

Conservation Corner

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Pocahontas County Naturalist



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On Tuesday, March 20, at 11:15 a.m., Iowans experienced the Spring Equinox. It's official, spring is here. Can the first spring day be far behind? I think everyone's ready for spring, including nature and the butterflies. Yes, Monarch butterflies have been in the news lately as winter counts come in and spring migration begins. Time to encounter the king of the butterflies.

Monarchs are one of the few butterflies that overwinter as adults. Each fall, adult monarchs congregate and migrate to southern California and Mexico. The winter counts for both areas are now in, and numbers are lower than hoped. In California, 150 Xerces Society

members conducted two counts, one on Thanksgiving Day and one on New Year's Day. Total estimated numbers were 192,629 individuals at 262 sites, the second lowest total since 2012. In Mexico, the World Wildlife Federation counted 6.13 acres for a projected number of 93 million individuals. While those numbers may sound good, they are down 15% from last winter, down 85% over the past 20 years, and are less than half the numbers scientists estimate are necessary for a stable Monarch population.

Scientists still believe the Monarchs can be saved. It will take a combined effort, though, by conservation, industry, and public leaders and programs. And while the Monarchs are hanging in there for now, new threats appear each year. Changing weather patterns and more hurricanes and wildfires have affected the numbers this year. After all, even protected overwintering sites and preserves are still vulnerable to natural disasters.

Pesticides also continue to be a threat, not only insecticides that affect caterpillars and adults but also herbicides that affect their habitat. Remember, it's not just Iowa farmers who depend on herbicides for weed control in their corn and soybean fields. It's also cotton and rice farmers in Texas, wheat farmers in Kansas, sugar beet farmers in the Dakotas, you get the idea.

2017 numbers are also in for the Iowa Butterfly Survey Network. Statewide, volunteers completed 504 surveys on 50 sites, reported 53 of Iowa's 120 native species, and counted 25,140 individual butterflies. Of those, 1,168 were Monarchs, many of which were seen during their Sept. 6 – Sept. 24 migration across Iowa. But the most memorable event of 2017 was the population explosion and migration of the Painted Ladies. In total, volunteers counted 9,182 individual Painted Ladies, 8,172 of them during August and September. To put the event in perspective, only 131 Painted Ladies were seen during the entire 2016 survey season!

Here in Pocahontas County, Linda Christoffers, Sue Weiskopf, and myself completed 19 surveys at the Lundberg Slough, Pocahontas Neighborhood, and Varina Wetlands. We recorded 13 species and counted 853 individuals. If walking and counting butterflies sounds like something you could do, give Conservation a call. We'd love to have you join in the fun and science of being an IBSN volunteer, doing our part to monitor butterfly populations and to help save the Monarchs.



North of Sanctuaries March 7, 2018