (MBBR) of the National Commission of Protected Natural Areas (CONANP) in Mexico. Data from 2004-2026 were collected by the WWF-Telcel Alliance, in coordination with the Directorate of the MBBR. 2000-2001 number as reported by Garcia-Serrano et al. in 2004

Each winter, researchers survey monarchs while they cluster together at their overwintering sites in central Mexico. Rather than counting individual butterflies, scientists estimate population size by measuring the total area of trees occupied by monarch clusters. One hectare equals approximately 2.47 acres, or just over two American football fields. Although the number of monarchs per hectare varies by year and site, estimates suggest roughly 20–30 million monarchs per hectare, with a median estimate of 21.1 million ([Thogmartin et al., 2017](#)).

This winter, there were nine colonies of monarch butterflies – three in Michoacán and six in Estado de México. Five colonies were located inside of the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve (MBBR), occupying 5.61 acres of forest, and four were located outside of the MBBR, occupying 1.63 acres. The colony of Atlautla, outside of the monarch region, occupied 0.005 acres of forest.

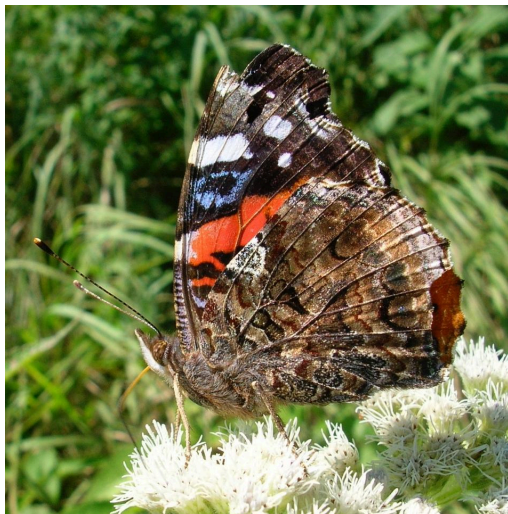
The eastern monarch population remains below levels considered necessary for long-term sustainability, although this year’s improvements are encouraging. Research suggests that at least 6 hectares of occupied overwintering habitat are needed to support a stable eastern migratory population ([Semmens et al., 2016](#)).

Year-to-year changes in monarch abundance reflect the complex and dynamic nature of their annual life cycle. Population size depends on conditions across the entire migratory range, including the availability of milkweed and nectar plants during the breeding season, weather conditions along the migration route, and habitat quality at overwintering sites. Favorable conditions in one stage of the cycle cannot fully offset challenges in another.

Conditions during the 2025 breeding season were more favorable for monarchs than in 2024, Dr. Karen Oberhauser wrote in an update for Journey North, a community science program of the Monarch Joint Venture. You can read her analysis of this year’s numbers [on Journey North’s website](#).

Regardless of short-term fluctuations, monarchs continue to face persistent stressors. Habitat loss across agricultural, urban, and transportation landscapes has reduced the availability of breeding and migratory resources. Extreme weather events, changing climate conditions, and pesticide exposure further affect survival and reproductive success. Monarchs are also affected by predators, parasites, and disease, which can vary regionally and annually.

Who Am I? A Native Fauna ID Quiz from Ilse Gebhard



Visit [iNaturalist](#) for the answer!

(Photo: R. Schipper)

Community Events of Interest

Saturday, April 11, 11am-1pm. Spring Salads Foraging Scavenger Hunt, Kalamazoo Nature Center. [Visit event web page.](#)

Sunday, April 12, 10am-12pm. Volunteer Workday, Kleinstuck Preserve. [Visit event web page.](#)

Thursday, April 16, 7-8:30pm. SWMLC event: 35 Years of Conserving Water Quality (Plus Frogs!), Hidden Pond Preserve. [Visit event web page.](#)

Thursday, April 16, 7pm. Pints and Native Plants, Brewery Outré. [Visit event web page.](#)

Sunday, April 19, 2-4pm. Planting Native Trees with Reforest Vine, Vine Neighborhood Association, 806 S. Westnedge. [Visit Earth Day 2026 web page](#) for this event.

Monday, April 20, 6:30-8pm. Wild Ones River City Program: “Tips and Tricks from a Wild Gardener,” Kroc Center, Grand Rapids. [Visit event web page.](#)

Monday, April 20, 7pm. Michigan Botanical Society Program: “Conservation of Imperiled Insects,” 2708 Wood Hall, Western Michigan University. [Visit event web page.](#)

Wednesday, April 22, 6:30-8pm. KAWO monthly program: “Looking Back, Looking Forward, Listening to the Land,” with Tom Small. Portage District Library. [Visit event web page.](#)

Saturday, April 25, 11am-5pm. Vine Neighborhood Cleanup and Celebration, Davis Street Park. [Visit event web page.](#)

Wednesday, April 29, 3-6pm. Spruce Tip Syrup Making, Tillers International. [Visit event web page.](#)

Thursday, April 30, 6-7:30pm. SWMLC event: Spring Wildflower Walk, Black River Preserve. [Visit event web page.](#)

SEEDLINGS appears mostly monthly and is edited by Beth Bradburn. Ilse Gebhard is Contributing Editor. The next regular issue will arrive in May. Submission deadline is April 20.

[Contact the editor](#)

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