



*Unison Preservation Society*  
**NEWSLETTER**  
*Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside*

*Butterfly Weed photo courtesy of Dara Bailey.*

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## The Plight of the Monarch Butterfly and How You Can Help

*By Caroline Nash Helmy*

I recently attended a lecture given by Nicole Hamilton, the president of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, on the plight of the Monarch butterfly, and wanted to pass along what I learned to our community here in Unison.

Monarch butterfly populations are in grave trouble. Experts expected bad news last year, but when the actual numbers came in, they were truly awful. In 1996, a billion Monarchs overwintered in the mountains northwest of Mexico City. They covered 51 acres. In 2013, after years of damaging human activities, there were only 33 million Monarchs covering just 1.65 acres. That's a 97% decrease. At this rate of decline, if no action is taken, the wondrous Monarch migration will soon be lost forever. To understand this decline you need to look at the Monarch's life cycle.

The migration starts in central Mexico in late February when the butterflies that overwintered there become active. They make their way to Texas where they lay eggs on any milkweed they can find. These eggs will become the first generation of that year's migration. The resulting newly emerged butterflies will continue northward laying eggs on the milkweed plants that they find in fields, gardens and hedgerows along the way. These eggs will produce the next generation of Monarchs, which like their

parents and grandparents, will continue in a northerly direction. These first generations in each year's migration live for only four to six weeks. Some will continue in this incremental way until they reach Canada. The Monarchs we see here in Unison have made their way in successive generations up the eastern migration track of the United States.

The key to this entire northern migratory process is milkweed (*Asclepias* species). Milkweed is the only plant the Monarchs can use to lay their eggs. This is because milkweed contains a chemical that makes the Monarch toxic to predators, and nature has programmed Monarchs to take advantage of this defense. When the eggs hatch, the caterpillars consume the milkweed leaves ravenously for about two weeks as they progress through five growth stages known as instars. They finally become large enough to pupate, resulting in a beautiful green chrysalis bedecked in gold where, in ten to fourteen days, the fat caterpillar magically becomes the majestic butterfly.

But here's the truly amazing part: When the butterflies of the final generation emerge between late August and early October take to the air, they unerringly head southwest toward Mexico, a place they've never been.

The Monarchs leaving Unison—



**Above:** A Monarch butterfly feeds on nectar from Smooth Blue Aster for fuel before the long migration trip towards Mexico. Photo courtesy of Sally Snidow.

delicate creatures weighing less than a dime—face a 2000-mile trip, and what they need at this point in the migratory process is fuel, which they get from nectar plants such as asters and goldenrod. Whereas milkweed is the key to the trip north, nectar plants are the essential for the trip south.

This final generation lives for not just a few weeks as prior generations did, but for six to nine months. They join millions of other Monarchs in the Oyamel trees at an altitude of 10,000 feet in the Mexican mountains to overwinter until the following spring, when they become sexually mature and the process begins again. Scientists have yet to figure out how the Monarchs know to do all this.

The reason for the Monarchs' precipitous population decline is the nearly total disappearance of milkweed and nectar plants caused by a convergence of



**Above:** A Monarch Waystation is simply a garden that has both milkweed plants which Monarchs feed on as caterpillars, and nectar plants that they feed on as adults. **Right:** Milkweed is a necessary host plant for Monarch caterpillars. Photos courtesy of Nicole Hamilton. **Below Right:** A Monarch caterpillar is easy to identify with their vibrant yellow, black, and white stripes. Photo courtesy of Sally Snidow.

human-induced factors: habitat destruction in the U.S. and in Mexico, genetically modified crops that farmers plant road edge to road edge, chemical herbicides, severe drought and fire. And Monarchs are not the only species affected by these harmful practices—they are simply the species we recognize most easily. Native insects in general are in decline, as are the birds that depend on them to sustain themselves and their nestlings.

The good news is that it's not yet too late! A female Monarch can lay more than 300 eggs in her lifetime if there is milkweed available for her to use and nectar plants to fuel migrations. If given the chance, Monarchs will do their part to reverse the downward population trends.

We can help right here in the Unison area by planting Monarch Waystations. A Waystation is simply a garden that contains both milkweed and nectar plants that Monarchs, as well as other beneficial insects, feed on. A Waystation can be as small or as large as you want to make it. It can even be a container garden. By certifying your Monarch Waystation with Monarch Watch, you become part of a recognized network of people across the country that is helping bring back the Monarch. You can even obtain an attrac-

tive sign to designate your garden as a certified Monarch Waystation.

The Unison Preservation Society is hoping that if enough people in our

## 15 Native Host and Nectar Plants for Monarch Waystations

\***Swamp Milkweed**, *Asclepias incarnata*

\***Common Milkweed**, *Asclepias syriaca*

\***Butterfly Weed**, *Asclepias tuberosa*

**Blue Mistflower**, *Conoclinium coelestinum*

**Joe-Pye Weed**, (e.g. *Eupatoriadelphus fistulosus*, *Eupatorium maculatum*)

**Boneset**, *Eupatorium perfoliatum*

**New York Ironweed**, *Vernonia noveboracensis*

\*\***Goldenrod** (e.g. **Rough-stemmed Goldenrod**, *Solidago rugosa*; **Narrow-leaved Goldenrod**, *Solidago graminifolia*; **Blue-stemmed Goldenrod**, *Solidago caesia*; and **Early Goldenrod**, *Solidago juncea*)

\*\***Aster** (e.g. **New England Aster**, *Symphiotrichum novae angliae*; **Calico Aster**, *Symphiotrichum lateriflorum*; **Smooth Blue Aster**, *Aster laevis*; and **Heart-leaved Aster**, *Aster cordifolius*)

**Blazing Star**, *Liatris spicata*

**Wild Bergamot**, *Monarda fistulosa*

**Mountain Mint** (e.g. **Narrow-leaved Mountain Mint**, *Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*;

**Hoary Mountain Mint**, *Pycnanthemum incanum*)

**Coneflower** (e.g. **Blackeyed Susan**, *Rudbeckia hirta*; **Orange Coneflower**, *Rudbeckia fulgida*)

**Oxeye Sunflower**, *Heliopsis helianthoides* (also other *Helianthus* sp., and **Sneezeweed**, *Helenium autumnale*)

**Wingstem**, *Verbesina alternifolia*

\* Necessary host plant for caterpillars—if you don't have milkweed, you will not have Monarchs.

\*\* Key nectar (food) plant for adults. Goldenrods and Asters are critical—especially in the fall.



neighborhood plant and certify a Monarch Waystation, we, as a community, can make a meaningful difference in our environment. Our combined garden plots can merge into a locality that could provide real help to the Monarch along on its fantastic odyssey. Let's keep the magic alive here in Unison.

For more information on the Monarch, how you can plant and certify your Monarch Waystation as well as where to buy native pesticide-free seeds, please go to Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's site at: [www.loudounwildlife.org](http://www.loudounwildlife.org) and click on the "Bring Back the Monarch" icon.

For certification requirements, see [http://www.loudounwildlife.org/PDF\\_Files/Monarch\\_Waystation\\_Application\\_Loudoun\\_plants.pdf](http://www.loudounwildlife.org/PDF_Files/Monarch_Waystation_Application_Loudoun_plants.pdf). ■

Caroline would like to thank Nicole Hamilton and Sally Snidow of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for their help in writing and providing photos for this article, and for the work they are doing to bring back the Monarch.



# New Threat to “Open Space” Tax Assessments

By Howard Lewis

Many residents in the Unison neighborhood are able to significantly lower their real estate property taxes each year through Loudoun County’s land use assessment program. If you are one of these residents, take note of a recent vote of the Loudoun Board of Supervisors.

The county’s land use program allows for the deferral of real estate taxes on property that falls into one of four basic categories: agricultural, forestry, horticultural, or open space use. It is the last of these four categories—open space—that was the target of the Board’s vote on January 15 of this year.

The Board decided to continue a moratorium on accepting any new applications for open space use on parcels of more than five acres and less than 20 acres. Landowners around Unison, who currently have property of this size in open space use, should make sure they take all the steps necessary to stay there. If you fall out, you can’t get back in because reapplying for the program will be considered a new application, which means it will be rejected. However, the routine renewal of a parcel already in open space use will not be considered a new application and will be allowed to continue.<sup>1</sup>

Here is a short explanation of the land use assessment program and how we got to the January 15 vote. To begin with, it is important to recognize that all residents in the county, whether they live in Unison or Ashburn, pay full property taxes on their houses and the lawn areas around the houses. The land

use assessment program applies only to undeveloped property beyond people’s backyards, so to speak. For example, if you own a 15-acre farm, with your house and yard sitting on three of these acres, the program applies to the remaining 12 acres of undeveloped land. It is this land that is assessed and taxed at a significantly lower rate as long as it remains undeveloped. If at some point this property is developed, the owner must repay the county the full property taxes for the previous five years.

*“Just...to say because you live in the west you don’t have to pay taxes on the land, many of my constituents in Ashburn would love to not have to pay taxes on their land and their backyards and these kinds of things, but they don’t live there.”*

*- Supervisor Ralph Buona (R-Dulles)*

Many property owners find the open space category is the easiest to apply for under the land use application process. There are a variety of reasons for this. For example, to apply for agricultural use, you have to provide five years of production records as well as show a certain amount of income earned from the land. For forestry, a minimum of 20 acres is required. And you need to be running something like a greenhouse or nursery to qualify for horticultural

use. So, over the years, open space use has been an important entry point for many landowners into the county’s land use assessment program. However, in 2010, the previous Board of Supervisors placed a moratorium on new applications for open space use on parcels of more than five acres and less than 20 acres. This followed the 2006 rezoning changes in Loudoun that limited the possibilities of subdividing parcels of less than 20 acres.

When the 2010 vote was taken, the expectation was that the moratorium would be lifted once the county’s Agricultural District Advisory Committee (ADAC) came up with “qualifying criteria” for new open space applications. The ADAC did indeed develop such criteria that dealt with everything from land use management to wetlands protection to the carrying capacity of pastures. The ADAC presented these to the Board in January 2011, which adopted them. This should have set the stage for a vote to lift the moratorium on new open space applications, but no vote was ever taken. So, the moratorium remained in place. In December of last year, the Commissioner of Revenue pointed out to the Board that the qualifying criteria could not go into effect until the Board voted to lift the moratorium on new open space applications, which brings us to the debate and vote on January 15 of this year.

This is where the discussion becomes much more interesting for anyone living in the Unison area who is enrolled in Loudoun’s land use assessment pro-



Photo courtesy of Dara Bailey.

gram. Long story short, the Board voted 5-3-1 to continue the moratorium. This is obviously bad news for any of the smaller landowners around Unison who had hoped to submit new applications for open space use. Among other things, it may force people, who were expecting the moratorium to be lifted, to sell undeveloped lots because they find that it is just too expensive to continue to carry them. During the January 15 meeting, Supervisor Geary Higgins (R-Catoctin), who supported lifting the moratorium, said that this is exactly what happened to him. "When people can't afford to carry these properties... you will end up with a house on it. I will take a picture of the house on the property I could not carry at \$4,500 a year with two kids in college."

While the immediate impact of the Board's vote on January 15 may not be that earth shattering for most Unison landowners, it is the debate preceding this vote that maybe—maybe—signals trouble to come. To say the least, the debate showed a great deal of skepticism on the part of many Board members from eastern Loudoun about the open space program in particular and the entire issue of the tax breaks that western Loudoun receives under the

land use assessment program in general.

In his report to the Board, the Commissioner of Revenue estimated that there are approximately 2,500 parcels in Loudoun with more than five acres but less than 20 acres that are eligible for open space use. If the Board lifted the moratorium and all these parcels went into open space use, the Commissioner estimated that this could lower land assessment values on these 2,500 parcels by \$375 million dollars and reduce tax revenues to the County by an estimated \$4.5 million a year. These estimates clearly caught the attention of the Supervisors. But what shouldn't be forgotten here, and pretty much was on January 15, is that for every \$1 paid in taxes on farmland and land in open space use, the cost to the County of providing services to these areas is 79 cents. This is in sharp contrast to the tax/service ratio for residential land uses where for every \$1 collected in taxes, the County spends \$1.62 in providing services. (See page four of the fall UPS Newsletter for further details on this subject.)

Besides the estimates of lost tax revenue, the Board also focused on comparisons with the open space programs of nearby counties. Fairfax and Stafford counties do not have an open space

category in their land use program. Arlington has no land use program at all. Prince William requires a 20-acre minimum, Fauquier 25-acres. Frederick has a five-acre minimum, but that has to be in permanent open space easement. As one Supervisor observed, Loudoun has the "most generous" program around.

In looking at this issue over the longer term, it is important to realize here that the estimates cited above for the reduced land assessment values of \$375 million and lower tax revenues of \$4.5 million are really the proverbial tip of the iceberg. These figures would be much, much higher if all the property in the land use assessment program—both small and large farms—was taken into account.

Some of the Supervisors voting to keep the moratorium in place on January 15 were careful to say they supported Loudoun's rural economy. This is encouraging. Nonetheless, the question going forward is this: Will this Board, or future Boards, seeking additional tax revenue, begin to look at changes in Loudoun land use assessment program as it applies not only to open space but also to agriculture, forestry and horticultural use? Right now, no one knows the answer to this question.

However, in his comments on January 15, Supervisor Ralph Buona (R-Dulles), who led the effort to continue the moratorium, may have provided an indication of which way the wind is blowing: "Just... to say because you live in the west you don't have to pay taxes on the land, many of my constituents in Ashburn would love to not have to pay taxes on their land and their backyards and these kinds of things, but they don't live there." If the wind indeed is blowing against rural property owners in western Loudoun, the only assured way to take your land out of play is to put it in permanent open space easement (conservation easement) with an organization such as the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the Piedmont Environmental Council or the Land Trust of Virginia. ■

**Footnote:** 1 This statement is based on conversations with Loudoun County officials. Sometimes, however, the devil is in the details; so, landowners should verify with county officials and outside experts that this is indeed true for their particular properties.



**Above:** The familiar Virginia Outdoors Foundation sign reads "This property is forever protected by a conservation easement." Photo courtesy of Dara Bailey.



# Growing Up Unison

By Tara Connell

Dwight Grant knows Unison in ways only a little boy with a fishing pole and some night crawlers can know a place.

Grant, 36, the owner of The Grooming Room in Middleburg, spent his childhood summers at his family's home in Willisville. His grandmother, Ann Lee, is and was the matriarch of a huge extended family headquartered in that historic village around the bend from Unison. The children would spend their summers there.

"Sometimes there'd be 60 of us (cousins and neighborhood children) running up and down Willisville Road... We would be out playing when a pickup truck would pull up in the yard. All of us would run over. It would be the men, our uncles...

"When you had family coming to town, you went fishing. It was their first priority to take us fishing. Or we thought so. We would pack into that pickup truck... There would be four men on the bench seat and the rest of us in the back....

The first stop would be Bloomfield—to get supplies at Freeman's Store. "We would shoot cans off the fence with BB guns to see who could shoot better." Sometimes the journey involved "running all over Willisville looking for the perfect sapling" to make a fishing pole. Other times "we would bypass all that and go straight to Miss Iselin's. That pond."

Miss Iselin is now Dodie Vehr, and "That pond" is at Fiddler's Green Farm, just south of the village on Unison Road.

"We had permission to fish there. My earliest memories of fishing are on that pond with my family... I fished that pond from ages six to 19."

In smaller groups of cousins, friends or uncles, Grant would visit the old Unison Store on his way to the pond. As he puts it: "We would get in the truck and just hope they were going to stop at the Store. You couldn't ask. If you did, they said 'just ride.'"

If their wishes were fulfilled, the men would stop at the store for what Dwight



**Above:** Dwight Grant at The Grooming Room in Middleburg, Virginia.

Photo courtesy of Michael Zuckerman.

remembers as a special treat—BBQ Loaf, sharp cheddar cheese, and crackers. Each of the kids would get their own small bottle of coke. "You had to learn to drink it slow or it would run out while you were fishing," he said.

Asked to explain what a BBQ Loaf is, Grant said: "It's like Italian deli meat

processed into a loaf with BBQ sauce on it. Glorified baloney."

And then they would buy night crawlers at the store. "We would take them from the cooler, take the top off and watch them squirm. "If we didn't buy them at the store, we would have to dig our own, which was stressful.

## Raise Your Voice for our Roads



Brutal winter weather, too much traffic, and too little money for maintenance combined this year to cause unprecedented damage to the nearly 300 miles of unpaved rural roads in Loudoun County—including much of Unison.

Swamped with complaints, Blue Ridge Supervisor Janet Clark held

a community forum March 25 after announcing a priority list of 22 roads that were targeted for "improvement," which she has defined as "widening, straightening, drainage assistance paving, or grading." Issues of years of poor maintenance were acknowledged.

But, an outcry against paving as destroying our rural character and harmful to horses was met with almost equal cries for paving. Even tarring and chipping had some fans.

So, the battle to retain our historic roadways has begun. Voicing your opinion is critical. A list of the 22 roads can be seen at Clarke's web page <http://www.loudoun.gov/blueridge>, along with forms to express your opinion. Contact Clarke at **Janet.Clarke@loudoun.gov** to say how you feel. Complaints go to VDOT at 1-800-367-7623 (FOR-ROAD).

Photo of Greengarden Road courtesy of Mitch Diamond.

## Unison Preservation Society Newsletter

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### How to Support the Unison Preservation Society (UPS):

UPS depends upon contributions from people living in our community who want to preserve our historic village and the countryside surrounding it. Since the UPS is a not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation registered in Virginia, all contributions are tax deductible. Contributions should be made to the Unison Preservation Society and sent to the post office box listed above.



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### Ideas for Newsletter Articles:

We are particularly interested in gathering material about Unison for future UPS newsletters. This includes not only stories, photographs, family histories and diaries of long past Unison residents but also what is happening in today's Unison. If you have ideas for newsletter stories, please e-mail us at [unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org](mailto:unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org).



### Newsletter Design:

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Ours were always too skinny.”

Grant remembers wistfully the store he knew as a child (wood floors, dish powder, the hand-crank register, receipts written in longhand in the 1980s) and then as a teenager in the '90s. “The store had changed. As a kid, it was more of a general store. As a teenager, it had alcohol, cigarettes. There was no ice cream.” Grant admits his recollections may be tinged by what he was looking for at the time. “I don't know how we did it, but I remember scoring beer there twice.” Or a wine called Mad Dog 20/20, which they would mix with Sunny Delight and call it “purple passion.”

His family was living in St. Louis at the time. “We would go back to St. Louis, drink and get sick. That's what the Unison Store allowed us to do in high school.” He laughs.

With graduation from Loudoun Valley High School, Grant changed his ways. “I became a Christian—had a radical conversion—and got consumed as a barber.” His first jobs were away from Middleburg in Leesburg, Reston, and Clarke County. He believed he needed to be away from the slow pace of Middleburg to be creative and learn the latest styles. The arrival of his son changed all that. “I came back to Middleburg and it was a familiar place that was home. I didn't feel intimidated. It was like another room in my house.”

Today he is way too busy to go fishing. As the first full-time barber in Middleburg in more than 50 years, his shop is always booked with



*Grant's earliest fishing memories with his family are from the pond at Miss Iselin's, (Dodi Vehr) which is now Fiddler's Green Farm on Unison Road.*  
*Photos by Dara Bailey.*



customers of both sexes. People stop him on the street to ask advice about their hair. Business is booming—so much so that he really doesn't need to promote it.

Even so, Grant makes a point every year of donating a gift certificate to the Unison Heritage Day auction. “There are a lot of good causes,” he said, “But that one (Unison Preservation Society) was a no brainer because of my childhood. The older I get, the more I value the simplicity of how I was raised and the values I grew up with.

“And it would be great if the store came back with some BBQ Loaf.” ■

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