MLMP Updates: May - June 2013

The Importance of Absence Data!

We've been patiently awaiting the monarch arrival at MLMP headquarters at the University of Minnesota. The milkweed shot up at our monitoring site and many surrounding sites around May 15th, close to a month later than last year. We haven't found a single monarch egg or larva during the two weeks we've been monitoring. The lack isn't surprising; both MLMP volunteers south of us and Journey North observers (see Journey North's spring migration map) have seen very low numbers of monarchs during the 2013 spring migration. These low numbers follow a record low overwintering population (see our April newsletter article on the spring migration).

Please monitor your milkweed and report your data even if you aren't seeing monarchs. Absence data are IMPORTANT! Absence data are collected when milkweed is present but monarchs are not, in the early spring or late fall, or during a low abundance year. These data document the timing of monarch arrival and departure, as well as years that numbers are low. If you don't report the absence of monarchs, we can't analyze the factors that contribute to variations in monarch timing or numbers.

While you are monitoring this season, feel free to get in touch with us! We'd love to hear about any interesting findings that you encounter (make sure to take pictures!), or answer any questions that you have about monarchs, monarch habitat, or MLMP protocols.

Monitoring Tips

Empty eggs. Some predatory insects pierce and suck out monarch eggs, leaving only the empty chorion attached to the milkweed. An empty egg often appears as a translucent, wispy structure, like the egg photographed by volunteer Martha Richardson as she was monitoring antelope horn milkweed (Asclepias asperula) near her house this spring. Other dead eggs can appear black in color, but make sure to look closely. Healthy eggs that are about to hatch appear dark near the top of the egg just before the caterpillar is ready to emerge. If an egg has unusual dark coloring, chances are that it is dead, and possibly parasitized. Keep an eye out for dead monarch eggs and larvae and remember to make note of them in the appropriate sections of MLMP monarch density datasheets.

Need a quick review? Check out the MLMP Online Training video series and share it with your friends. Use it to refresh your memory of monarch biology or ways to distinguish larval instars, or brush up on MLMP activity protocols.

Report monarchs that you see "off-site". If you see monarch eggs, larvae, pupae, or adults when you're traveling, or if you aren't a regular MLMP volunteers, you can still report your monarch sightings. You just need to know the location, date, and stage of the monarch(s) that you see. You can also report the milkweed species, or anything else that seems important. Check out our anecdotal reports form!
Florida Winter Monitoring Report

We received an update from the Northern Gulf Coast of Florida about winter monarch sightings from Richard RuBino. Richard’s report provides details about the first season of monitoring monarchs in four counties along the Florida Gulf Coast (Wakulla, Franklin, Gulf, and Bay).

Fifty-one enthusiastic volunteers collected data throughout January and February 2013. They reported adult monarchs sighted and the behaviors and condition of those monarchs, milkweed species and location, egg and larvae observations, and weather readings. Because temperatures rarely dip below freezing, both milkweeds and monarchs can persist in these counties during the winter.

Volunteers saw 512 monarchs during the two month period, most of which were reported as in “good” or “excellent” condition, suggesting they may not have been migratory monarchs, but rather newly eclosed locals. In January, ten pairs of mating monarchs were observed, but none in February. One volunteer tagged adult monarchs at his site and noted multiple re-sightings or re-captures of those tagged individuals near the milkweed. This suggests that the milkweed may have given the monarchs a reason to stick around rather than migrating. All but a few reports of milkweed in the study area during January and February were non-native tropical milkweed (A. curassavica), primarily in residential gardens.

Egg and larvae observations were sporadic, but reported throughout the study timeframe. One location had two reports of about 100 eggs, 15 days apart from one another. Do monarch butterflies overwinter along the northern Gulf Coast of Florida? Yes, at least during the winter of 2013. Whether monarchs overwinter along this coast every year can be determined only by continuing this monitoring effort, but this year’s data give us a great start!

Reader Feedback: Please send suggestions or content for future e-newsletters! If you have questions about monarchs, Ask The Expert. Email: info@mlmp.org or call 612-625-8304

A FALL MONARCH
A monarch puts an egg beneath a frond, Where there it briefly bonds
Upon this leaf 5 days,
Then hatching, eating, here it 2 weeks stays,
Abides this host till 2-inch this worm weighs,
Then ventures forth to hang --
A pupa in a day, and 10 days it will change.

’Tis then this chrysalis turns black and splits --
And butterfly exits
To hang about to dry
And then she drops and flops before she flies;
Her wings have grown with blood to sail the sky.
’Tis August's fading glow,
And monarchs hatching now, to migrate only know.

To mid-Iowa will this monarch waft,
2 weeks she southward drafts --
Kansas, Oklahoma;
By mid-October over Wichita;
By wind and instinct, causing people awe;
November, Texas stays,
December, Mexico, 3/4ths her journey’s made.

By mid-December, central Mexico,
3 months these woods she’ll know,
Then northward she will fly,
her orange and black-veined wings will glint the sky.
And Texas she will catch a suitor's eye,
And here a new age lays,
Which in a month flies north, but she will pass away.

G. Kittell
Mar 2013

Tropical milkweed is in Florida during all seasons—these caterpillars were munching at a FL MLMP site in June 2012. Photo by Catherine and William Long