

# Connecting with Nature on Fiscalini Ranch Preserve: The Plight of Monarchs



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The future for California's monarch butterflies is not looking bright. Their numbers have fallen since the 1980s from 4.5 million to 2,000. On Fiscalini Ranch Preserve, around 20,000 were counted in the winter of 2015/2016. This year the count was 8. Clearly this is a crisis.

Threats to the monarch population are many but loss of habitat tops the list. In order to breed, monarchs require native milkweed – only native milkweed is timed to their natural cycles of migration – near nectar plants so adults can feed. They also need nectar plants along their migration routes. Both resources are in short supply as development and pesticide use continue to rise.

Overwintering sites where butterflies gather to rest are also vital to monarchs. Sites on public lands like Fiscalini Ranch Preserve and Pismo Beach are protected from development. Sites on private land are not.

Ironically, even public concern can threaten monarch survival. Many people who are motivated to help keep this iconic species alive plant non-native milkweed or hand rear caterpillars. Both practices are linked to fatal disease that contribute to their decline.



Even planting native milkweed within five miles of the coast can upset the natural cycles of migration and breeding that have served monarchs so well up to now.

Laws are not helping. A California Superior Court Judge recently ruled that the State's Endangered Species Act does not apply to insects, so it offers no protection for butterflies. Although the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found that Western monarchs have a 70% chance of going extinct within a decade, the species was not a high-enough priority to list as endangered.

But hope is not lost. Species have rebounded from low numbers before, and it was recently discovered that the Western and Eastern populations mix more than was once thought. That gives each a possible lifeline to recovery.

On the Central Coast, you can help monarch butterflies by avoiding pesticide use, including winter-flowering plants in your garden, and reporting sightings of monarchs to national networks through iNaturalist or WesternMonarchMilkweedMapper.

Informed compassion is your best tool for helping monarchs return to our forests and gardens.