

Monarchs welcomed back

Butterflies
 Conservationists concerned by dwindling numbers

By Nicholas Weller

nweiler@santacruzsentinel.com
 @lore_nick on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ » Hundreds of handsome orange and black butterflies already flutter among the shaded eucalyptus groves of Natural Bridges State Beach in Santa Cruz.

Since September, the monarchs have been returning from as far away as Washington, New Mexico

and Arizona to their winter resting grounds in Santa Cruz and other sites up and down California's Central coast.

Natural Bridges will mark the official start of monarch season with Welcome Back Monarchs Day starting at 10 a.m. Sunday.

The family-themed festival will feature butterfly arts and crafts, music, skits, a parade and plenty of butterfly-themed food, including monarch cake and hand-

made monarch ice-cream (actually pumpkin).

The theme of this year's festival is "The Mystery of the Monarchs." But one mystery that won't be answered until later this year is how many monarchs will actually arrive.

In 1997, park volunteers counted 120,000 butterflies wintering at Natural Bridges, but since then the numbers have

MONARCH » PAGE 3



Monarch butterflies in the eucalyptus trees at Natural Bridges State Park on Sept. 10.

SHMUEL THALER
 — SANTA CRUZ
 SENTINEL FILE

Monarch

FROM PAGE 1

dwindled. By 2009 volunteers could only find 1,300 butterflies.

Monarchs used to be so common on the Central Coast that it's hard to imagine a winter without them, but in fact the familiar monarch is in big trouble, according to Sarina Jepsen, endangered species director at the Xerces Integrate Conservation Society. "Across North America we've seen a 90 percent decline in the monarch butterfly population over the last 20 years," Jepsen says.

Eastern monarch populations which winter in Mexico have fared the worse, but western monarchs are in decline as well. Last year, volunteers in the annual Thanksgiving Monarch Count of overwintering populations in California counted only about 200,000 of the butterflies

where there were once more than 1 million, Jepsen said. In August, Xerces and other conservation groups petitioned for federal protection for monarchs under the Endangered Species Act.

Loss of flowers for nectar and trees for shelter have both contributed to monarchs' decline, said Martha Nitzberg, lead interpreter at Natural Bridges. The leading cause, Jepsen and Nitzberg agreed, is the eradication of milkweed from fields, farms and urban areas around the state.

Western monarchs' migration from their summer breeding grounds takes four generations, meaning the butterflies arriving in Santa Cruz now are the great-great-grandchildren of the ones that were here last winter. Monarch caterpillars eat only milkweed, so each generation of butterflies must seek out milkweed plants on which to lay its eggs. "The search has been kind of a

IF YOU GO

What: Welcome Back Monarchs Day

Where: Natural Bridges State Beach, 2531 W. Cliff Drive, Santa Cruz.

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday.

Information: Call 831-423-4609.

desperate search recently," Nitzberg said, citing suburban growth and use of herbicides as causes for the plant's loss.

Visitors to Sunday's festival can pick up milkweed seedlings and learn butterfly friendly gardening tips to help support the butterflies on their great migration. Nitzberg said she hopes such habitat restoration efforts will help the monarch bounce back, and also that the festival will help give children a connection to nature. "If we can keep the world healthy for monarchs," she says, "then we can keep it healthy for us."