



Threatened and Endangered Species

Mead's Milkweed (*Asclepias meadii*)

Mead's milkweed is a federally threatened species. Threatened species are animals and plants that are likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future.

Endangered species are animals and plants that are in danger of becoming extinct. Identifying, protecting, and restoring endangered and threatened species is the primary objective of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's endangered species program.



Mead's milkweed was extirpated from northern Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin.

What is Mead's milkweed?

Mead's milkweed is a long-lived, tallgrass prairie herb belonging to the milkweed family (Asclepiadaceae).



Photo by Mike Redmer

Appearance – Mead's milkweed has a single slender unbranched stalk, 8 to 16 inches high, without hairs but with a whitish waxy covering. The hairless leaves are opposite, broadly ovate, 2 to 3 inches long, 3/8 to 2 inches wide, also with a whitish waxy covering. A solitary umbel (an umbrella-like cluster of flowers) at the top of the stalk has 6 to 15 greenish, cream-colored flowers.

Habitat Requirements – This milkweed requires moderately wet (mesic) to moderately dry (dry mesic) upland tallgrass prairie or glade/barren habitat characterized by vegetation adapted for drought and fire. It persists in stable late-successional prairie.

Life History – Mead's milkweed is a long-lived perennial herb. Studies suggest that it may take 15 years or more to mature from a germinating seed to a flowering plant. After maturing, it can persist indefinitely.

Reproduction – Mead's milkweed flowers as early as late May in the south through mid to late June in the north. It is pollinated by small bumblebees and miner bees. Young green fruit pods appear by late June and reach their maximum length of 1.5 to 4 inches by late August or early September. The hairy seeds within these pods mature by mid-October. Mead's milkweed also spreads vegetatively through underground stems called rhizomes, which strike new roots and stems from their nodes.

What is Mead's milkweed? (cont'd.)

Distribution and Range – This milkweed formerly occurred throughout the eastern tallgrass prairie region of the central United States, from Kansas through Missouri and Illinois and north to southern Iowa and northwest Indiana. It currently is known from 171 sites in 34 counties in eastern Kansas, Missouri, south-central Iowa, and southern Illinois.

Why is the Mead's milkweed threatened?

Habitat Loss – Mead's milkweed is threatened by the destruction and alteration of tallgrass prairie due to farming along with residential and commercial development. Sites known to have Mead's milkweed were destroyed by plowing and land development.

Habitat Fragmentation – Smaller habitat fragments support lower numbers of plants, and thus, fragmentation may hasten or explain the loss of genetic diversity and failure of this plant to sexually reproduce. Populations with low numbers may not attract sufficient numbers or types of pollinators.

Hay Mowing - Most Kansas and Missouri populations occur in prairie hay fields where mowing typically takes place in late June to early July, which removes immature Mead's milkweed fruits and prevents completion of the plant's life cycle.

What is being done to prevent extinction of Mead's milkweed?

Listing – Mead's milkweed was added to the U.S. list of Endangered and Threatened Species on September 1, 1988.

Recovery – A recovery plan* was published on September 16, 2003 which included strategies to increase the numbers and distribution of this plant.

Recovery Plan Strategies – Protect and manage habitat, increase size and number of populations, conduct field surveys for new populations or potential habitat for introduction, conduct research, maintain existing populations, promote public understanding, and review progress.

Reintroductions - Reintroductions are taking place in northern Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin. We do not know, yet, if they are successful.

What can I do to help prevent the extinction of species?

Learn – Learn more about the Mead's milkweed and other endangered and threatened species. Understand how the destruction of habitat leads to loss of endangered and threatened species and our nation's plant and animal diversity. Tell others about what you have learned.

Join – Join a conservation group; many have local chapters. Or volunteer at a local nature center, zoo, or wildlife refuge.

Protect - Protect native plants by avoiding non-native invasives, like dame's rocket, in your yard and garden. Remove non-natives, like buckthorn and honeysuckle, that invade your landscaping.

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* The Mead's Milkweed Recovery Plan and additional species information can be found at <http://midwest.fws.gov/endangered>.