

Working Together for Monarchs

Story by Iris Caldwell and Abigail Derby Lewis

EACH YEAR, PEOPLE across North America bear witness to one of nature's most dramatic events: the annual monarch butterfly migration. The eastern population of the monarch butterfly makes a 3,000-mile trek from Mexico up to Canada and back. But each year, fewer are making the trip: over the last two decades the monarch population has decreased by 90 percent. Experts agree a main threat to the species is habitat loss, including shortages of milkweed and nectaring sources across urban, suburban, and agricultural landscapes. These landscapes have been shaped by increasing herbicide use and development. On a positive note, the monarch has created a movement whereby anyone can come to the table (homeowners, farmers, rights-of-way, metro areas) and address the challenges the monarch faces.

Preserving monarchs and their remarkable migration requires creating and protecting habitats across North America that are crucial throughout its life cycle—including habitat for breeding, migrating and overwintering. It requires an all-hands-on-deck conservation strategy that relies on all land use types to provide monarch butterfly habitat.

The Monarch Conservation Science Partnership (MCSP), comprised of leading experts on monarch biology and conservation, agrees that significant habitat restoration and enhancement will be required across rights-of-way, agricultural, urban and protected lands in order to substantively lower

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the risk of extinction for the eastern monarch population. This demands an unprecedented level of coordination among individuals, organizations and government agencies.

In May 2015, the White House's Pollinator Health Task Force issued the *National Strategy to Promote the Health of Honey Bees and Other Pollinators*. The plan directed federal agencies to develop strategies and make investments to reverse pollinator population declines. It also set population targets for monarch butterflies and honey bees with the additional goal to restore and enhance seven million acres of new pollinator habitat by 2020.

Additionally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been petitioned to list the monarch butterfly under the Endangered Species Act, with a decision expected in June 2019. A Species Status Assessment and Status Review are currently under way to provide the scientific foundation for the policy decision. During this time, conservation efforts also are under way to help provide food and habitat for monarchs across the landscape, and with the hope that there will be significant progress thereby precluding the need to list the monarch.

The all-hands-on-deck approach needed to help stabilize the monarch population has already taken root

in Illinois. Emerging efforts illustrate a deep commitment to increasing monarch habitat, which in turn benefits other pollinators, birds and a variety of wildlife, and includes co-benefits such as stormwater retention and decreased mowing costs.

The monarch butterfly has been identified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan. Last year, a statewide survey gathered information about monarch conservation activities occurring in both public and private sectors. Leaders from across five key sectors (agriculture, rights-of-way, urban, natural lands and education) convened for a summit in September 2016, kicking off an integrated strategy development process for conservation and collaboration across the state.

Examples of monarch efforts across different sectors in Illinois include development of the Rights-of-Way as Habitat Working Group, led by researchers at the University of Illinois-Chicago. Launched in 2015, the group engages transportation and utility organizations and promotes opportunities for restoring and enhancing pollinator habitat along roadsides, railroads and utility corridors. These rights-of-way landscapes are



Monarch photo courtesy of Zach Paolillo, The Field Museum.

To learn more, or to participate in the collaborative effort in Illinois, visit dnr.illinois.gov/conservation/NaturalHeritage/Pages/MonarchButterflySummit.aspx.

important not only because they account for millions of acres of semi-protected land across the U.S. but also because they intersect and connect existing habitat and otherwise favorable environments.

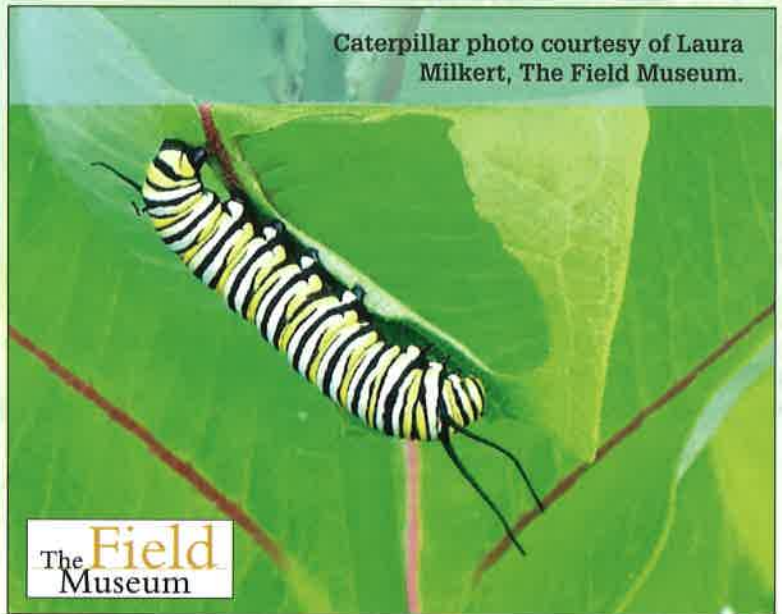
The agricultural sector also is making strides through the Monarch Collaborative. The Keystone Policy Center brought together a diverse group of committed stakeholders, including scientists, conservationists, farmers and the private sector, to find collaborative solutions to strengthen monarch populations and habitat. The Collaborative draws upon the expertise and experience of its members to identify and promote practices that support monarch butterfly populations across agricultural landscapes.

Exciting efforts are coalescing in the urban sector, too. Chicago Wilderness is developing a regional plan for monarch conservation that can act as a model for other urban regions. This effort builds upon the Urban Monarch Conservation Design developed by The Field Museum and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (fieldmuseum.org/science/research/area/keller-science-action-center/science-action-chicago/monarchs-view-city). The products include a Guidebook and a set of mapping and analytical tools that helps to identify the best places and methods to create habitat in urban areas.

With so many intersecting efforts to choose from, become part of the collective action today! ■



It is crucial that habitat for monarchs is provided throughout their life cycle, including milkweeds for caterpillars and nectar sources for adults. Photo by Iris Caldwell.



Caterpillar photo courtesy of Laura Milkert, The Field Museum.

BIOS



Iris Caldwell, P.E., is a Research Engineer at the Energy Resources Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She facilitates the Rights-of-Way as Habitat Working Group and other efforts to engage industries in pollinator habitat conservation. She has also been involved in the Illinois statewide monarch conservation strategy development.



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