

Missing monarchs



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Alicia Robinson, 4, gets a close look at a monarch that landed on her mom at Natural Bridges park on Wednesday.

Insect-munching rat nibbles at butterfly numbers

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Butterflies
SANTA CRUZ — A mysterious rat is munching on the monarch butterflies wintering at Natural Bridges State Park, but only a few butterfly docents have actually spotted the pesky critter.

The rat has startled school children and surprised the docents along the popular trail. It is taking a tiny bit of the blame for a reduction in the monarch numbers, but there is some sympathy for the hungry rodent.

"Part of me loves the monarchs, loves the

butterflies and wants to see them do well, but we also have to take a step back and see this as natural change," said Julie Sidel, an interpretive specialist at the ocean-front park.

"If there's a natural change in a rat's behavior, we have to look at that as a part of the whole picture."

And so the rodent goes, playing hide and seek with curious children and making prey of the colorful butterflies.

Butterfly specialists say this year's butterfly crop appears to number about 60,000 at Natural Bridges, about half the huge flock of two winters ago.

1,289?
Sidel said the number of butterflies is down this year in habitats up and down the West Coast.

"I can't imagine the rat can take all the blame," said visitor Gary Luttringer, of Boulder Creek, who visits the butterfly trail often. "I think it's natural selection. The ones that are weaker won't go on breeding if they're on the ground."

Young Chelsea Irwin, visiting from San Mateo, was in disbelief Wednesday.

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"I think it's a mean rat," she said. But she thought if rangers try to get rid of it, they may accidentally hurt the butterflies.

Most visitors to the park thought the natural process should not be disturbed — rat or no rat.

"It's better to keep the situation the way it is without any other influences," said Nina Vyhinskaia of Michigan. "The older I've gotten, the more I think nature is much wiser than people who try to improve things."

The rat showed up the first week of January, park in-

terpretive specialist Hannah Nielsen said.

"I heard some of our docents down there say it was fairly fast," Nielsen said. "It would dart out and then come back. Especially the younger kids would see it and then point it out."

Indications are that it is a wood rat. Docents have described it as having black fur and being larger than your garden-variety rat.

Park specialists said they've never seen anything like it but have heard of another butterfly-eating rodent.

"Five different mice rodents have been spotted in Mexico (butterfly) colonies," Sidel said. "Only one has

been noticed actually eating the monarchs."

The local rat seems to go after the butterfly abdomens, leaving the orange wings behind for collectors. The wings are poisonous to predatory birds.

It remains unknown, however, if they are poisonous to rats.

Another butterfly lover sympathetic to the rat was Jim Lamont of Santa Cruz.

"In the modern world, rats are seen as sort of the pariah and have gotten this bad rap," he said. "You have to look at it objectively, and killing is definitely part of nature."