

Conservation Corner

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Spring is here – well, meteorological spring, anyway, that began on March 1 here in the Northern Hemisphere and is based on average temperatures. The astronomical first day of spring, of course, occurs at the Vernal Equinox which, thanks to leap year, will arrive at 11:30 p.m. CDT on March 19 – the earliest First Day of Spring in our lifetimes!

But I don't need the calendar to know spring has arrived on the wings of geese sounding their way back north, on the wings of red-winged blackbirds noisily taking over our grove, on the wings of the Indian Girls Basketball Team bringing home a state championship to Pocahontas. Time to celebrate as we look forward to warmer temps, greener landscapes, and the return of the Monarchs!

Yes, finally there's good news out of Mexico. Recently the World Wildlife Fund announced the encouraging results of this winter's survey. Nine colonies of adult butterflies covered approximately 4 hectares or 10 acres of forest in Mexico, the best report in five years.

So what turned the tide? I believe you helped turn the tide! Across North America waves of gardeners planted and tended host and nectar plants, waves of farmers included milkweeds in habitat plantings or left some milkweeds along fence lines, and waves of conservationists worked tirelessly to promote pollinator friendly habitats. Each wave helped turn the tide in the Monarchs' battle with loss of spring and summer milkweed habitat, loss and degradation of overwintering habitat, and strong storms during periods of peak migration.

Even small plantings produce monarchs that make it to Mexico. Experts currently estimate that it takes 29 stems of milkweed to produce 1 overwintering monarch in Mexico. The US Fish and Wildlife Service set a goal of 200 milkweed stems per acre for monarch habitat – a goal we can easily meet in our flower gardens and road ditches.

Another wave that helped turn the tide is gathering research data on butterflies in general. Last summer I, along with Linda Christoffers and Sue Weiskopf, took part in the Iowa Butterfly Survey Network. We each mapped a route that we surveyed six times over the summer months, counting butterflies as we walked around and through the Varina Wetlands, Cooper's Cove, and Gull Point State Park.

Last week we received the 2015 survey results from ISU staff at the Reiman Gardens in Ames. You might be interested to learn that Linda, Sue, and I completed 18 surveys and counted 248 individual butterflies representing 14 different butterfly species. Statewide, 197 surveys were completed. Of the 118 species of butterflies found in Iowa, 51 species were counted with a total of 10,154 butterflies! The top three species were Clouded Sulfur, Cabbage White, and Pearl Crescent, while some surveyors also reported high numbers of Red Admirals and Monarchs. It was a fun learning experience and we hope to do it again this year. If you'd like a route of your own, give Conservation a call at 712-335-4395. Together we can bring back the Monarchs to Pocahontas!

