

2020 Interview with Mia Monroe:

Questions Asked:

1. When and why did you get involved in monarch conservation?
2. How would you describe the monarch-related work you do?
3. Can you describe some of your past and present monarch experiences and observations?
3. Have you noticed any changes in monarch populations over time?
4. What are your thoughts on the current status of western monarchs and/or overwintering sites in Sonoma County?

Mia's Response:

My early fascination with monarchs was fostered by my nature-loving family who encouraged me to find caterpillars in nature and watch the amazing, beautiful [metamorphosis](#) to a monarch butterfly while also learning the indispensable link to milkweed. We would journey to the nearby overwintering sites at [Pacific Grove](#) and [Santa Cruz](#) to learn about the value of those refuges and appreciate having them as part of our lives as Californians.

As a young national park ranger I became involved in a study managed by [The Xerces Society](#) to inventory the population of western monarchs in the overwintering coastal zone. This was in the 1980s, and this taught me the skills to be alert for monarch behavior, find overwintering clusters, and how to count and enter useful data. I also met with many biologists to learn about possible [threats](#), [trends](#), [overwintering site qualities](#), and questions about [monarch migration](#).

This was a very exciting time but although it seemed to me monarchs were abundant and doing well these scientists were already voicing concern about lower numbers, overwintering site losses and other looming threats in the breeding areas of the West (i.e. [loss of milkweed](#)).

The next big step was setting up a monitoring program to systematically check in on monarchs, especially during overwintering. Knowledgeable biologists suggested a regular and systematic count around Thanksgiving—a time considered to have the maximum population at the groves since it's a date that usually falls before the big winter storms.

Last year, we were already very concerned by the steep decline (aka: extinction vortex) since so few monarchs were born, and only a handful (less than 30,000) arrived to overwinter. Then, over Thanksgiving weekend, a massive storm moved in, knocking most monarchs out of the trees and further weakening the surviving population.

Over the years, I have helped establish the [Thanksgiving Count](#). Volunteers like me, under auspices of The Xerces Society, undergo [training](#) and fan out to check in on the overwintering sites. We now have added a New Years Count (to see what the possible

breeding population in early spring could be) and other goals such as noting arrival time at overwintering sites, nectar plant choices, and impacts of storms. We also take weather measurements.

I coordinate teams around SF Bay Area and work closely with the Sonoma volunteers as well as those in my home county of Marin. Many volunteers are local and can educate their neighbors and communities. The overwintering sites at the upper and lower limits are very important, especially in this era of climate change when monarchs may need to move northward if things get warmer at the larger sites in Central CA... Although we focus on the overwintering sites to get monarchs through to breeding time, other places to rest, regroup, and ride out storms or smoke are invaluable, too, and some of the Sonoma County sites may offer this kind of refuge.

Also, while the *big* sites are invaluable and great for public viewing, many smaller sites are essential in case those large sites get impacted (ex: a tree falls down and opens the site to wind and rain).

In Sonoma County, there is wonderful potential of educating public at the [Bodega Dunes State Park](#) with interpretive signs and knowledgeable staff as well as the great efforts to provide nectar plants at [Sea Ranch](#) now underway.

I am thrilled by much else happening in Sonoma County from the call to plant [monarch waystations](#), the pollinator gardens in [Sonoma](#) and at [Cornerstone](#), the [master gardener programs](#) and early efforts to locate wild milkweed to protect and expand these invaluable breeding areas!

My volunteer work as a community scientist is so rewarding and this is an invaluable way for others to help document sightings, breeding success and more. Check out the [Western Monarch Call to Action](#) at the Xerces website to learn how to help and participate!

Most of the Sonoma sites have been known for decades, and, with a little care, the groves could once again offer important haven for monarchs as they move towards our CA coast for the winter—offering us a chance to view one of the most amazing spectacles of nature: a monarch on the wing or sunning on a tree!

