



The Marvelous **MONARCH**

By Julie Catalano

By the time you read this, millions of monarch butterflies will be in the final stretch of their nearly 3,000-mile journey to spend the winter in Mexico, and Texans have a front row seat to one of nature's epic migrations.

From around mid-October to mid-November, countless monarchs winging their way south from Canada use Texas like a giant funnel, focusing on two main pathways from north to south — the central flyway that cuts a roughly 300-mile swath including Austin, San Antonio and the Hill Country; and the coastal flyway along the entire Gulf of Mexico coastline all the way to the tip of Texas. These are the peak months, but in fact monarchs enter the state's central flyway even earlier.

By mid-September of this year, Javier Gonzalez, naturalist educator at South Padre Island Birding, Nature Center and Alligator Sanctuary on South Padre Island, had already seen a

few harbingers of the spectacle to come as the monarchs get closer to their destination. "Sometimes the weather will push the migration further inland," he says, "but most of the time it actually hugs the coastline." Traditionally heavy September rains on the coastline fuel the growth of seaside goldenrods, sunflowers, asters and milkweed to sustain the flyers. "It's like a highway of food all the way down."

The fall migration is extra special because this is the annual journey of the "super generation" of monarchs — bigger and stronger with lifespans up to eight months as opposed to the usual month or so.

The monarchs will need that food as stored energy for hibernation in their wintering grounds in about a dozen Oyamel fir forests at elevations of 10,000 feet in the states of Michoacán and Mexico, creating a spectacular black, white and orange kaleidoscope effect, practically obscuring the trees they roost in by the millions. The trees create a microclimate that protects them until it's time for the spring migration when they head back north, where up to five generations of regular monarchs fly, feed, breed and die before their trip is complete.

"Texas is an extremely important state along the migration route in that they are the last U.S. state before they hit Mexico," says Amy Snelgrove, project and data management for Texan by Nature (TBN), an Austin-based nonprofit organization founded in 2011 by former first lady Laura Bush to unite leaders in business and conservation in the preservation of the state's natural resources. "They are also the first state they hit on the way north," adds Snelgrove, "laying their eggs on milkweed, their only host plant. That puts us as a very important stretch as we are setting them up for success heading north in the spring."

A National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant allowed TBN to host the first South-Central Monarch Symposium in 2017, where more than 200 monarch conservation partners and scientists representing more than 80 organizations convened at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin to identify key strategies for the recovery of the monarch in the south-central region of the migratory pathway. TBN's partners include Monarch Joint Venture, Master Naturalists, Texas A&M Agrilife Extension, National Wildlife Federation and Texas Parks & Wildlife Department.

The monarch is not on the endangered species list, but for a pollinator and indicator species (meaning one that reflects the general health of an ecosystem) the numbers are troubling. According to TBN, the number of monarch butterflies west of the Rocky Mountains — the ones who overwinter on the California coast — have dropped to fewer than 30,000, compared to 1.2 million two decades ago. The monarchs east of the Rockies are the ones funneling through Texas, and the news there is better, says Snelgrove. "The count in Mexico last fall was the highest population they've had in more than 10 years. We're excited to see what comes through here in the spring migration in March."

But one good rebound does not a recovery make, and efforts are ramping up to protect the monarch and everything it needs to keep the momentum going. Like the real estate mantra that repeats location as key, the future of the monarch is all about habitat, habitat, habitat. And that means more milkweed —



PHOTOS BY JAVIER GONZALES



the only plant that monarch caterpillars eat and the only plant where monarchs lay their eggs. The milkweed plant has been devastated by increased use of herbicides and insecticides, killing not only the plant itself but the young caterpillars feeding on it. Another enemy of the milkweed? "Lawn mowers," says Gonzalez.

How can Texans help? Snelgrove recommends contacting sources such as Monarch Watch or Texas A&M Agrilife Extension for advice on planting and cultivating a combination of native milkweed and regional nectaring plants to create a welcoming waystation. TBN's Project Certification provides organizations and individuals with meaningful recognition for conservation efforts. Their site also has a Monarch Resources page to help in creating or restoring a monarch habitat for homes, groups and businesses. Everyone can do their part, say both Snelgrove and Gonzalez, to keep these magnificent monarchs happy, healthy and on the move for generations to come. ♦

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