

Alarm sounds for monarchs

Parks protect winter habitats, but insects aren't getting there

Kris Millgate
Special to USA TODAY

There's a silent spectacle in Yosemite National Park screaming for attention. It's rarely noticed over the ruckus of bear jams, bighorn sheep stops and deer crossings, but it's significant in its own flighty way. It's the appearance of monarch butterflies. They wing through Yosemite seeking milkweed, a plant in short supply outside the park.

"There's a big push in the U.S. for pollinator habitat, and we include monarchs in that," says Dave Trevino, a wildlife biologist with the National Park Service. "Many of our parks are planting habitats that include milkweed."

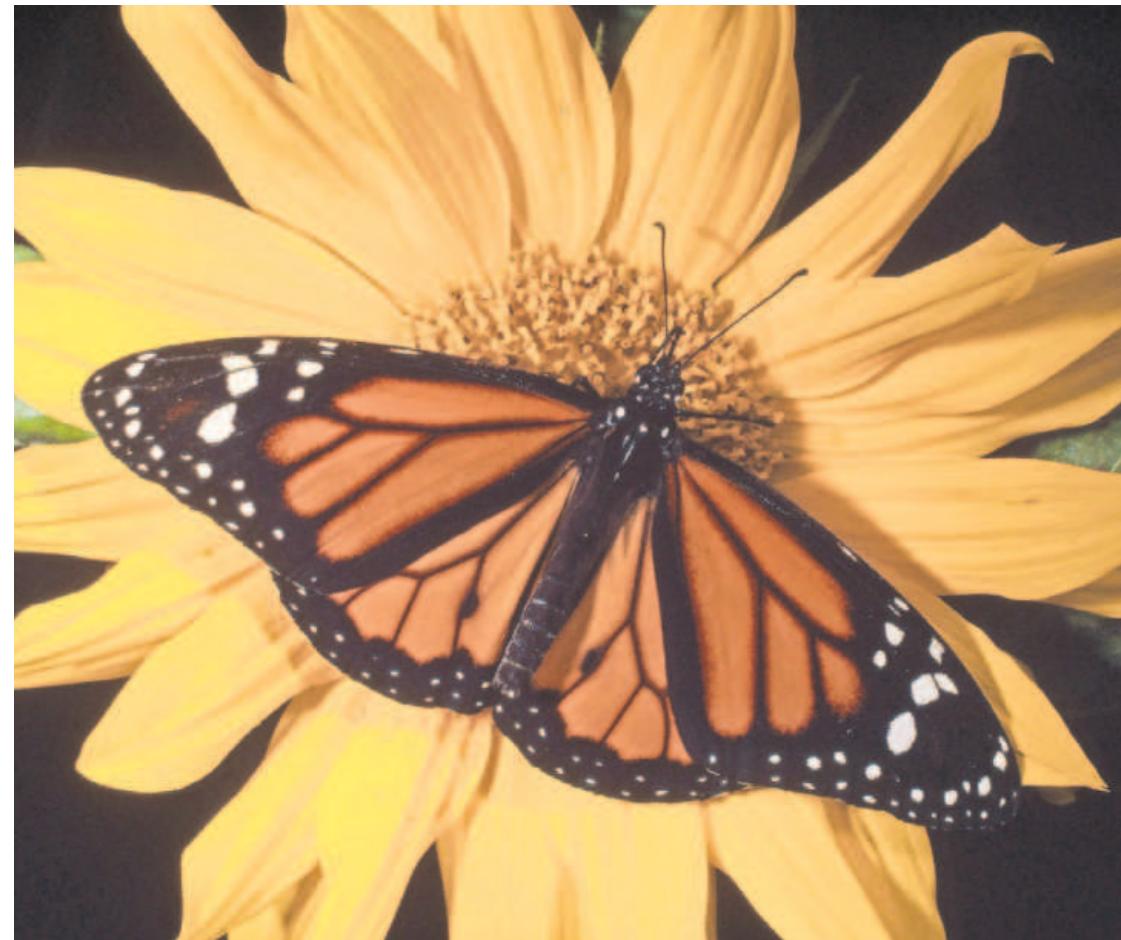
The USA has two distinct populations of monarchs: eastern and western. Eastern monarchs winter in Mexico, and their numbers are on the rise after slumping for several years. Western monarchs, however, are far from rising. They're disappearing. The number of monarchs overwintering on the California coast plunged dramatically in 2018, dropping 85%. Only 28,429 monarchs arrived. Population collapse has been predicted at 30,000.

"It's a pretty big deal they've collapsed in one year," says Emma Pelton, a conservation biologist with the Xerces Society. "Our worst fear is they disappear before we figure out what's happening."

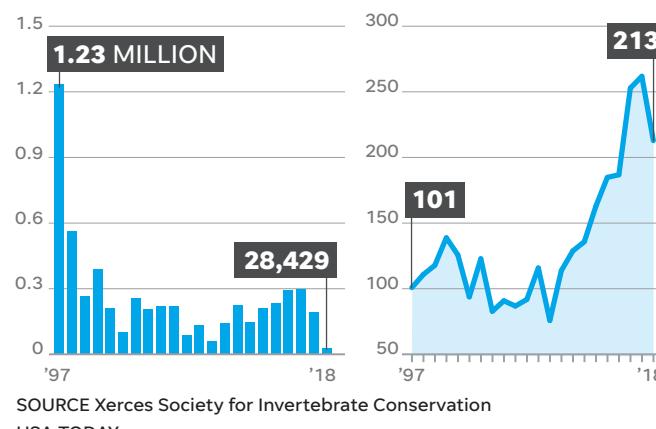
National parks could help slow the slide to extinction. The park service protects 11 monarch overwintering sites in California, including Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Point Reyes National Seashore. If monarchs make it to the west for winter, they're set — but they're not making it. The cause of the decline could be urban sprawl, rural practices, more people, less vegetation. Whatever it is, the insect population is slipping faster than a solution is developing.

"The drop in Western population numbers is a punch in the gut for a lot of us," Trevino says. "But if you let things get you down in conservation work, you won't be in conservation work that long."

It is understandable why big animals dominate the spotlight in national parks. Cubs, lambs and fawns are more exciting to watch than monarch caterpillars creeping along on milkweed. While their show is not as impressive, their rate of return on future fertility outnumbers bigger animals by a factor of hundreds — and that may be



More monitoring sites are looking for western monarch butterflies, but fewer are being reported. Sightings and sites:



what brings monarchs back.

"The thing about working with insects is they rebound really quickly," Pelton says. "It's not one egg. It's hundreds of eggs, and there can be fast results."

New finds are possible, too. The park service manages Dinosaur National Monument in Utah. A handful of years ago, staff thought monarchs didn't use the desert terrain there.

Now they know better.

"One of the issues with monarchs is we don't really know their migratory pathways especially coming out of that corner of western Colorado and eastern Utah. It's a big blank spot on the map," Trevino says. "The park didn't realize it had monarchs until I was rafting with my family and saw them."

There's a new program pro-



Monarch butterflies start out as striped caterpillars (above) before emerging in the familiar orange, black and white (top).

TOP: KEVIN SCHAFER, WWF-CANON;
ABOVE: KRIS MILLGATE

moting pollinators, specifically monarchs, in the Dinosaur area. Making sure they survive is the next hurdle. "The Park Service views itself as an integral partner in this all-hands-on-deck response," Trevino says.

Outdoor journalist Kris Millgate (tightlinemedia.com) is based in Idaho. Her first book, My Place Among Men, publishes in August.