

Amidst the Monarchs

Natural Bridges draws thousands each week to get a glimpse of butterflies



Monarch butterflies sit in the trees of Natural Bridges State Park in Santa Cruz on Saturday.

PHOTOS BY JON WEIAND — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

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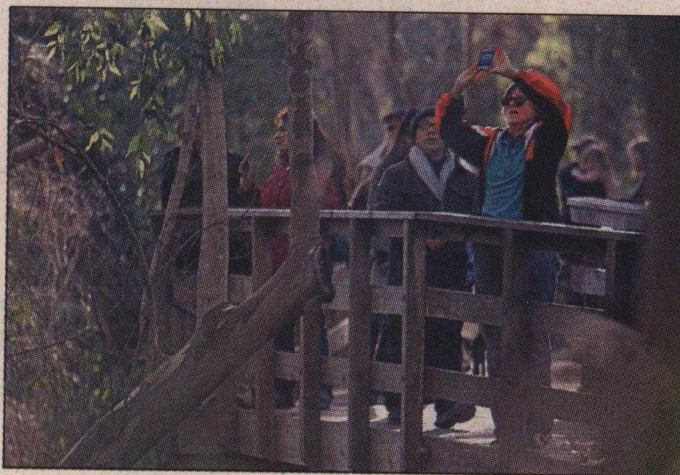
SANTA CRUZ » For Maria Monroe, seeing the migration of the monarch butterflies was on her checklist of things to see in California.

The Sonoma County resident was visiting family in Santa Cruz County when they suggested going to Natural Bridges State Beach to see the butterflies. On Saturday, Monroe was among hundreds standing underneath tree branches to watch clusters of butterflies flap their wings.

"It's great to see the clusters and it's great to see them floating around," said Monroe, 34, who came with her husband and two children. "It's almost magical."

Each year, thousands of monarch butterflies winter among the trees at Natural Bridges and even more visitors come to the park to get a glimpse.

Martha Nitzberg, a Natural Bridges interpretive ranger, was elated at the crowds. From October through February, when



Visitors stop to take pictures of the monarch butterflies in Santa Cruz's Natural Bridges State Park on Saturday.

the insects migrate through, the parking lot in front of the visitor's center is nearly full on weekends.

"It's great that these people are looking to the outdoors to share this natural phenomenon with their families," she said.

On the second Saturday of February, the park will hold a Migration Festival to say goodbye to the visiting butterflies.

While the butterflies winter in Santa Cruz, the park offers weekly educational tours to visitors that highlight the life cycle of the insects. A crowd of about 30 people gathered in the visitor's center of the park Saturday afternoon to hear Nitzberg talk about the butterflies.

The insects travel to Natural Bridges and other coastal

ON THE NET

To see a video of the Monarch butterflies at Natural Bridges, visit santacruzsentinel.com and click on this story.

areas from the Rocky Mountains to winter. From there they travel back inland, flying to northern and eastern states before eventually flying to the Rocky Mountains again where the process starts again. The migration cycle is complete within a year, and because the butterflies only live two to four weeks, it takes four to five generations to complete the journey each year.

Within Santa Cruz, the goal of park rangers and others is to "have them survive without freezing," Nitzberg said.

Near the front of the visitor's center, several milkweed plants, the primary food source for the insects, played home to monarch caterpillars who munched away at the leaves. After about a month, the caterpillars build chrysalises, where they begin the transformation into butterflies.

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Outside, visitors made their way down a path to the monarch butterfly grove nearby. Clusters of butterflies on tree branches attracted visitors who cooed at the site of the colorful orange creatures.

Peg Galli, 61, of Santa Cruz, leaned against the railing of a foot bridge to admire the insects.

"It's a beautiful day, and I wanted to see how many clusters of monarchs there were," she said.

Galli usually avoids Natural Bridges because of the crowds and gets her dose of monarch sightings near Lighthouse Point.

Despite the crowds, Galli admits she came to Natural Bridges the weekend before to admire the clusters.

High in the trees, butterflies fluttered between branches and leaves about a hundred feet above the crowds. Many visitors had binoculars and digital cameras to get a better look.

Eric Deffenbaugh, of Soquel, came with his wife and daughter. The family hadn't visited the park in years, and Deffenbaugh said he forgot how majestic the insects could be.

"You kind of forget how beautiful it is to see them congregate," said Deffenbaugh, 60. "It's a flurry of action."