

A Monarch & A Naturalist Find A Bond
Jennifer Bulava

Tuesday, September 18: I led a morning walk at Amico Island, one of our Burlington County Parks. Many butterflies were flying around, including monarchs. At the end of the walk, I noticed a female monarch flopping awkwardly on the ground. I picked her up on one finger and examined her. She had nothing visibly wrong with the wings, legs, or anything else I could see. Maybe it was temporary injury or distress? Whatever the problem, I knew I couldn't leave her sitting on the ground. The remnant rain bands from Hurricane Florence were due to reach us soon. So I took her with me in the car and drove back to my office at Smithville Park. If she shook off her problems and re-found her energy, I could always let her go tomorrow, I decided. She sat on the passenger seat the whole way back, and I brought her into my office. She sat on my hand for the rest of the afternoon. She moved from my finger to my wrist when I typed, but otherwise did not move, except to open and close her wings.



I took her home that evening but could not get her to drink from the flowers in the backyard. I put some sugar water on a shallow plate, but she fell over and flopped onto her back when she tried to approach the plate. Unfortunately, she fell into my sink, which held some dirty dishes and she splashed the dishwater on her wings (which had been perfect until this point). I put some sugar water on a cotton ball and she sipped from that. I put her on one of the house plants in the front window and she climbed up to the leaves and roosted for the night.

Wednesday, September 19: Just before leaving for work, I stretched out one finger to collect my friend from the plant. She hopped right on, although she refused to enter the jar I had chosen for safe transport. Instead, she sat on my hand and then climbed onto the top of the steering wheel as I drove to work. Every time we turned, she went for a ride on the wheel.



My co-workers were surprised to see I still had the monarch on my hand when I arrived. I showed her to everyone who hadn't seen her the day before, and then carried her on my hand as I drove to the Moorestown Library for my scheduled lecture. As I set up the AV equipment, she kept climbing from one place to another to stay on me, either on my hand, arms, or shoulders. When the audience arrived, they were surprised, to say the least. I explained the sequence of events of how I had found her, and then presented my program – with my friend on one shoulder the whole time.

As the lecture finished, I noticed several kids around in the library. I showed them my friend, and they *loved* seeing her up close! I drove back to Smithville, stopped by the butterfly garden, and put her on a butterfly bush. She quickly climbed around it, drinking from every flower she could reach. Many people were visiting the park, including a huge party right next to the garden, so as I moved her around to different flowers, I wound up giving an impromptu program about monarchs, migration, and related topics. Even the kids who had been on the playground walked over to listen and were amazed.



As I was heading back to the parking lot, another family arrived with four children. I showed them my friend and one boy about seven asked, “What’s wrong with her? Why can’t she fly?” “I don’t know,” I said. “She’s hurt somewhere.” He lowered his head to kiss her wings. “What are you doing?” his mom asked, surprised. “Kissing the butterfly’s wings,” he said, “to make them better.”

I brought my monarch back inside the office with me. She sat on my hand the rest of the afternoon. I drove home again with her on the steering wheel and repeated the ritual with the sugar water on the cotton ball before placing her on the house plant to roost for the night.

Thursday, September 20: I couldn’t get any sleep and stayed up all night. I felt awful. Eventually, I managed to get ready for work and lifted my friend off the plant. She was very lethargic too! I didn’t think she would make it through the day, honestly. I wasn’t sure I would either. What a team.

As I was getting stuff out of the car in the parking lot at Smithville, the monarch moved from my shoulder to my back, and then into my hair, just as a couple came by and asked what was open and where the trails were. While I answered them, their eyes drifted to the top of my head. “Thank you so much for the information. That sounds great. We just have one more question -- do you know you have a butterfly in your hair?” I smiled and said, “Yes, I know” -- as if it is totally normal to have a butterfly clinging there!

Finally the work day came to an end, and we drove back home again. My friend seemed to have perked up a bit, sitting with me the whole ride until I drove into my garage, when she jumped off. Only after grabbing a flashlight was I able to find her – under the driver’s seat. We both went to sleep early that night.

Friday September 21: Picked up my friend from the plant and drove to work a little early for my nature walk at Amico Island. As we arrived at Amico, she was holding so tightly to my finger that I found it hard to get my stuff together. I asked one of the attendees to hold her while I got my things situated, but when I put my hand next to hers, the monarch would not leave me! Eventually, I put her down on the car’s backseat so I could get organized. I told everyone there about my monarch friend and how I had found her on Tuesday, three days earlier, and had kept her with me ever since. Although she clearly would not be able to fly again, people smiled to see a monarch up so close and so “attached” to me. The monarch sat on my shoulder for a little while and then made her way up to my hat during the walk. What a great way to teach people of all ages about monarchs!



When we finally arrived at the southern end of the trail where the flowers are, I wanted to get her some nectar to sip. After the storm few flowers were left with their petals intact, but I found one tickseed sunflower remaining and she started drinking right away. I was just about to leave her there for a few minutes so I could look at other things with my group, but then I happened to spot a huge praying mantis with its front legs completely outstretched, ready to grab anything that landed on that one last flower! Yikes! That was a close one! I stood guard as my friend nectared and then took her with me back to the group. After a long walk with lots of monarchs and other butterflies, birds, dragonflies, and caterpillars, one of the attendees came over to tell me that it was obvious my monarch had chosen me for a reason.

Later back at the office, while I was standing in the kitchen with some of my co-workers, the monarch fell off my shoulder and landed on the floor, upside down. My co-worker Grace bent down and extended a finger to pick her up. The monarch climbed on and sat on her hand, then looked around, stared at Grace, turned around to find me, and jumped right onto my hand! If I didn't have the other witnesses, you might not believe me. Grace was open-mouthed in amazement – "Did you see what just happened!?" she exclaimed.

On the way home that evening I tried to put my monarch on the steering wheel but she wouldn't sit there. She sat on my leg instead. When I arrived in my driveway, I looked down to pick her up and saw a yellow drop of fluid on my pants where she was sitting. Not a good sign. Monarchs don't "pee." A quick Google search told me that any fluid from a butterfly or a caterpillar is bad. I gave her some sugar water on the cotton ball, and she just sat on the couch with me for a while. When it was time to go to sleep, I put her on her house plant again and she clung on.

Saturday September 22: I had to get up early to go to work for a Saturday morning birding program at Amico Island. When I went to the house plant, my monarch's wings were open, which was odd, because they had been closed each night while she roosted. When I lifted her off the stem her feet seemed to find a place on my hand, but she seemed to have lost her grip. In the car I put her down in the jar she had refused earlier, and this time she fell, limp, to the bottom. My friend must have died overnight. I wasn't completely surprised, but it was certainly sad.

I drove to work, thinking what I might do with her. I thought about taking her back to Amico Island where I had found her, where I was headed again anyway. But I decided to preserve her, so my memory of this special butterfly will live on. I think I'm going to put her in an acrylic block for display. Picking her up that first day gave her at least four extra days of life that brought a lot of joy to a lot of people in that short time. I may never have such a bond with an insect ever again, but it was a thrill to bridge the ordinary gap between human and butterfly for those days. I am grateful I had the opportunity.

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September 26, 2018