

On The Wings of Monarchs

Monarch butterflies stop in the region on epic journey to Mexico.

Their rite of passage is under way. Faced with an urgency dictated by their own mortality, the winged creatures spend their fleeting lives on a journey fashioned by the sun and the wind.

There is an old Indian legend that defines the freedom of butterflies as well as any written word. It says the creatures make no noise. When you catch one, if you hold it in your hands, whisper a wish to it, and set it free again, it will carry your wish to the Great Spirit because you sustained the harmony of nature.

Right now [September], in one of the major corridors of migration, millions of Monarchs are carrying wishes on the wings of their incredible journey to Mexico. Look closely and you will see them, granting their tiger-colored splendor to might oak trees, and riding the wind with a fragility and grace that will carry them thousands of miles to Sierra Madra, a mountains system in central Mexico.

Douglas and Kathleen Ziemer of Des Moines, Iowa, coordinate their vacation in the Iowa Great

Lakes Region to match the migration of the Monarch butterflies each September. The couple, along with Kathleen's mother, Rosemary Massman, spent last week finding and tagging the gentle travelers in the Okoboji area.

They are part of Monarch watch, a program dedicated to the education, conservation and research of the butterflies at the University of Kansas' Department of Entomology.

The Ziemer's fascination with butterflies was a natural evolution. Both had grown up with an affinity for the outdoors and had become volunteer gardeners at the Saylorville Lake flood control project near Des Moines. About six years ago, Douglas received a butterfly kit from Rosemary and took the experiment through the complete stage of the creature's life. A second kit followed, and the couple immersed themselves into studying the diurnal insects. "We were hooked at that stage," Kathleen remembered. She devoured books on the subject, and found Monarch Watch on the Internet. They began to follow the migration in the fall, and last September officially joined the tagging program.

Last week, the Ziemer's search was undertaken in the Lakes Region, where they found the Monarchs staging in aging oak trees. The best locations were isolated pockets of undisturbed retreats that allowed columns of sun light through dense stands of trees.

The Monarchs favor the downwind side of large-leaved trees. Once they capture a butterfly in a fine-meshed net, the Ziemers document the sex and distinguishing characteristics of the insect and place a tiny tag on the underside of the dorsal wing. The tags carry identifying numbers from the University of Kansas, and are returned there by other researchers who recover them in the U.S., and by natives in Mexico who recover them in the over-wintering sites, which can attract up to 300 million Monarchs.

Most of the research on Monarchs is in its infancy, and Monarch Watch is a rapidly growing organization of scientists and civilians who are devoted to strengthening the future of the butterflies. "We are basically a conservation group, concerned with the diminishing habitat of the Monarchs, and finding ways to enhance their environments," Kathleen said. "Just like Ducks

Unlimited or Pheasants Forever or other groups, we're constantly learning about the science of the creatures we're trying to protect."

Because the life of an adult butterfly is so fleeting (a Monarch lives about 15 days, while the Mourning Cloak has the longest life expectancy of about nine months), the research is often thin. The long-term effects of pesticides on the insects, for instance is still under scrutiny. Each species, for example, has its food source on which it is solely dependable.

"Monarchs will lay eggs on milkweed only," Kathleen explained, "and the larvae will feed only on milkweed. Swallowtails, on the other hand, will lay eggs only on parsley, dill or Queen Anne's Lace." Understanding the habitats of the 20,000 species worldwide is an ongoing search.

The Ziemers' fascination with butterflies led to some experimentation with breeding and raising several different species, and the interest eventually evolved into ButterfliZ of Iowa, their own retail business. Now in their second season, they are nurturing a business that sends butterflies all over the country to persons celebrating weddings, anniversaries and other festivities. Since it has become chic to release

butterflies at such events in lieu of throwing rice or releasing doves, ButterfliZ has grown rapidly.

Restricted by government regulations to ship only nine of the more than 2,000 species common to the U.S., the Ziemers concentrate on raising Monarchs, Mourning Cloaks, Painted Ladies and Swallowtails. A controlled environment, which hosts one area of high humidity and a misting system within flight cages for breeding purposes and another of low humidity where larvae is hosted, the entire 30-day life cycle of the butterflies is carried out. Once the caterpillars have become beautiful butterflies, they are placed in individual boxes which are ice-packed in thermal containers.

The butterflies are thus kept in a sleeping stage during shipping. Kathleen will resign her secretary's job to devote full-time to the butterfly enterprise next year. She will enhance the butterfly release business by offering gardening layouts and tips, display cages and gift baskets. Intrigued by other's fascination with butterflies, she will also teach educational seminars.

"Butterflies are therapeutic for people," Kathleen explained. "When my mother suffered a stroke, we brought Painted Ladies to her in the hospital, and she became captivated with them." Now recovered, Rosemary takes an active part in the annual tagging of the Monarchs. And Douglas, a cancer survivor himself, finds comfort in the winged creatures. "They soothe people's anxieties and give them an inner peace," he said. Douglas also believes that Monarchs are a litmus test for the environment. "If their habitat is diminishing, how much are the habitats of so many other creatures on earth and how will it all affect our lives and the lives of children?"

And through it all, the migration of the Monarchs has brought a family together like no other phenomena may have done. When they search the woodlands for beauty on the wing, it is with an exhilaration that they share and will remember. When children bring butterflies to Kathleen, she asks them to make wishes before they release them. Although the butterflies will perish with suddenness, the wishes will be carried forever on the wind.

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