

Pacific Grove moves to protect butterflies

McCLATCHY NEWS SERVICE

PACIFIC GROVE — In "Butterfly Town, U.S.A.," people are fined \$500 for molesting monarch butterflies, and the official city line is "protect the butterflies, in every way possible, from serious harm and possible extinction by brutal and heartless people."

Unfortunately, during the last 40 years something went wrong in Pacific Grove.

The unique orange and black monarch has been molested to such an extent by dynamite blasts, tree thinning and clearing, and ever-present real estate development, that out of an original six sites only two winter nesting sites remain — and one of those is in danger of disappearing.

Some 3 million monarchs, which come from as far away as west of the Canadian Rockies, gather during the winter at more than 100 sites from Mexico to Mendocino County in Northern California.

Another group 50 million

strong from east of the Rockies winters in a single region of inland Mexico 10 miles wide by 30 miles long. They cling to tree trunks, limbs and leaves in solid blankets like Christmas-tree flocking. Their combined bulk and weight provide warmth and keep the wind from dislodging them.

When the weather turns warmer in late January, they begin to mate. The males stay and eventually die. The females leave in February for journeys as long as 2,000 miles, seeking milkweed on which to lay eggs.

What makes the monarch unique is that once they leave California, their immediate offspring never return. Three spring and summer generations live and die elsewhere, and the final flock of fall generation butterflies, which have never been to the California coast, somehow know to return to exactly the same places to start the cycle over again.

Vern Yadon, curator of the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History, is afraid that fewer monarchs in the future may find places to stay here. There are pictures of monarchs everywhere, but Pacific Grove may someday lose its distinction as the butterfly capital of the West Coast, Yadon said.

For years people have flocked here from October to February to see the delicate creatures. But Natural Bridges State Park in nearby Santa Cruz, where about 190,000 monarchs are wintering, already has more butterflies than Pacific Grove, according to Santa Cruz museum zoologist John Lane, recognized by many as a leading authority on monarchs. Up

to a quarter-million — almost eight percent of the monarch population west of the Rocky Mountains — may winter there at times.

Thousands more winter along California's Big Sur Coast, and at one privately owned location in Marin County, which Lane refused to identify, more monarchs spend the winter than any other place in California.

Pacific Grove's George Washington Park, which offers the sweet fragrances of the pine and eucalyptus trees whose low-hanging branches protect the monarchs from the biting coastal chill, supports thousands of butterflies.

"The city is moving very responsibly," Lane said.

Pacific Grove Mayor Morris Fisher lives across the street from Washington Park, where he helped plant young trees to encourage gathering butterflies. There's no question, he said, "We must protect the butterflies. They're part of the city."

But the pressure on them is nearly overwhelming, the mayor said.

Not far away at nearby Butterfly Grove Inn on an adjacent two acres, the only other regular roosting site in town, motel manager Kristi Aslin said she hasn't seen a butterfly for

weeks. "I send people to Washington Park," she said.

Lane explained that monarch butterflies live in a knife-edge winter environment, flying a fine line between coastal microclimates and often moving to escape cold winds and winter chill. Monarchs have trouble flying in temperatures below 55 degrees, and may fall to the ground and die at temperatures in the 40s.

Unfortunately, the owner of the two acres next to the motel — the grove is called "Butterfly Trees" — thinned out the trees and removed all the middle-story branches so that there was no protection left for butterflies.