

2005 is a good year for the butterfly

As the wave of butterflies that continues to move through parts of the valley, heads are turning and taking notice.

The migration of the Painted Lady butterfly has been well covered in the media. People are continuing to ask for more information along with reprints of the past Tribune article. Back issues can be purchased at the office.

The Painted Lady migration is a phenomena triggered by different elements of nature, particularly the weather. The wave of butterflies that continues to hatch is on a one-way journey northward. See the April 8th interview with entomologist, Norman Smith, in the Madera Tribune.

If we get a few successive migratory years in a row we could think about creating a city-wide "butterfly festival." With the help of enthralled people, the monarchs in other areas of the county have certainly made a name for themselves. Why not here with our local variety of butterfly?

To pass along a little research info, some comparisons have been made between birds, monarchs and the Painted Lady whose botanical name is *Vanessa cardui*. It is also known as the Thistle butterfly and Cosmopolite. Its food sources are borage, burdock, mallow, thistle, hollyhock, vetch, fiddleneck and pearly everlasting.

When birds migrate they do so primarily because of food. Winter comes, and mosquitoes and food sources dwindle or become less accessible. Birds fly south and the landscape becomes one big food fest.

The Painted Ladies, which are native to the west, eat and reproduce primarily in the Mojave desert but also in other areas up and down western United States and Mexico. Sometimes they are seen as far north as Canada. Record rain in the desert appears to trigger this desert butterflies migration.

The Monarch, like the Painted Lady, have distinctions that set them apart from other butterflies but neither one tolerates rain or cold very well.

Monarchs begin their migration for the same reason the flowers wither: the weather changes. The monarch butterfly, which is, genetically, a tropical species, cannot survive subfreezing temperatures. And when the monarchs are wet, they are even more vulnerable. They have to move to a more hospitable place to reproduce.

Nineteen ninety-seven was reported to be a spectacular year for eastern monarchs. These travel from Texas to Canada, particularly the Midwest. Citizens were encouraged to turn on their water sprinkles (providing them with drinks) to help them on their way. The

organization, “Monarch Watch” which is accessible through the Internet was definitely on-watch. People everywhere posting sightings and people on-line stayed informed.

“Butterflies spread out across their entire range, From Texas up to Canada, from the Atlantic to the Rockies. Everywhere people might have seen monarchs, they did,” wrote Sue Halpern. “In Lancaster, in Mankato, in Newark, in Buffalo, in Lincoln. And they began to see them in unlikely places, too, such as Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, two hundred miles north of any known milkweed.” Milkweed is the Monarchs primary if not, exclusive food.”

There were lots of butterflies and “people were thrilled to see them in such large numbers, thrilled to walk out of their houses and find them basking in their driveways or clustered in the pines or resting on the ledges of urban skyscrapers. The number of postings on the Internet “Monarch Watch” site increased too, as observers from all over North America recorded their exclamations. It was exciting to watch the numbers and places appear on the screen, exciting the way an election is if your candidate is winning, exciting like the Woman’s World Cup.” (Four Wings and a prayer, by Sue Halpern).

Nature is an intriguing teacher. We learn from her and we learn from the people dedicated to studying nature, one bug, one butterfly, one bird at a time. Still, we have an opportunity to watch and learn with what we have here, with our own native variety of butterfly. The Painted Lady intrigues us, and surprises us, with its springtime appearance. It pulls on our attention as it flutters above our yards and fields as it follows its invisible string north. Heading north, it feeds, multiplies and spreads its beauty before it dies and one knows when it will return again.

When we consider that the last ‘grand’ migration of the Painted Lady was in 1990, we might not want to miss its significance.

Next year or during the next decade, we will look back and say, “2005 was a good year for the butterfly.”

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