

Santa Cruz welcomes monarchs back to town

Kid-focused event celebrates butterfly's annual migration

By Cathy Kelly
Santa Cruz Sentinel

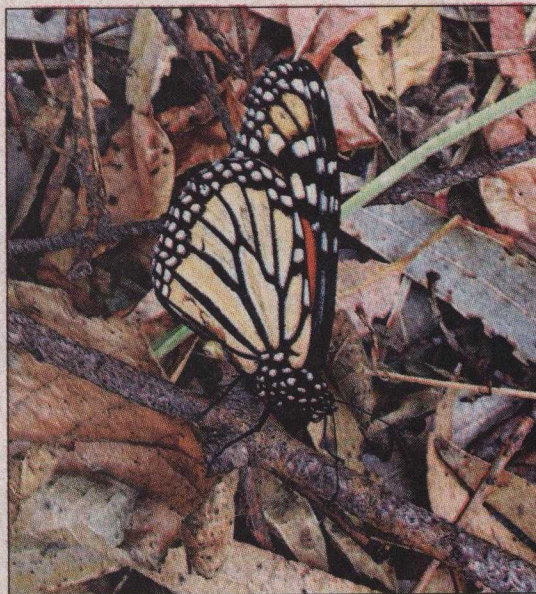
SANTA CRUZ — Fanciers flocked Sunday to the annual Welcome Back Monarchs Day festival, where the beloved migratory butterfly was the undisputed ruler of Natural Bridges State Beach.

Children of all ages arrived wearing the butterfly's orange

and black and sporting wings and antennae. The kids created an array of monarch-shaped crafts in celebration of the insect's annual migration.

Images of the butterfly were found on rugs, faces, bags, shirts, stickers, buttons, socks and more. (One small sign did advise that the official state insect was the California dog-face butterfly, but the lion's share of the attention was on the monarch.)

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A monarch butterfly lights on a twig Sunday at Natural Bridges State Beach in Santa Cruz, where the Welcome Back Monarchs Day festival was celebrated. The insects live up to eight months, and their numbers typically peak from late November to early December.

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Monarchs

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The popular free festival included live music, crafts, poetry, monarch grove tours, food and more. State parks interpreter Martha Nitzberg estimated the crowd in the thousands. The highlight might have been a parade led by Monarch Man and Monarch Woman.

Bobby Buchser, of San Jose, was standing near a crafts table Sunday, watching his 5-year-old daughter, Saskia, color a paper butterfly that would be glued to a stick. Saskia wore what looked like a bright orange satin sleeveless gown, and her 2-year-old sister, Cosima, was nearby.

"The kids are having a great time," Buchser said.

"We spent a lot of time looking at butterflies and drawing pictures of butterflies and doing all kinds of butterfly stuff. You pretty much can't go wrong with butterflies with two little girls."

Monarch butterflies begin arriving in the area in October and stay until about March, experts say. When temperatures rise above 55 degrees, as they did Sunday, they flitter about and drink nectar from an assortment of trees and plants.

But their larvae eat only milkweed, and potted, blooming milkweed plants were on sale at the festival, near the park's demonstration butterfly garden.

Several of the large orange and black butterflies flitted about Sunday at the monarch resting area at Natural Bridges, accessible to humans down a wooden

path. The butterflies seek shelter in the eucalyptus grove, a tree that flowers in winter, providing nectar.

Up near the visitor's center were all the human activities, including an area where children could color a paper monarch, write a wish on it and hang it on a small tree.

Some of the youths' wishes were for "all butterflies to come to my house," "Christmas right now" and "hope for ice cream" — presumably from the ice cream area around the corner, where Pacific Collegiate School students were cranking out pale orange scoops of pumpkin ice cream for \$1.

Two-year-old Zander bucked the butterfly trend by wearing a penguin shirt and clutching a small penguin puppet as he danced to

some folk tunes by the Mystic Truebudoors.

"He likes all animals," his mom, Debbie Ulrich, of Aptos, explained. "We love this; it's one of the best festivals. It's just a great gathering."

"I'm always a little worried though, because (the monarch) habitat is disappearing."

The family has some milkweed seeds at home they will plant, she added.

Nitzberg, the interpreter, was grateful for the Mystic Truebudoors, who not only played songs about local critters and other natural wonders, but set up a stage for the other performers.

She said the festival would not happen without all the volunteers. Any money raised goes to education, she said.

The number of mon-

archs varies from year to year, Nitzberg said. Last year, there was more rain in the spring, which led to more milkweed and more monarchs, she said. She said milkweed is not native to the Santa Cruz coast.

"We never know how many will come, but we are always excited to see them," she said.

According to the Natural Bridges website, monarchs are famous for their multigenerational migration from Western states to the California coast. Monarchs arrive in the Santa Cruz area from states west of the Rocky Mountains and are four generations removed from those that left last spring. The butterflies live up to eight months, and their numbers typically peak from late November to early December.