

Monarchs get warm welcome

Natural Bridges greets its annual winged visitors

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Butterflies 10-10-05

SANTA CRUZ — Surrounded by curious onlookers of all ages, June Langhoff pointed to a tiny white dot on the leaf of a milkweed plant and explained the life cycle of the monarch butterfly to her captive audience Sunday at Natural Bridges State Beach.

A variety of milkweed plants sat on a table manned by Langhoff, one of the 50 community volunteers who helped stage the 26th annual Welcome Back Monarchs Day.

Children and adults got up close to the milkweed plant to see the small monarch eggs Langhoff was talking about. The eggs hatch into caterpillars and feed on the milkweed.

"It eats and eats and eats and grows bigger until its skin splits, then it eats its own skin, and gets bigger," Langhoff explained.

After 10 days in the caterpillar stage, the next step is the chrysalis, or pupal stage, when it forms a shiny green case. The monarch emerges from the chrysalis after 14 days.

Eight-year-old Lisa Brown traveled from Los Gatos with her family to view the butterflies. The third-grade home-schooled student said she's been visiting the butterflies since she was "really little."

"The butterflies sort of give me a thing of relaxation because they're so pretty," she said. "And they love to be here because it's like they're home."

The mild weather attracts the butterflies to the area, and the Central Coast is an ideal spot for them to live until they return to the Rocky Mountains in February, said Martha Nitzberg, lead interpreter at the park.

The activities for the children teach them ways they can make a difference in the environment, Nitzberg said.

When the event was first held, it wasn't geared toward children, but now it clearly is, said butterfly biologist John Lane.

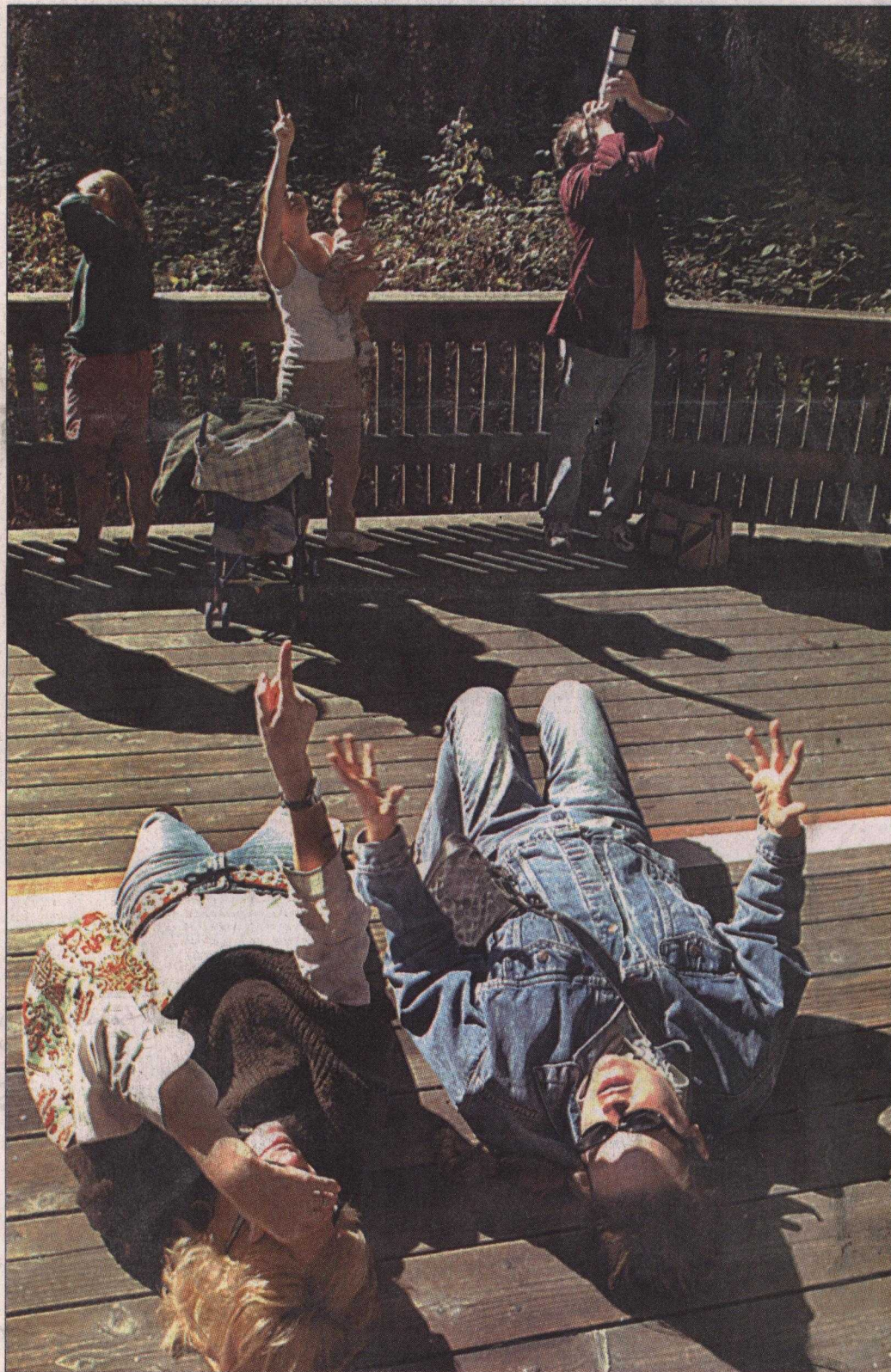
See **MONARCHS** on **BACK PAGE**

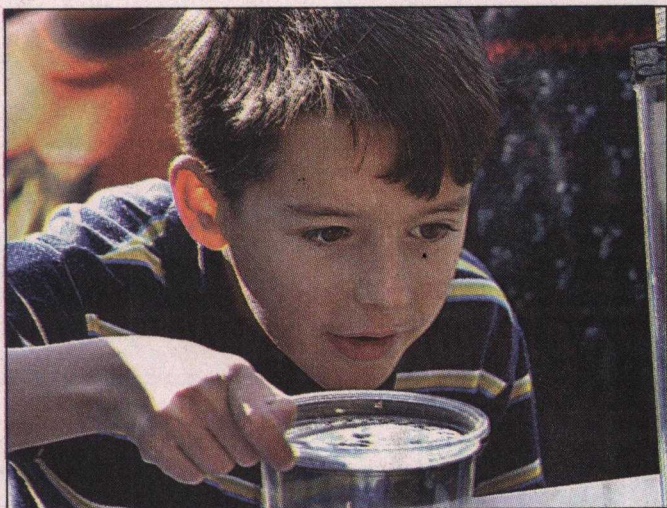
Visitors to Natural Bridges State Park crane their necks to see the fluttering monarchs while Heather Michel and Meg Yarnell, foreground, take in the scene from the deck Sunday during the Monarch Butterfly Fest.



Monarch butterflies have made their annual trek back to Natural Bridges in Santa Cruz.

Dan Coyro/
Sentinel photos





Brian Tesch came all the way from Martinez to see the monarchs at Natural Bridges State Beach on Sunday.

A monarch caterpillar looks for food while two chrysalis cocoons wait to hatch.

Dan Coyro/
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photos



Monarchs

Continued from Page A1

"I'm glad they're here, the more they know about monarchs and other living things, probably the better off we all are," he said.

The beach's visitors center bustled with children and their families; 600 people were expected to attend.

Food booths sold hot dogs, pasta and desserts for \$1, with proceeds going to the park's education programs. A puppet show kicked off the event, and arts and crafts tables were set up for children to create butterfly-themed art.

Other attractions included the butterfly costume parade and the main draw — the thousands of brightly colored butterflies.

Spotting scopes were set up for people to get a close-up look at the monarchs clustered in the

eucalyptus trees. The butterflies sip nectar from the trees' flowers using a straw-like sucking tube called a proboscis. When not in use, it's visibly coiled under its head.

Organizers of the yearly tradition hope children and adults learn about the importance of the monarch butterfly to nature, and ways to provide a welcoming home for them during their migration to the area. The milkweed plant is key to their survival, and people are encouraged to grow it because it's the only thing the larvae eat.

Natural Bridges is planning a festival during the second week of February, when the monarchs leave Santa Cruz.

For information, call 423-4609 or visit www.santacruzstateparks.org.

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