Milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.) are herbaceous perennial plants named for their milky sap. These plants occur in a wide range of habitats, including intact natural communities on roadsides and highly disturbed roadsides. As required host plants for monarch (*Danaus plexippus*) caterpillars, milkweeds play an essential role in the butterfly’s life cycle (see reverse). Vegetation management that allows milkweeds to persist can support monarchs. This guide can help you recognize the most common native species found on roadsides in your region.

The most common milkweeds in roadsides in Montana & Wyoming (in alphabetical order):

**Swamp milkweed (A. incarnata)**

**PLANT:** One to many upright branched stems; smooth or with short hairs.

**LEAVES:** Opposite; lance-shaped or narrow; with few short hairs.

**HABITAT:** Wet meadows, grasslands, ditches, edges of ponds, lakes, streams.

**SOILS:** Silty to loamy or clayey; moist–wet.

**BLOOM:** Jun–Jul; pink, light purple.

**Plains milkweed (A. pumila)**

**PLANT:** Upright, unbranched or branched stems; with fine hairs.

**LEAVES:** Alternate, may appear whorled; thin and narrow; dense on stems (bottlebrush appearance).

**HABITAT:** Prairies, plains, low hills.

**SOILS:** Rocky, sandy, gypseous, calcareous; dry.

**BLOOM:** Jun–Sep; white to pink.

**Showy milkweed (A. speciosa)**

**PLANT:** Stout upright, unbranched stems; hairy.

**LEAVES:** Opposite; oval-shaped; hairy.

**HABITAT:** Grasslands, meadows, fields, disturbed areas, edges of rivers, ponds.

**SOILS:** Sandy to loamy; dry–moist.

**BLOOM:** May–Aug; pink and cream or white; flowers are the largest of North American species.

**Whorled milkweed (A. verticillata)**

**PLANT:** One to several upright, usually unbranched stems; sparsely hairy.

**LEAVES:** Whorled; narrow to thread-like; leaf margins rolled downward; smooth or with short hairs.

**HABITAT:** Grasslands, open woodlands, badlands, plains.

**SOILS:** Sandy, rocky, clayey; dry–mesic.

**BLOOM:** Jun–Sep; white to greenish.

(Continued on next page.)
The Monarch Butterfly Life Cycle

1. Egg
   - 3–5 days

2. Larva
   - 10–14 days
   - Caterpillar grows by molting 5 instars

3. Chrysalis
   - 10–14 days

4. Adult
   - 2–5 weeks (breeding generations);
   - 6–9 months (overwintering generation)

Additional Resources:
- For more information on monarchs and roadsides, including monitoring, visit: tinyurl.com/MJV-Monarchs-Roadsides
- Western Monarch Milkweed Mapper: www.monarchmilkweedmapper.org
- Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation: xerces.org
- Monarch Joint Venture: monarchjointventure.org


Maps & Distribution Data:
These profiles are derived from regional floras and field guides and Woodson’s The North American Species of Asclepias (1954). Most common species are abundant across both states and are found in roadsides. Less common species might not occur in both states, have a limited distribution across a state, or may be less common in roadsides. Additional species may be uncommon in roadsides, have a small distribution in a state, or are uncommon or rare. The range maps indicate counties where species have been observed (but may be incomplete), and were created by USDA-NRCS using the latest data from the USDA’s PLANTS database (https://plants.sc.egov.usda.gov).

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