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Monarchs wing their way back to Santa Cruz

BY ALISSA POH

SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

SANTA CRUZ — Orange and black are hot colors at Natural Bridges State Beach, but not in any spooky sense. The monarch butterflies are back in town.

People are once again flocking to the park to marvel at these brilliantly hued insects that migrate here from the Western Rockies each winter. School tours provide not only some of the youngest, but also the most fascinated, visitors a chance to get caught up in butterfly mania.

"Butterfly ears, everyone," volunteer Jane Sheffer says repeatedly to each group of eager schoolchildren, getting them to hush up and listen by following her lead and acting like they have insect antennae.

That's how butterflies hear — not with actual ears, but through vibration-sensing antennae. So children are encouraged to walk quietly and point at any butterflies they spot, rather than shriek excitedly, as vibrations can disturb the insects.

"These are tiny little insects, and they've never made this journey before," Sheffer explained to one group of children. "They migrate to the coast for the winter, mate here, head further inland, lay eggs and die"

According to Barbara Cooksey, an interpretive specialist at the park, butterflies hatched in the spring or summer live for approximately one month, since they are continuing the journey further inland, which uses a lot of energy. Those hatched in the fall, however, live for six to nine months, and they make the long migration every year. Sheffer describes them as the "over-wintering generation"

"I'd say these are probably the great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren of the migrating generation from the previous winter," she said.

It isn't clear how this particular generation of monarchs knows how, when and where to migrate annually, but they may get their cues from day length and colder weather. Over the winter, the butterflies cluster in the park's eucalyptus grove, where they mostly remain in a semi-dormant state resembling hibernation, flying around in search of nectar and food when the temperature is above 55. Below this temperature, monarchs dislodged from a cluster may fall victim to other insects or field mice, as they can't fly.

"Eucalyptus trees have long tendrils that kind of hang down, and [the butterflies] cluster there. This makes the force of blowing winds less harsh, because [the tendrils] sway with the wind," Sheffer said.

Dan Johnson, a park aide working at the entrance kiosk, says that so far about 1,000 monarchs have fluttered their way back to the park. That number is expected to go up to 10,000 by late November. This may sound like a lot of butterflies, but 15 years ago, said Cooksey, the count peaked at 150,000.

"They'd hang to the ground in huge clusters, but I've never seen this since working here. I've only seen pictures," Johnson said.

One main reason for this decrease in monarch numbers is that the amount of milkweed has dropped substantially.

"The only plant that a female monarch will lay her eggs on is milkweed," Sheffer said. "This provides toxins for the developing caterpillar and subsequent adult butterfly to be poisonous to predators"

Monarch numbers are estimated from the density and size of a given cluster, and teams of researchers and volunteers help with this task each year. There also will be a "Thanksgiving count" the Saturday before Thanksgiving, when butterfly numbers are at their peak.

"It's a car-pool system, and they go to different locations all around Santa Cruz that day," said Cooksey.

In addition to school tours, those interested in learning more about these insects can join one of the monarch butterfly tours held at the park every weekend through February. For those concerned about the drop in monarch numbers, there is a way to help.

"They can plant milkweed and other nectaring plants in their gardens, to help the monarchs," Cooksey said. The butterflies "need the habitat, since there are fewer monarchs due to habitat loss"

Contact Alissa Poh at jcopeland@santacruzsentinel.com.

If You Go

WHAT: Monarch butterfly tours.

WHEN: Saturdays and Sundays at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. through February.

WHERE: Natural Bridges State Beach.

information: Monarch migration is variable, call

423-4609 to find out population particulars.

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