



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

This monarch butterfly sports an ID tag.

Butterflies Monarchs to skip today's butterfly festival

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SANTA CRUZ — There will be some important guests missing from today's Migration Festival at Natural Bridges State Park: the monarch butterflies.

Only a few of the distinctive orange and black butterflies which migrate to the park each September showed up this year. And those that did left early, said John Lane, education director for the city's natural history museum.

Consequently, those going to the annual festival from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. today won't be able to see the butterflies even though planned activities like displays and crafts will go on.

In a normal year, 50,000-200,000 butterflies show up at Natural Bridges State Park, filling a grove of eucalyptus trees with their colorful wings.

This year, only about 15,000 butterflies came, said Lane.

The reason is a mystery.

Lane said monarch migrations generally fluctuate from year to year, with an irregular pattern of increase and decline.

But this year is unusual because the numbers dropped so dramatically.

"15,000 butterflies for Natural Bridges is very low," he said.

Researchers can speculate about the butterflies' decline this year, but no one knows for certain why so few came.

It could be that the drought cut down on milkweed, their favorite place to lay eggs. Or, it could be that something about the weather pattern has caused disease to spread among the butterflies, said Lane.

It also could be that the weather has prompted a boom in a certain wasp and fly that lay their eggs on monarch butterfly eggs, said Lane.

"Nobody knows," he said.

While Lane is not worried about a one-year drop in butterfly migrations, another year could cause more concern.

Right now, leading monarch butterfly researchers are meeting in Mexico to study a huge drop in the butterfly population there that could be caused because habitats have been logged, said Lane.

"If (the decline) is because of a change in habitat ... that spells real trouble," he said.

A similar change in habitat in the Western U.S. could be a problem.

Natural Bridges' butterflies also left earlier than expected.

Usually, they stay until late January or February. But this year, they flew out of town after Christmas.

Butterflies come to Natural Bridges because they are near the water where it is warmer and they can find a spot that is blocked from the wind, said Lane.