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CCR – MI League of Conservation

Voters Lansing Office; Years of Living Dangerously



***1400 at 14, Down to 14...
'14 & Beyond?***

Historically, I've tended to avoid spending time teaching about the Monarch butterfly. Why? It seems that nearly everyone can already recognize one and knows at least a little bit about its life cycle and behavior (milkweed, migration). In keeping with our mission to enhance awareness of, and appreciation for natural diversity with a Michigan twist we'd rather open eyes to any of myriad butterflies and moths that are much less recognized and understood, but of no less importance as components to a healthy, functioning, diverse, and inherently more interesting ecosystem.

Like the Monarch, the larva of most any species feeds on only one or a small list of plants. Just as would happen to the monarch if milkweed disappeared, each of these lepidopteran species stands the risk of at least local extinction if its food plant is broadly pulled, 'dozed, or, at a currently frightening pace, poisoned.

An elementary school-level course could be offered surrounding the identification and connectivity of each lepidopteran to its larval food plant, and, ultimately, to the broader ecosystem. The course would traverse science core curriculum necessities such as life cycles, food chains, natural communities, adaptation, ecology, and more.

For instance the spiny larva of the Great Spangled Fritillary, another large, showy, orange butterfly in our state, feeds on nothing but violets. Every first grader can learn that, like milkweed means monarchs, violets mean fritillaries. Then, it's on to nettles meaning Red Admirals, sheep sorrel meaning American Coppers, thistles meaning Painted Ladies, asters meaning Pearl Crescents, etc.

Oh, and they're sure to grasp how the butterfly-less flipside works, too. How can the acquisition of such knowledge be anything but beneficial to the future adult's sense of connectedness and responsibility toward stewardship of the ecosystem in which he or she lives? We better get busy before it's too late.

A deep personal concern over the erosion of natural diversity in our world drives our business. Audiences of kids are often told to ask their parents if they can remember some wild bird, insect or other wild creature they saw all the time when they were kids, but, now they rarely or never see. We tell them



that every one of their parents should be able to name a few, if not, more. (“Fireflies” is often mentioned.) Then, we break the news that when they are their parents’ age, and if they have kids of their own, they will be telling *them* about wild living things, the commonality of which is taken for granted now, that are no longer around.

Circumstances have changed. I am more than ready to discuss the Monarch now, and, in the process, clarify the “14”-laden title...

In last month’s *Wild Times* I wrote of my boyhood on Chicago’s northwest side, and of my friend, Goose, who was the only other kid in the neighborhood who shared my passion for all things wild.

Mid-September, 1971. School had been back in session barely more than a week. After a whole summer of free days, Saturdays had regained a precious status in our lives. On this particular sunny, cool morning, Goose and I found ourselves together on the corner of Eddy and Springfield, equidistant from our houses. We sat on the curb trying to come up with a source of amusement to pursue through the day.

Goose squinted into the cloudless blue sky and matter-of-factly announced, “There goes a Monarch.” The orange, fluttering object against the bright azure backdrop passed over our heads pushed by a gentle northerly breeze in a leisurely fashion, alternately gliding then fluttering again, then spiraling in a few lazy circles before disappearing over the rooftops to the south.

“Oh yeah,” I replied, eyes still to the sky. “I’ve noticed a few, too. There’s another one.” Same direction, north to south. We were well aware that Monarchs migrated through our latitude in September, and that sunny, cool days, especially, with abundant thermals keeping them afloat, were perfect days for these insects to cover ground in their migration to Mexico.

This butterfly hadn’t even disappeared before another was in sight, then two more, then three more. Ten had just flown over in less than two minutes! Suddenly, we were in middle of an unexpected Monarch-counting game. We watched our watches, kept counting, and the Monarchs kept coming.

By 11am and well over 100 Monarchs spotted from our street corner, our day’s diversion was well in place. How many would we count from this corner if we kept at it all day? We were determined to find out. If one of us had to run home to go to the john or get something to eat, the other kept the count going alone. We moved from the curb and into the street to get a maximum view of the airspace over the trees so we wouldn’t miss any. When a car approached we moved to the side to let it pass then drifted back to the middle. As the sun neared its zenith in early afternoon the frequency of sightings increased. In a few instances ten butterflies were in view at the same time... 488, 489, ... 490, 91, 92, 93, ... 494, 95, 96, ... 497, ... 498, 499, 500!” We high-fived in the street, but couldn’t celebrate for long. “501, 502, ...” Through mid-afternoon, the flight remained fast and furious. Milestone numbers 600, 700, 800 and 900 rocketed past.

Another celebration at 1,000! We were blown-away that this many could fly over a single city street corner. How many hundreds of thousands of Monarchs passed over all of Chicago on this day alone?

As 6pm approached, each of us broke, in turn, to run home and grab some dinner. When they heard what we were doing all household members thought we were nuts. One of my older sisters got a laugh out of the other sibs when she said there were probably only a few butterflies flying in a big circle that we kept recounting all day. I didn’t like that. This was serious *science* to Goose and me.

As the sun crept toward the rooftop horizon, the thermals slowly abated as did the flight’s intensity.

When we passed 1,300 we knew that getting to the next hundred-milestone would be difficult. The rate trickled to only one or two per minute. No butterflies were high in the air now. They passed barely over the tree tops. Others even began passing underneath the canopy not far over our heads.

When the sun finally disappeared below roofline we noticed some low-flying butterflies searching among hanging branches for suitable night roosts. We marveled at how one individual would flutter from one leafy branch to another in a seemingly random manner before finally settling on a leaf – not randomly at all, but right next to another butterfly that had settled there minutes before. Were they finding each other by sight or by smell? We weren't sure, but they definitely were aware of each other. Amassing this way to spend the night must have been advantageous to their survival. By dusk several small clusters of Monarchs clung to branches within our view.

We succeeded in passing 1,400, but just barely. Goose and I had acquired an odd record of which we bragged to friends and family. Most seemed not as incredulous over the number of Monarchs over one street corner as we were. Were they taking the news of our day-long observation with a grain of salt?

Every year since then I've been keenly aware of my first Monarch-sighting of the summer and noting the date. The first arrival has almost always appeared in early to mid-June, then, was quickly followed by more. A month later, after the new arrivals laid eggs on local milkweeds and larvae grew then metamorphosed into a fresh generation, the species would become common the rest of the summer.

Well, not as much over the last fifteen years or so. In step with my observations, items popped up in the news about the butterfly's decline, largely blamed on deforestation in central Mexico where all the Monarchs from Eastern North America overwinter.

Enter Summer of '13: For the first time in memory, June came and went without a single Monarch sighting. I finally spotted my first in early July. Carol and I do not have office jobs. We spend a ridiculous amount of time under the sky every day of the summer. We travel all over the state conducting wildlife programs, as well, and, in so doing last year, I found that this was not merely a mid-Michigan phenomenon. Naturalists at nature centers, interpreters at state parks, and others shared similar observations. Alan Wernette is the MDNR interpreter at Ludington State Park, where abundant milkweed lining the shoreline has always meant abundant Monarchs. The milkweed is still abundant, but Wernette states, "In 2013 I could count on one hand the number of adult stage Monarchs I saw all year." For the first time since that day in September when I was 14 I kept a Monarch count, not for a day, but throughout the whole summer. It was too easy to keep track. By September in 2013 my grand total was – you guessed it – 14!



Eight-year-old Hope Hoedel "wears" a live Monarch. Will they still be around when her daughter is eight?

Flashback to a Joni Mitchell song from the early 70s. Heck, we may have heard it on our transistor radios the same day we counted that ridiculous number of butterflies. "Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone..." You know the rest of *Big Yellow Taxi*. Paradise is, indeed, being paved. Will our complacency kill the Monarch, or can we muster the resolve to save it?

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/01/29/monarch-butterflies-decline/5028977/>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/01/29/the-monarch-butterfly-population-just-hit-a-record-low-heres-why/>

2014 Monarch Count Update... July 4: 3.

-Jim McGrath

Feeding Frenzy

SUNDAY,
JULY 13



Doors open from 1 to 5pm. Admission \$5/person.



Who doesn't love feeding time at the zoo? That's why we've set up a whole afternoon of nothing but... With over 100 hungry Michigan-native reptiles and amphibians of 43 species, plus an always-hungry red-footed tortoise, plus our "farm" of growing giant silk moth caterpillars, there will be a LOT of feeding. Throughout the day, knowledgeable staff is on hand to mingle with visitors, giving everyone up-close opportunities to watch snakes, turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards eat a wide variety of foods – fruits and vegetables plus many kinds of small animals, including worms, slugs, insects galore, fish, frogs, toads and even mice.

- We'll provide nets for you to catch your own insects around the yard and on the trails to feed to frogs of all 13 species found in the state. Tree frogs will take one right out of your fingers!
- Feed food sticks, worms and fish to 20 aquatic turtles in small pools on the patio. Small ones will take food right out of your fingers!
- Meet our large snapping turtle as we take it out for a walk, then watch it chase minnows in a pool.
- Pick mulberries to feed to our box turtles and tortoise.
- Learn to identify all 3 species of Michigan garter snakes then watch them eat worms, fish and frogs.
- Watch a hognose snake consume a live toad.
- Hold specimens of all sizes of the Black Rat Snake, Michigan's largest. Then, watch some of them eat frozen, thawed mice.
- Meet 9 species of Michigan salamanders, then watch some of them eat worms and insects.
- Watch impressive Polyphemus, Cecropia, Prometheus and Luna caterpillars devour leaves of a variety of native trees. Arrange to take some home to raise into large and beautiful moths.
- Staff is always on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit.



A circle of curious kids surrounds a hognose snake as it consumes a toad.

Last Chance to Raise Giant Silk Moth Larvae this Summer



Larvae will be available for sale through the middle of July. Check the website for purchase information.



Catch Us on Coffee Break Friday, July 18

Jim is scheduled to appear on Friday, July 18 at 9:15am, discussing larvae and food plants of various Michigan butterflies. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at lcc.edu/radio/onair/ or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at lcc.edu/tv/watch. We'll post a reminder on our Facebook fan page.

Around the State in July

- ❖ *Friday, July 4: 7:30pm. Michigan Turtles Presentation; Hartwick Pines SP, Grayling.*
- ❖ *Saturday, July 5: 1:30pm. Giant Silk Moths Presentation; Hartwick Pines SP, Grayling.*
- ❖ *Tuesday, July 8: 10:30am. Giant Silk Moths Presentation; Fremont Public Library.*
- ❖ *Sunday, July 13: 10am to 2pm. Michigan Turtles Exhibit; Williamston Farmer's Market.*
- ❖ *Monday, July 14: 10:30am. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Prime Time Senior Program, E. Lansing.*
- ❖ *Saturday, July 19: 10:30am. MI Snakes Presentation; Huron County Nature Center.*
- ❖ *10:30am. MI Reptiles & Amphibians; Wabasis Lake Park Campground, Greenville.*
- ❖ *Thursday, July 24: 3-6pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Ludington SP.*
- ❖ *Thursday, July 24: 7pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Ludington SP.*
- ❖ *Saturday, July 26: 8pm. Michigan Snakes Presentation; Hartwick Pines SP, Grayling.*
- ❖ *Sunday, July 27: 1:30pm. Seldom Seen MI Herps Presentation; Hartwick Pines SP, Grayling.*



CCR – New Lansing MLCV Office; Watch “Years of Living Dangerously”

At Beggar’s Banquet in East Lansing last week, we attended a “Watch Party” hosted by staff from a new field office of the Michigan League of Conservation Voters that just opened in Lansing. They showed the fifth episode of the currently-running Showtime series, *Years of Living Dangerously*.

This is a 9-part documentary series focusing on climate change - and a must-see for anyone (everyone) who relies on fossil fuel consumption in their daily lives. The first episode premiered on April 13. For more, visit www.yearsoflivingdangerously.com. The first episode is available to watch from this website now.



If you’d like to get involved on a local scale (We are!) or find out more about Lansing’s MLCV office, contact them at rami.mlcv@gmail.com or at 735-620-8306.

More for your perusal: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/25/business/economy/carbon-cuts-now-wont-stop-climate-change-but-could-limit-damage.html?_r=0

Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!



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