

# Meadows

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Rock Creek Park  
Washington, DC

*Swallowtail butterfly  
on thistle flower.*

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## Meadows Create Diversity

Created by Congress in 1890, Rock Creek Park protects and preserves nearly 3,000 acres of natural and cultural resources within the District of Columbia. Forest occupies most of the park, along with picnic groves, parking lots, roads, and mowed lawn. Open meadows also dot the landscape. In 1977 the National Park Service established these meadows to increase natural diversity.

Today, the meadows provide a transition between wooded environments and areas of open mowed grass. This “edge habitat” provides valuable refuge for insects, birds, reptiles, and small mammals. Most of the 11 meadows in Rock Creek Park are small and scattered. The meadow at the intersection of Military Road and Glover Road covers four acres and is the largest in the park.

# A Light Hand Equals Healthy Habitats

Rock Creek Park's meadows typically grow undisturbed. However, if left entirely alone, they eventually would revert to woods. In early spring, National Park Service staff cut dead stalks and woody sprouts in the meadows. Throughout the growing season, workers also control invasive, non-native plants. These plants come to the meadows from many different parts of the world. In the open, sunny conditions present in meadows, and without the predators or other controls found in their places of origin, these non-native plants can compete against the native plants. Without some management of the invasive plants, park meadow habitats could be lost.

Park meadows are diverse places. Naturalists have identified more than 400 species of sun-loving plants in these habitats. Meadows provide birds with places to nest and perch, and habitat to support butterfly life cycles. Pollinators and insects, attracted by meadow grasses and flowers, support small mammals scurrying along the ground.

For most casual observers, the meadows look like areas of high grass that need mowing. But to those who watch carefully, the meadows are alive with activity. With patient observation, visitors who stand with one foot on the mowed lawn and the other

in a meadow may notice the contrast. One's attention may move from stirring leaves to the sound of whirring wings or from fragrant flowers to tall grasses, only to pause at the rustle of a small creature's passage.

Enjoy the meadow's plants and animals as you find them, but please leave them undisturbed for others to enjoy. No collecting is allowed. Pets must be leashed at all times on National Park Service land. Visitors and pets should stay on designated trails at all times.

*American goldfinch.*

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## American Goldfinch

In spring, a brilliant yellow and shiny-black bird may be seen flying above Rock Creek meadows. This is the American goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*). The male possesses bright yellow feathers used to attract a mate. The preferred habitat of these seed-eating birds is open meadows. American goldfinches nest from late June through July, one of the latest nesting periods for birds in the Washington, DC area. Such timing is believed to coincide with the seed production of milkweed, thistle, and other plants that goldfinches feed their young.

These birds are active, acrobatic flyers that balance on the seed heads of plants and then pluck off the seeds. This dexterity enables the goldfinch to take advantage of food sources relatively inaccessible to potential competitors, increasing its chances of survival.

*Rabbit in the meadow.*

NPS

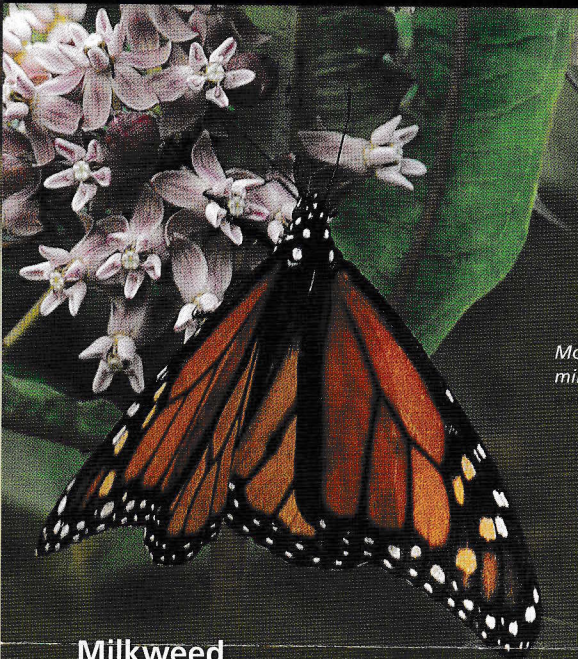


*Tawny-edged skipper on thistle.*

NPS



# Teeming with Life



*Monarch butterfly on milkweed blossoms.*

## Milkweed

This tall, perennial plant (*Asclepias syriaca*) grows in Rock Creek Park's meadows to a height of nearly four feet. In late June through early July, it produces a sweet-smelling, mauve and pink flower. When pollinated, the flower becomes a thick-walled seedpod by August and September. The pods eventually dry out and crack open to reveal hundreds of little brown seeds, each attached to its own silky

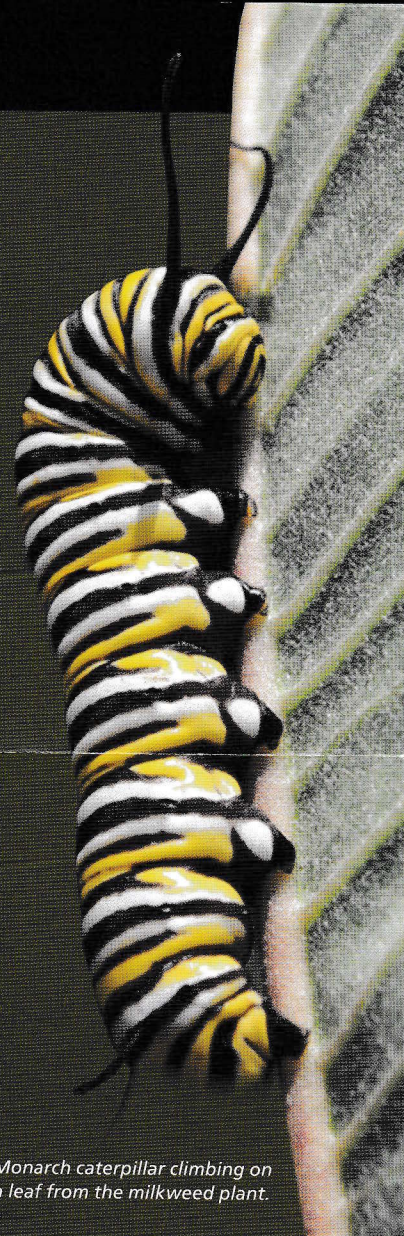
parachute. On windy November days, thousands of these white, spidery-appearing parachutes dot the sky as they carry seeds off to other places.

The milkweed flower is a highly sought-after nectar source for many butterfly species. However, the plant is extremely important to one species in particular: the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*). Milkweed is the

only plant monarch caterpillars can eat. Adult female monarchs lay tiny eggs on the underside of the milkweed leaves. In just over a month, the eggs hatch, caterpillars grow and pupate, and adults emerge. There may be three different generations between March and August.

Milkweed also protects the butterfly from predators. The plant contains a chemical that caterpillars consume, which is transferred to the adult monarchs. This chemical makes the butterfly toxic and bitter-tasting to birds and other predators.

The monarch butterfly is famous for making a 3,000-mile fall migration to wintering grounds in central Mexico and back. This journey takes up to two months each way and may span three to four butterfly life cycles by the following spring.



*Monarch caterpillar climbing on a leaf from the milkweed plant.*

## Insects

Besides monarch butterflies, many other insects can be found in Rock Creek meadows. With careful observation, grasshoppers, crickets, bees, and spiders all can be spotted

small mammals, bats, and birds. A black and yellow garden spider (*Argiope aurantia*) may spin its circular web between tall plants in early evening to catch flying insects. A host of

## Small Mammals

White-footed mice (*Peromyscus leucopus*) use meadows for food, relying on numerous seeds produced by grasses and other plants. Another small mammal found in the

metabolism, the shrew may eat as much as three times its body weight per day to survive.

As dusk settles on the meadows, an animal may be

In the meadows. Numerous species of butterflies and moths frequent the meadows at different times of the year when various plants are flowering. This diversity of insect species makes meadows an attractive feeding area for

butterflies sip nectar from meadow flowers, floating from aster to milkweed to clover.

Bumblebees and honeybees fly busily from flower to flower, collecting pollen to take back to the hive.

meadows is the short-tailed shrew (*Blarina brevicauda*), which has slate-colored fur and tiny eyes. The shrew is difficult to see because it moves constantly along the ground under leaf litter in search of insects, snails, and beetles. Because of its high

seen flying swiftly and changing directions abruptly just above the meadow plants. These are bats, feeding on insects. Bats are experts at catching insects in flight. Without them, people would encounter far more mosquitoes and gnats.

## Meadow Locations

### Northwest

1. Battery Kemble Park. East of Chain Bridge Road, uphill from the main parking lot.
2. Sherrill Drive. Flanking the bridge over Rock Creek, at the intersection with Beach Drive.
3. Military Field. South of Military Road, between 27th Street and Glover Road.
4. Morrow Drive. Bounded by Madison Street and Morrow Drive, near 16th Street.
5. Picnic Grove 17. Along the edge of the woods, east of Glover Road, north of the intersection with Ross Drive.
6. Park Road. About 500 feet east of Beach Drive at Peirce Mill, northeast of tennis courts.
7. Bluff Bridge. Downstream 0.3 miles from Peirce Mill, west of footbridge over creek.

### Northeast

8. Fort Slocum. Along the edge of the woods, along Kansas Avenue, Madison Drive, to Third Street.
9. Fort Totten Metro. Large open area west of First Place, north of Metro station.
10. Sargent Road. East of Sargent Road, between Gallatin and Galloway streets.
11. Barnard Hill. West of Eastern Avenue, north of Bunker Hill Road.

Meadows occupy six areas in the Rock Creek watershed and five locations under park management in the Civil War Defenses of Washington, including Battery Kemble Park. The park's Nature Center offers checklists of park plants and birds, as well as a list of butterflies found in the meadows.

### More Information

Rock Creek Park  
3545 Williamsburg Lane, NW  
Washington, DC 20008  
202-895-6070  
[www.nps.gov/rocr](http://www.nps.gov/rocr)

### Visit

Rock Creek Park Nature Center  
5200 Glover Road, NW  
Washington, DC 20015  
[www.nps.gov/rocr](http://www.nps.gov/rocr)  
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