

Monarchs go missing

Butterflies



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The Associated Press

Fewer butterflies appear, but fans still come looking

SENTINEL STAFF AND WIRE REPORT

SANTA CRUZ — California's monarch butterflies — whose appearance each winter is a celebrated show of color and beauty that draws tourists from around the world — have dwindled in numbers this year, and may be in the midst of a longer-term decline.

At Natural Bridges State Beach in Santa Cruz, one of the not-to-miss California stops for butterfly-loving tourists, the numbers have dropped dramatically, said Wendy Peddicord, an butterfly specialist with the state Parks Department. During migration peaks, the monarch population at that park ranges from 50,000 to 100,000. This year, it's ranging from 600 to 1,000.

'The Monarchs are still spectacular and covering the trees, but it's nowhere near what it used to be.'

WENDY PEDDICORD,
BUTTERFLY SPECIALIST

"I was just out there a minute ago, and the monarchs are still spectacular and covering the trees, but it's nowhere near what it used to be," Peddicord said. "The monarch is just one of many animal, plant and insect species that are being affected by global changes. Monarchs just happen to be this beautiful symbol of freedom. It's a gift."

In Monterey County, the Ventana Wilderness Society counts the orange and black butterflies as they spend

Please see **MONARCH** on **BACK PAGE**

Barb Bicknell made the trip from Los Gatos to Natural Bridges State Beach on Friday to catch a glimpse of a monarch butterfly.

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Monarch

Continued from Page A1

the winter clustering in coastal groves of eucalyptus, pine and cypress.

"Our numbers are dramatically fewer," said society member Sarah Hamilton.

Ventana's counts have found only about a third as many butterflies this winter as last. And some of the society's counts hint that Monarch populations may have been declining for several years, although nobody knows why.

But even with the diminishing numbers, tourists are still flocking to the California coast to see the insects, said Ro Vaccaro, president of the Friends of the Monarchs in Pacific Grove, a town so crazy about the little creatures that it has a Butterfly Parade, a Monarch Avenue and a \$1,000 city fine for anyone who molests one of the butterflies.

"The ones that made it are looking pretty good," Vaccaro said.

The Monarchs draw a crowd in Santa Cruz County, too.

Almost every day from October through February, five to six scheduled tours come through Natural Bridges. The state Parks Department holds a "Welcome Back Monarchs Day" in October and a Migration Festival every February to celebrate the return and fluttering away of the half-gram beauties.

Monarchs are famous for both their beauty and their stamina. East of the Rocky Mountains, the butterflies make an extraordinary annual migration of thousands of miles, flying from summer habitats in the United States to wintering grounds in Central Mexico.

In California, the butterflies generally make a shorter journey, flying from the Central Valley to the Pacific Coast, but they are still popular with tourists and nature-lovers alike.

Volunteers spend hours peering through binoculars trying to count the butterflies as they huddle together, a difficult task that makes a precise count impossible.

"We try to count their feet and divide by six, but that doesn't always work," Vaccaro joked.

Still, the best estimates show a decline.

Dennis Frey, a professor of biological sciences at Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo, estimated there might be only a million Monarchs in California's 300 wintering sites this year, down from roughly 1.5 million last year and perhaps the lowest count in a decade.

In Pacific Grove, the heartland of



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Monarch butterfly enthusiasts keep their eyes peeled at Natural Bridges.

Monarch tourism, an annual Thanksgiving count at a key habitat site has shown a steady decline since 1997, Hamilton said.

The reason for the longer-term drop remains a mystery, but Frey thinks this winter's butterfly shortage may be due to a late-winter drought last year. The lack of rain meant less milkweed, the summer plant where the butterflies lay their eggs and which then becomes their only food source as caterpillars.

Less summer milkweed means fewer winter butterflies, experts said.

"It takes a fat, juicy caterpillar to make a beautiful, healthy butterfly," Vaccaro said.

Peddicord, of the Natural Bridges State Beach visitor center, suggested concerned residents plant milkweed gardens and butterfly gardens on which caterpillars can dine.

Sentinel staff writer Heather Boerner contributed to this report.