

BUTTERFLIES Monarchs herald banner year

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Monarch butterflies are arriving at their winter homes in Natural Bridges State Park at the edge of Santa Cruz. And already, it looks like this could be a banner year for the annual visitors from the north.

Scientists still aren't sure why last year's migration — estimated at 15,000 monarchs — was so

sparse. Some think drought conditions along the flyways from the north and east reduced the number of visiting butterflies — which have flocked to Natural Bridges in populations estimated as high as 200,000 in some years.

Wednesday, hundreds and perhaps thousands of the orange-and-black insects fluttered gracefully above Natural Bridges, at the north end of Santa Cruz just

beyond West Cliff Drive. At this time last year, only a handful could be seen at the park.

In a departure from past years, many of the butterflies that have winged in for the winter are gathering in their characteristic clusters in trees outside their traditional grove. Some are clustering in nearby eucalyptuses, others in trees at the other side of the Natural Bridges parking lot.

While monarch expert John Lane predicts that the insects will eventually gather at their usual hangouts in the traditional butterfly grove, a state parks guide says they may be seeking new winter resting spots.

"A tree in the butterfly grove came down since last year," Heather Steele said Wednesday. "That could have changed the conditions by altering the canopy

above the grove and by letting the wind blow through."

Whether they're coming to the same trees their great-great- or great-great-great-grandparents visited last winter or to other trees nearby, the butterflies will be officially greeted on Welcome Back Monarchs Day on Sunday, Oct. 10, from noon until 4 p.m. There'll be a monarch costume

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Good news for butterfly viewers: more monarchs are fluttering in

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parade, poems and paintings, along with tours of the monarch grove and songs and stories about the beloved bugs.

Steele, an interpretive specialist for state parks, said she thinks that as opposed to last year, this winter is going to be a good time to see monarchs at Natural Bridges.

Lane noted that the population of the visitors normally fluctuates from between 50,000 and 200,000. While he was expecting a drop in the number of monarchs at Natural Bridges last year, he said, he was surprised at how few of the insects actually showed up.

Monarchs fly to coastal California from as far north as southern Canada. Monarchs living east of the Continental Divide fly south to mountains in Mexico to spend

the winter.

The monarchs arriving each year are, experts say, as many as four or five generations later than those that spent the previous winter resting and mating at Natural Bridges. What causes the insects to return year after year to places they've never themselves been baffles bug mavens.

In the Monterey Bay region, Lane said, Natural Bridges has by far the largest winter monarch population, outstripping Pacific Grove, which bills itself as Butterfly Town, USA. However, small populations of the butterflies can be found in several eucalyptus groves throughout the area.

The annual winter stopover, which begins about now and ends as spring approaches, not only allows monarchs to escape fatal freezes in their northern habitats but provides a place for bug ro-

mance. As spring arrives, the insects mate and the females fly northward, laying their eggs on milkweed — the only food monarch larvae will eat.

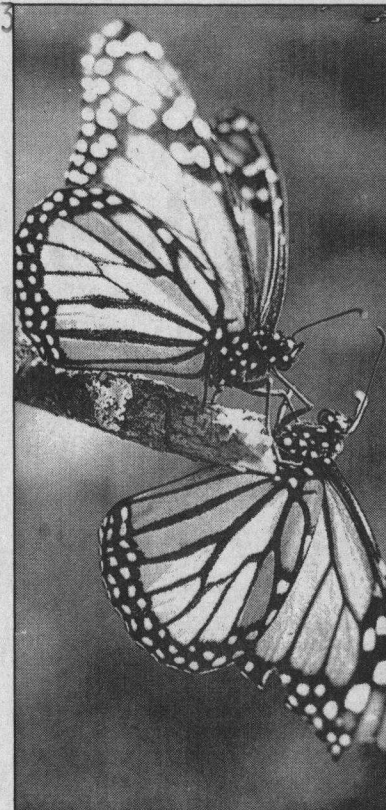
Sex is rough on the males.

"Mating is energy-intensive," notes Steele, who says males don't live long once they've done their jobs. Females die after laying their eggs on the northward trek.

Lane says the males do hang around after the females have headed north.

"Then," he says, "they figure out the females are gone and they take off themselves. They follow the milkweed and can live for a few more months."

Before the butterflies' annual return to the California coastline, "several generations of 'summer' monarchs will be born," according to Lane.



MERCURY NEWS FILE PHOTOGRAPH

The insects spend the winter in Natural Bridges State Park.