

WELCOME BACK MONARCHS DAY

Visitors swarm to Natural Bridges to spot the telltale flutter

Butterflies

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By SHANNA MCCORD

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SANTA CRUZ — Emma Morton arrived at Natural Bridges State Beach on Sunday with giant orange and black cardboard monarch butterfly wings pinned to her back and a headband with black felt antennas.

The Oakland resident is so enchanted by the insect that

years ago she had a butterfly tattooed on her left arm. On Sunday, at Welcome Back Monarchs Day, she pulled up her pant leg to show off butterfly socks. She also wore butterfly earrings.

“Yes, I am a big butterfly fan,” she said. “They represent the calm in nature. They are an expression of free-

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Megan Del Rosario models her butterfly wings to the amusement of friend Janice Gau. The pair traveled from Fremont on Sunday to volunteer at Welcome Back Monarchs Day at Natural Bridges State Beach.

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dom.”

Morton, 59, made the trip to Santa Cruz with friend Jennifer Sutton to catch a glimpse of the monarch butterflies settling in for winter.

Morton and Sutton joined the swarm of people visiting the eucalyptus grove at Natural Bridges, which is home to thousands of monarch butterflies until February.

Sunday's celebration of the migrating monarch's return to the area included live music and lectures about the butterflies. Kids tables were set up for face painting, for kids to make caterpillars out of egg cartons and other butterfly-related crafts.

Santa Cruz's mild weather and ocean air provide a safe haven for the tropical butterflies, which would die in freezing temperatures.

Come spring, the monarchs will fly back to the valley regions west of the Rocky Mountains, where milkweed, the only plant a monarch caterpillar eats, is plentiful.

The monarch grove at Natural Bridges is the state's only preserve specifically designed to protect the butterflies and their habitat from human intrusion.

Lauren Velasco of San Carlos pointed at the brown spots fluttering near the tree tops in the grove to help her 4-year-old son Kyle recognize the butterflies.

“We just wanted to be part of nature and support the state parks,” Velasco said. “For us, the issue of state parks is important, too.”

Velasco said she worries about the impact of the state's budget woes on California parks. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger recently backed off an earlier plan to close hundreds of parks to cut the state's roughly \$14 billion budget gap.

Lorena Tax has been visiting her daughter at UC Santa Cruz for four years, but before Sunday had never made time to see the butterflies.

Tax and her daughter Desiree stopped on the wooden boardwalk at Natural Bridges to read biological information posted about the monarchs, such as how to tell a male and female apart.

“This is wonderful,” said Tax, a Fontana resident. “It's such a beautiful part of nature. I can't believe I've never come down here before.”

On the days temperatures go below 60 degrees in Santa Cruz, the butterflies cluster together for warmth and protection.

Park rangers said they didn't know how many people had visited the park to see the monarchs Sunday, but the parking lot was full out most of the day.

Park aide Ryan Wall said people had been calling for weeks to find out when the monarchs would arrive.