

Butterfly royalty return to Natural Bridges park



PHOTOS BY KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Sadie Witchel, 4, closes her eyes and skips across the field at Natural Bridges State Park on Sunday afternoon as she participates in the Dance of the Butterflies during Welcome Back Monarchs Day.

Festivities mark start of monarch migration

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SANTA CRUZ » The royalty of butterflies were having a fly-in of their own Sunday at Natural Bridges State Park.

The annual Welcome Back Monarchs Day, in its 35th year, drew thousands to witness the kickoff to the monarch migration season in Santa Cruz.

"We come every time. I've been coming here since I was a kid," Mercedes Ketterman of Santa Cruz said while wandering down the butterfly boardwalk Sunday afternoon. "There were a lot more when I was a kid."

Ketterman was accompanied by friends from Maui who had never seen the monarch event, and her 5-year-old daughter, Vivian Ketterman. Vivian, dressed in a colorful peacock dress, said she enjoyed the orange, black and white colors of the monarchs wings the most.

In the past several decades, the monarch population has taken a plunge, said Natural Bridges interpretive ranger and monarch event coordinator Martha Nitzberg.

Development and use of herbicides, along with other natural causes, have significantly decreased the monarch's favorite food and secret to their survival, milkweed plants. The plants carry protective toxins, a defense mechanism they pass along to the monarchs who feed on them.

"We can make a difference in what we do and what we allow to happen and changes we are involved with," Nitzberg said. "With this celebration, we are bring awareness and empowering people to make changes."

Too much milkweed in Santa Cruz could also be a bad thing, Nitzberg said. If the monarchs had enough enticement, they would stay in Santa Cruz year-round, meaning they would not escape their natural predators by heading inland, she said.

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Monarch butterflies sun their wings on a branch at Natural Bridges State Park.

Monarchs

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As Nitzberg explained the intricacies of monarch survival, a group of children and adults clustered nearby in front of the event's stage area, energetically dancing and flapping their giant cardboard butterfly wings while a band played a monarch celebratory song. Across the way, children and parents clustered like butterflies around a series of picnic table art sta-

tions, designing their own paper wings and pipe cleaner antennae.

Noah Stanton, 5, from San Jose, stared intently at an informational display featuring an empty caterpillar chrysalis hanging from a branch. Mom Lara Stanton said this was their first trip to the monarch event. Noah explained that he was enjoying his visit, and liked that the butterflies were so pretty.

"I thought it would be a good thing to do," Lara Stanton said. "He loves the

outdoors and science."

Visitors also took a hand in hand cranking their own "monarch" ice cream, which was actually pumpkin flavored.

Much of the day's butterfly action was centered beneath the trees down the monarch boardwalk. Rendered nearly invisible by inaction, the butterflies clustered tightly to hanging branches, waiting until sunlight warmed them enough to take flight in sudden bursts to a chorus of visitor oohs and aahs.

Fernando Tellez and Fernando Ferreira, from Watsonville, stood with big smiles staring up high at that monarch clusters.

"It's beautiful," Ferreira said. "I enjoy painting them. They just kind of cheer you up."

The counterpoint to Sunday's monarch welcome will be February's Migration Festival at the park, a goodbye to the visiting butterflies. The event is held the second Saturday of each February, falling on Valentine's Day next year.



KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Children and adults enjoy a day in the sun at Natural Bridges State Park as they participate in the Dance of the Butterflies during Welcome Back Monarchs Day.