

✓ Butterflies

Monarchs return in big numbers

The Associated Press

PACIFIC GROVE — Butterfly enthusiasts are all aflutter as orange and black-winged monarchs make a hearty return to Santa Cruz and Pacific Grove.

An estimated 100,000 have returned so far this year following years of drought that caused their numbers to drop to less than 5,000 in Santa Cruz last year and fewer than 4,000 in Pacific Grove.

That was the lowest in Santa Cruz in the 14 years records have been kept.

But this year, about 50,000 monarchs have perched themselves on trees at Natural Bridges in Santa Cruz and 50,000 in Pacific Grove, according to Ro Vaccaro, president of the Friends of the Monarchs in Pacific Grove.

More are expected as the butterflies begin concentrating into tighter clusters after the first winter rains.

"They look very healthy," Vaccaro said. "They are shimmering like stained glass all over the skies as they come back to the same trees every night. For us,

12-3-95
it is a sign of renewed hope and rejuvenation."

Before the decline, an average of 80,000 butterflies wintered in Santa Cruz, said Julie Sidel, a park interpretive specialist at Natural Bridges State Park.

Parasitic wasps or a deadly virus could have contributed to their decline, but most experts suspect that the weather was a major factor.

The elusive butterflies travel 2,500 miles — about 100 miles a day — from their birthplaces in British Columbia and southern Alaska to Santa Cruz and Pacific Grove and other smaller sites that no one is sure.

The monarchs seek places like Pacific Grove and Santa Cruz because of the desirable microclimate.

"When the sun hits the branches, the monarchs bask in the sun for a few minutes and then do a little shimmy shake to get their muscles warmed up to the 55 degrees they need to fly," Vaccaro said.

"Then the entire bows of the trees start trembling, and if we are lucky they all kick off at once. It makes you want to turn orange and fly away with them."