

Monarchs

Conservation Up in the Air

Monarchs have captured the imagination of the American public. For perhaps the majority of Americans, the only butterfly name they know is "Monarch." There are upsides and downsides to this situation. The upside is that many people at least know of one butterfly species and many have some interest in saving it. The downside is that other butterflies may be ignored. If a butterfly is large and its color is vaguely toward the red end of the spectrum, the butterfly must be a Monarch. Thus, tiger swallowtails become Monarchs. If the flying wings aren't large or vaguely orange, they must not be a butterfly. Thus, Cabbage Whites become moths.

Monarchs have become ubiquitous in public discourse because they are ubiquitous in the landscape, being one of the few butterfly species found throughout the United States and southern Canada, because they are large, and because in good years their aggregations during the fall migration can be extremely impressive. In addition, although quite a few butterfly species, including Cloudless Sulphurs, Painted Ladies, Mourning Cloaks and Queens, undertake classical migrations, north in the spring and south in the fall, only for Monarchs do we know of specific and discrete overwintering areas where the aggregations of millions of butterflies are awesome.

Because of their unique place in the public psyche, everyone (well, lots of people) worries about their future. Each year that isn't a boom year for the species we receive scores of concerned telephone calls desperately wanting to know why Monarch numbers are so low and if the end is near.

Last year was not a boom year for Monarchs. On the 2004 NABA 4th of July and 1st of July Butterfly Counts, a total of 2173 Monarch were counted. On the 2003 counts the number was 5301. But, with butterflies, a two-fold increase or decrease in numbers is hardly any change at all. A quick look at the yearly tally of Monarchs on three selected counts, in different regions of the country, is fairly inconclusive, perhaps showing a downward trend over the past 10 years. One needs also to consider that the Count numbers primar-

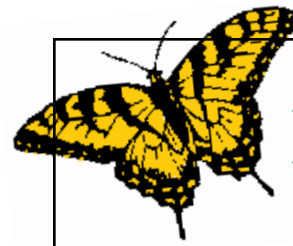
ily reflect a mid-summer population of Monarchs and not the abundance of the generation that will migrate southward. Analysis of all the Count data would yield more interpretable numbers.

However, there is widespread agreement that this past winter's populations on the Mexican overwintering grounds were the lowest in many years. Recently, a number of articles, in the Houston Chronicle on February 17 and in the New York Times on March 14, talked about this situation. In the Houston Chronicle article I am quoted as saying that Monarchs "are not in danger of extinction." This is of course true, because Monarch populations exist throughout Mexico, the West Indies, parts of South America, in the Canary Islands and in Australia. However, the reporter didn't mention that I went on to say that what is in danger is the phenomenon of the mass migration of Monarchs in North America.

There is little agreement on why the populations are down. Fingers are pointed in every direction. Some see logging of the fir forests where the Monarchs spend the winter and blame the Mexican people and/or government.

Some point to the spreading use of corn (and other crops) that has been genetically modified so that it has greater resistance to herbicides, allowing farmers to use higher levels of Round-up and other herbicides which then kills milkweeds in the farm fields. Because Monarch numbers have fallen in the Northeast, where (I believe) there is not an issue of widespread use of these genetically modified crops, as well as in the Midwest, it seems to me that the use of gm crops is highly unlikely to be the cause of this year's Monarch decline. If milkweeds are declining in farm fields and there was evidence that their presence in those fields was critical to the future of Monarchs, wouldn't it make more sense to provide farmers with incentives to allow milkweeds in their fields than to say they must allow large numbers of plants they consider to be weeds? Or, if one was truly concerned with the number of milkweed plants, shouldn't one work

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