

by Mary Hoff
illustrations by Michael Schmidt

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State symbols help show how much fish, trees, and other natural resources mean to Minnesotans.
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How is a monarch butterfly like an agate? Both are Minnesota natural resources. And both are official Minnesota state symbols. Minnesota has 14 official state symbols. Eight are natural resources—things found in nature that enrich our lives. The men and women who represent us in the Minnesota Legislature decided to call these resources “state symbols” because they help make our state unique. The showy lady’s-slipper, red pine, common loon, walleye, Lake Superior agate, wild rice, morel mushroom, and monarch butterfly can help us answer people from other places when they ask, “What is Minnesota like? What’s special about your state?”

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Mirrors of Minnesota

**SHOWY OR
PINK-AND-WHITE
LADY'S-SLIPPER**
(*Cypripedium reginae*)



The Minnesota state flower has two names: the showy lady's-slipper and the pink-and-white lady's-slipper. It is one of 45 orchid species known to be native to Minnesota. It was probably named state flower because it is so big and beautiful.

In Minnesota the showy lady's-slipper blooms in sunny, damp areas such as swamps and bogs, mostly in the northeastern two-thirds of the state. Usually 1 to 2 feet tall, it produces frilly, pink-and-white blooms in June or July.

A healthy showy lady's-slipper can produce a half million seeds in a single year. It will grow 14 to 20 years before it blooms for the first time. It can live to be 100 years old.

The showy lady's-slipper gets its name from the fact that the bloom looks a little like a woman's slipper. Its scientific name, *Cypripedium*, means shoe of Venus.

In 1893 the Minnesota Legislature chose to make a lady's-slipper the state flower. However, the legislators accidentally designated a different species, *Cypripedium calceolus*. In 1902 the Legislature corrected the mistake.

Showy lady's-slipper blossoms form a ring around the state seal in the middle of the Minnesota flag.

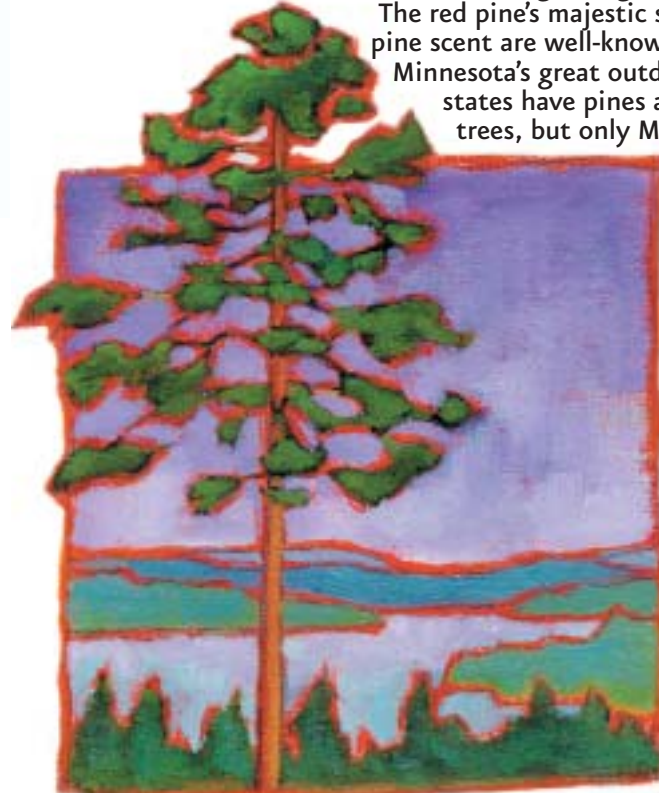
When people think of the north woods, they often think of towering pines such as the red pine—Minnesota's state tree.

Red pines, also known as Norway pines, grow mainly in the northern two-thirds of the state. Their needles are about 5 inches long and arranged in clusters of two. When 15 to 25 years old, red pines begin to produce cones about the size and shape of a chicken egg. The cones ripen in mid-September but don't fall to the ground until the next spring or summer. Each cone contains tiny seeds that scatter in the wind.

You can recognize a red pine by its orange-red bark, which forms flat flakes that look sort of like jigsaw puzzle pieces. Minnesota's tallest red pine, which grows in Itasca State Park, is 126 feet tall and is estimated to be more than 200 years old.

In 1953 Minnesota legislators chose the red pine as a state symbol in recognition of its important role in our state's history, economy, and environment. More than a century ago, loggers cut red pines and sent logs of this strong wood downriver to build houses and businesses in fast-growing cities and towns.

The red pine's majestic shape and rich pine scent are well-known reminders of Minnesota's great outdoors. Several states have pines as their state trees, but only Minnesota has the red pine as its official state symbol.



RED PINE
(*Pinus resinosa*)

This big black-and-white bird has bright red eyes, a long bill, and a black head that glows green in the sunlight. It lives on lakes statewide. Loons are bigger than ducks, growing up to 3 feet long and weighing up to 12 pounds.

A loon is an excellent swimmer and diver, chasing and eating fish below water. It has a hard time walking on land because its feet are far back on its body.

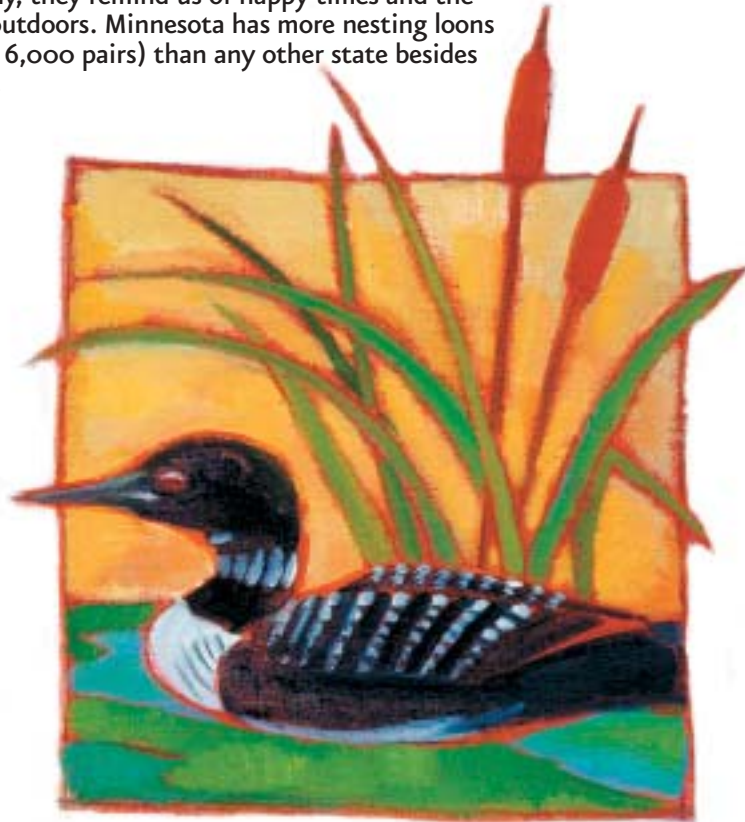
Loons are known for their loud, unusual calls. In fact, some people think the name *loon* comes from an Old Norse word, *lomr*, which means a moaning sound. Loons have four kinds of calls: tremolo, wail, hoot, and yodel.

Loons build nests at the water's edge in late May or early June. The female lays one or two eggs, which hatch after about a month. Each parent sometimes carries the chicks on its back as it swims.

In the fall, Minnesota's common loons replace their summer plumage with gray and white feathers. Then they fly to the ocean coasts of the southeastern United States for winter.

The common loon became our official state bird in 1961. Because loons live in places where we relax and play, they remind us of happy times and the great outdoors. Minnesota has more nesting loons (about 6,000 pairs) than any other state besides Alaska.

COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*)



WALLEYE (*Stizostedion vitreum*)



Walleyes live in cool, clear, deep lakes. They are a favorite fish of many anglers because they taste good and are a challenge to catch. Minnesotans harvest about 4 million pounds of walleyes each year. The state record walleye, caught in 1979 from Seagull River at Saganaga Lake in Cook County, weighed 17 pounds, 8 ounces.

The walleye is the largest member of the perch family in the United States. Its skin is green, gray, and gold with white on the bottom end of its tail. The walleye gets its name from its glassy eyes, which make it look "walleyed"—an old-fashioned name for blind.

Walleyes eat insects and other invertebrates (animals without backbones) while small, and mainly fish when they get older. Walleyes often travel in groups called schools.

Named Minnesota's state fish in 1965, the walleye earned that title because this popular fish is found all around the state. The Department of Natural Resources releases (stocks) more than 2 million young walleyes into lakes each year. This stocking, along with the rules that limit how many fish a person may catch and keep, helps ensure lakes will have plenty of walleyes in the years ahead.

The morel is a kind of fungus found in the soil. Most of the time it looks like tiny threads, called *mycelia*. But when the fungus gets ready to reproduce, it sends up fruiting bodies—better known as mushrooms. Morels occur in all kinds of forests. Good places to find morel mushrooms are near dead elm and cottonwood trees and in old apple orchards.

Morel mushrooms are 2 to 6 inches tall and wrinkled-looking. Their long, pitted caps are hollow inside.

The state mushroom species is the golden-colored *Morchella esculenta*. Another kind of morel that grows in Minnesota is the black *Morchella angusticeps*.

Many people consider morels a rare and wonderful taste treat. Mushroom hunters search for morels in late spring—when oak leaves are the size of a mouse’s ears—and take them home to cook. Never eat any mushroom you find outdoors unless an expert tells you it’s OK because some wild mushrooms are so poisonous that they will kill you if you eat them.

The morel became Minnesota’s state mushroom in 1984. At the time, no other state had an official fungus. It was a Minnesota first!

MOREL
(*Morchella esculenta*)



Like flowers on wings, monarch butterflies flit above open fields on warm summer days. Bright orange and black, they are among the biggest butterflies in Minnesota.

Monarchs lay their eggs on milkweed plants. After they hatch, the larvae (called *caterpillars*) eat milkweed leaves. The leaves contain a substance that makes the larvae taste bad. This taste helps protect them from hungry birds.

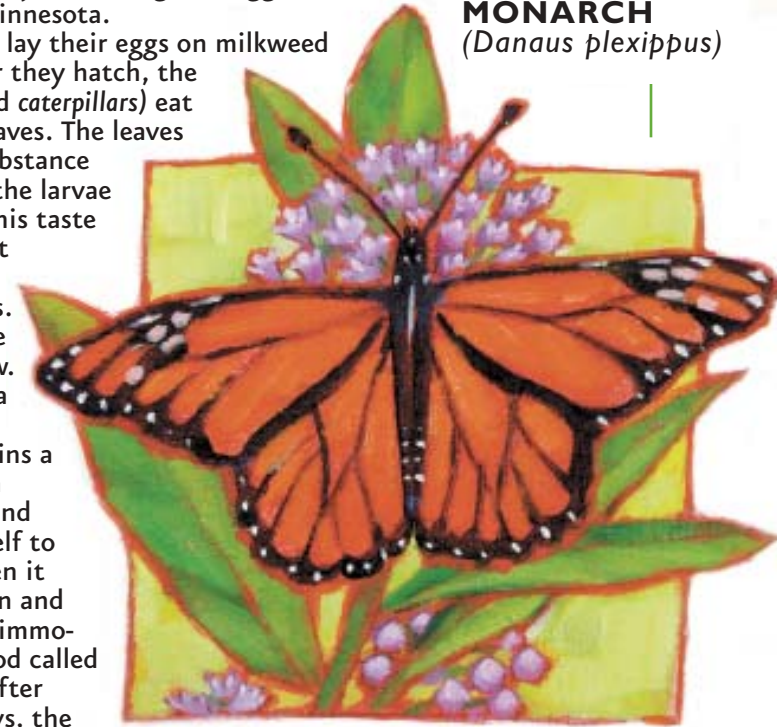
The larvae eat and grow. When a larva finally stops eating, it spins a silk pad on a plant stem and attaches itself to the pad. Then it sheds its skin and becomes an immobile green pod called a *chrysalis*. After about 12 days, the chrysalis breaks open and a butterfly emerges.

Some people think the monarch gets its name from the thin, black-and-gold line at the top of the chrysalis. This line resembles crowns worn by human monarchs (kings and queens).

In fall Minnesota monarchs migrate south to Mexico. There they gather with tens of millions of other monarchs in a deep forest in the mountains. Clinging to fir trees, they await the arrival of spring. In March they begin to head north again. Their eggs turn into adults that continue the journey until at last, after three or four generations, monarchs appear again in Minnesota in May.

The monarch was named Minnesota’s state butterfly in 2000. It is also the state insect or butterfly for Alabama, Idaho, Illinois, Texas, Vermont, and West Virginia.

MONARCH
(*Danaus plexippus*)



WILD RICE (*Zizania palustris*)

This grass grows best in shallow, clear water in lakes and rivers in central and northern Minnesota. Wild rice beds shelter insects and other creatures.

In spring wild rice seeds sprout in lake and river bottoms. Leaves poke above water in June, float on the surface, and continue to grow. In summer the plant forms a head of tiny maroon and gold flowers on a stiff stem above water. The flowers develop into long, dark, rice-shaped seeds in August and September. Ducks and other waterfowl eat the seeds to gather energy for their long flight south in autumn.

The Ojibwe name for wild rice is *manomin*, meaning *good berry*. Long before European settlers arrived in Minnesota, American Indians gathered thousands of pounds of wild rice seeds to eat each year. Canoeing through grassy patches, they bent stalks over the canoe and gently tapped ripe seeds off the stems with special sticks. They made sure to let some seeds fall into the water so more plants would grow the next year. Many American Indians and other people still harvest wild rice the traditional way.

Wild rice was named Minnesota's state grain in 1977.



The Lake Superior agate is by far the most ancient of our state symbols.

Agates formed in lava pouring from cracks in the earth that developed in the Lake Superior area more than a billion years ago. As the boiling hot lava cooled, gas bubbles hardened into spherical holes in rocks. Later, mineralized water seeped into the bubble holes and deposited a coat after coat of quartz, forming layered agates. About 10,000 to 15,000 years ago, glaciers moved southward through the area and spread these hard, roundish rocks far and wide.

You can find agates in gravel beaches and pits around much of Minnesota—wherever the glacier carried them.

The layers in the Lake Superior agates are made of a quartz material called *chalcedony*. The agates contain iron and are often rusty orange, red, and yellow.

Named the state gemstone in 1969, the Lake Superior agate represents many parts of Minnesota's past: volcanoes that laid down the hard rock of Superior's North Shore, glaciers that shaped hills and valleys, and iron that provided jobs

for miners and supplied raw materials for cars and steel products. ♻️



LAKE SUPERIOR AGATE

More Symbols

STATE DRINK: milk, 1984

STATE FLAG: 1893, modified 1957

STATE MUFFIN: blueberry muffin, 1988

STATE PHOTO: *Grace*, 2002

STATE SEAL: 1861, modified 1983

STATE SONG: *Hail! Minnesota*, 1945

www.dnr.state.mn.us/snapshots/plants/showladysslipper.html
www.dnr.state.mn.us/snapshots/plants/redpine.html
www.dnr.state.mn.us/snapshots/birds/commonloon.html
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