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Monarch Butterflies Migrating From Mexico Visit KC Early

Warm weather arrived early this spring, and so did large numbers of monarch butterflies in the Kansas City area. The first seemingly fragile orange and black butterflies spotted flitting near spring flowers in recent weeks migrated all the way from wintering grounds in Mexico. They almost beat the emergence of milkweed plants, which adult monarchs need to lay eggs upon, and caterpillars need to grow and move the life cycle forward.

The first monarchs arrived in the region on April 8, said Orley R. “Chip” Taylor, founder and director of Monarch Watch based at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. Three days of strong southwest winds starting on April 7 helped monarchs move northward from Oklahoma 300 miles in three days.

“They got ahead of milkweed,” Taylor said. “The result was lots of eggs on the few milkweeds that emerged. This is the most unusual return we have observed in 25 years. They were about two weeks ahead of time, and we often don’t see monarchs until May.”

Staff at the Missouri Department of Conservation’s (MDC) Anita B. Gorman Discovery Center in Kansas City noticed the early arrival because monarchs were searching for blooms and landing on milkweed plants that had barely poked up from the ground. MDC staff observed on April 21 that eggs had hatched and numerous caterpillars a quarter-inch long were feeding on milkweed. They will soon grow and enter the pupae stage, and by early May will emerge as adult monarch butterflies.

How this bodes for monarch numbers as summer progresses remains to be seen, depending on weather, habitat quality and predation on larvae.

Monarch butterfly populations have declined sharply in the United States due to declining habitat with milkweed plants, and habitat losses at wintering ground in Mexico.

People can help monarchs, and all butterfly and moth species, by using native plants, shrubs and trees in home landscape plantings. The butterflies and moths are dependent on specific plant species for their life cycles. Monarchs are reliant on milkweed.

Birds also benefit from native species growing in a home or business landscape. Caterpillars are a key part of their summer diet. Most non-native plants do not host butterfly or moth life cycles because the insects evolved with natives. Think of native plants as summer bird feeders.

For information on monarch butterflies and providing monarch butterfly habitat in landscape plantings, visit <http://on.mo.gov/2pxcS5T> and <http://on.mo.gov/2bfilCK>.

MDC can assist acreage or farm owners with large plantings that benefit pollinator species, such as butterflies and bees. Cost share funds may be available for some eligible projects. For information about MDC services for private lands, visit <https://mdc.mo.gov/property> or call your local MDC office. For information about creating large-scale habitat for monarchs and other butterflies, visit <http://on.mo.gov/2p29TRx>.