

Science News

Share Blog Cite

Print Email Bookmark

As Monarch Butterflies Journey North, Gardeners Can Help Protect Species, Researcher Says

ScienceDaily (May 11, 2010) — It has been a hard winter for Monarch butterflies, according to Chip Taylor, director of Monarch Watch at the University of Kansas. Taylor said that low temperatures, storms and habitat destruction have all threatened the butterflies' overwintering population in Mexico.



Monarch butterfly. (Credit: iStockphoto)

See Also:

Plants & Animals

- [Insects \(and Butterflies\)](#)
- [Zoology](#)
- [Ecology Research](#)

Earth & Climate

- [Ecology](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [Drought Research](#)

Reference

- [Monarch butterfly](#)
- [Difference between a butterfly and a moth](#)
- [Caterpillar](#)
- [Pupa](#)

"I spend a lot of time fretting over the status of the monarch population and I'm always searching for factors or data that will help me understand the past as a way of predicting the future trends in monarch numbers," Taylor said.

As the butterflies migrate through Texas and continue northward across the Great Plains this spring, Taylor has poured over data from a network of monarch observers, hoping to gauge the well-being of the butterflies. But he said it is difficult to pin down their numbers with precision.

"This returning population has been most unique," Taylor said. "The data clearly shows that monarchs were limited to Texas this spring more than in any of the previous ten years.

What does this mean? Was the

dispersal of monarchs limited this spring because of the lower than average temperatures or because the population is low or some combination of both? The answer is probably the latter -- a combination of low numbers of returning monarchs and lower temperatures."

Nonetheless, Taylor said that data on the butterflies "is not all doom and gloom."

"The conditions for growth in the monarch population in Texas have been exceptionally favorable the last two months," Taylor said. "The temperatures have been moderate and due to adequate soil moisture, the milkweeds and nectar sources have been abundant. In addition, the fire ants have been scarce having not recovered from the prolonged drought of last year. So, small population or not, the monarchs should be off to a good start."

The Monarch Watch director said that the health of butterfly population would be determined by the number of first-generation monarchs that come north out of Texas over the next six weeks and weather conditions throughout the northern breeding range over the remainder of the summer. Depending on these factors, the number of monarchs could stay steady, decline or increase compared to last year.

But gardeners can help the butterflies by planting milkweed and other monarch-friendly plants, Taylor said.

"We need the public to pitch in to save the monarch migration," said Taylor. "Without an effort to protect monarch habitats and restore milkweeds, this incredible migration will slowly fade away."

Taylor encourages gardeners, homeowners, schools, governments and businesses to plant monarch "way stations" consisting of milkweeds and other butterfly plants, in hopes that the dedicated habitats will sustain a threatened population during its migration.

"The size of the overwintering population last year was 1.92 hectares and, with a modest increase this summer, the population might get back to this number," Taylor said. "If the conditions for the rest of the summer are highly favorable, a winter population of 4 hectares is possible -- but that doesn't seem likely at this point. In any case, the winter population of

Related Stories

Genetic Basis For Migration In Monarch Butterflies Uncovered (Mar. 31, 2009) — Scientists studying Eastern North American monarch butterflies have uncovered a suite of genes that may be involved in driving the butterflies to migrate towards Mexico for the winter. Their research ... > [read more](#)

Habitat Destruction May Wipe Out Monarch Butterfly Migration (Apr. 5, 2008) — Intense deforestation in Mexico could ruin one of North America's most celebrated natural wonders -- the mysterious 3,000-mile migration of the monarch butterfly. The astonishing migration may ... > [read more](#)

Long-Distance Migration Shapes Butterfly Wings (Feb. 13, 2010) — Monarch butterflies that migrate long distances have evolved significantly larger and more elongated wings than their stationary cousins, differences that are consistent with traits known to enhance ... > [read more](#)

Butterfly Migration Could Be Largest Known (May 20, 2005) — Millions of painted lady butterflies that fluttered into California's Central Valley in the last week of March could be just the advance guard of one of the largest migrations of the species on ... > [read more](#)

Where Have All The Butterflies Gone? (May 8, 2006) — Cold, wet conditions early in the year mean that 2006 is shaping up as the worst year for California's butterflies in almost four decades, according to Art Shapiro, professor of evolution and ecology ... > [read more](#)

at: <http://www.monarchwatch.org/>

Search ScienceDaily

Number of stories in
archives: 85,801

Email or share this story: | [More](#)

Story Source:

Adapted from materials provided by [University of Kansas](#).

Need to cite this story in your essay, paper, or report? Use one of the following formats:

- APA University of Kansas (2010, May 11). As monarch butterflies journey north, gardeners can help protect species, researcher says.
- MLA *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved May 15, 2010, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/05/100510151354.htm>

Note: If no author is given, the source is cited instead.

Find with keyword(s):

Search

Enter a keyword or phrase to search ScienceDaily's archives for related news topics, the latest news stories, reference articles, science videos, images, and books.