

Conservation Corner

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As the PAC-LM Girls Basketball Team returns to Pocahontas County, the Iowa Class 3A Championship Trophy in hand, Conservation would like to join in the chorus of congratulations for their outstanding season. Did you follow the tournament trail to Des Moines to cheer them on? If so, did you stop along the way, either going or returning, to fill up with gas or for a bite to eat?

Here in the Midwest our interstates and highways are dotted with gas stations, restaurants, and rest stops. As we migrate across the land, we've come to expect evenly spaced operating fueling stations for both vehicles and people. Now, suppose your mission is to drive I-35 from the Texas/Mexico border north to Duluth, Minnesota, a journey of 1,300 miles. Have you ever stopped to think about what would happen if, unbeknown to you, the fueling and eating sites were only partially stocked or perhaps even closed? Would you keep going in hopes the next truck stop was open? Would you leave the interstate and try to find a station in a small town and risk getting lost? Would you simply run out of gas and end up stranded along the roadway?

Now, suppose you're a Monarch butterfly and you are driven to migrate north each spring along that same route. What would happen if your gas stations (nectar sources) and eating places (milkweeds) were no longer open for business or only partially stocked? Well, over the past few decades that's exactly what's happened. The agriculture industry and urban sprawl have transformed the prairie landscape, leaving large gaps with few resources. How will these gaps affect the Monarchs? Will they starve? Lay fewer eggs? Become lost? End up stranded along the highway?

Habitats provide plants and animals with food, water, shelter, and a place to raise their young. Just as important as the abundance of resources, however, is the arrangement and distribution of those resources across the landscape. Somehow the gaps created by modern farming practices and urban sprawl need to be restored, especially along migratory routes.

Each day, millions of cars and trucks travel along I-35, and unexpected fuel shortages could quickly strand thousands of vehicles. This spring an estimated 109 million butterflies started their 1,300-mile northward migration along the I-35 corridor. To help prevent thousands of butterflies from starvation or becoming stranded, groups of concerned people have banded together to provide food, water, and shelter for these royal travelers. Today over 15,000 waystations are open for business across the country. Here in Iowa, 357 waystations of restored habitat are now open. Check out the Monarch Watch website for info on how you can become part of the Monarch Waystation Program.

In closing, I'd like to remind everyone to save the dates of April 7 & 8. Plan now to attend the 11th Annual Garden Extravaganza at the Expo Center in Pocahontas to learn more about butterflies, honeybees, and all things gardening. Until then, beware the Ides of March!

