

## Weedkiller blamed for decline of monarch butterflies in Teaneck and across U.S.

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Don Torino, the Bergen County Audubon Society's president, pushing a wheelbarrow as volunteers planted milkweed at Teaneck Creek Conservancy. Milkweed is key to the monarch butterfly's survival.

Don Torino remembers past summers when monarch butterflies could be seen in every corner of the Teaneck Creek Conservancy as they made their famed 6,000-mile round trip between Canada and Mexico.

But their numbers have plummeted in the past few years, to the point where a sighting of a single orange and black monarch can lead to email chains and Facebook posts.

"If I can count five in the last two years, that's a lot," said Torino, president of the Bergen County Audubon Society, who sports colorful tattoos of butterflies on his arms. "They're not here anymore."

It's not just Teaneck. The monarch population has declined 90 percent in the U.S., from 1 billion in 1996 to about 100 million today, according to the federal government. While monarchs have been hit hard by a number of factors, much of their decline has been attributed to the gradual loss of milkweed, the only plant a monarch's larvae will eat.

The drop in the butterfly population has not gone unnoticed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which launched the Save the Monarch campaign this year, in part because it is one of the few insects that can pollinate over long distances, helping plant colonies to thrive.

Key to the effort is reestablishing milkweed. The skyrocketing use of the chemical glyphosate, the key ingredient in many herbicides, including the widely popular Roundup, has been blamed for milkweed's decline.

But while the Obama administration has been praised for the campaign, it has been criticized by environmentalists for turning down a formal petition last month to limit glyphosate use.



"The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency apparently plans to study the monarch migration to extinction," said Sylvia Fallon, a senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council, which had asked the agency for greater regulations on glyphosate. "Everyone loves the monarchs, including the Obama White House. But love isn't going to save monarchs from glyphosate."

Although Roundup has been around since the Monsanto Co. introduced it in the 1970s, its use by farmers has increased exponentially in recent years, since Monsanto introduced genetically modified crops like corn and soybeans that are not harmed by glyphosate. These "Roundup Ready" crops have become popular, especially at large Midwestern farms, because it's easier to kill weeds, including milkweed.

A Monsanto spokeswoman would not say whether Roundup has affected the monarch population, but the company has pledged this year to donate \$4 million to restore milkweed habitats.

The White House released plans in May to create a 1,500-mile "butterfly highway" in the country's midsection by planting milkweed and restoring habitats friendly to migrating monarchs.

Rebuilding the population will ensure that one of the most celebrated natural phenomena in North America continues.

Every fall, monarchs migrate south to the mountains of central Mexico, where they spend the winter huddled on fir trees. Beginning in spring, they migrate north throughout the United States. Monarchs will go through four generations of butterflies during the spring and summer migration process, laying their eggs on milkweed plants.

Within four days, the eggs hatch into yellow-white-and-black-striped caterpillars, which eat the host plant's leaves.

After two weeks, the caterpillar attaches to the underside of a branch or leaf and becomes a chrysalis. Ten days later, after metamorphosis, the full-grown monarch emerges and continues the migration north.

While illegal logging in the monarch wintering grounds and some extreme weather have also hit the butterfly population hard, environmentalists say restoring milkweed will make the biggest difference.

"If you get rid of the milkweed, you're taking away the dinner plate of the monarchs," said Jane Scott, a microbiologist and treasurer of the North American Butterfly Association in Morristown. "It's the key to their continuing survival."

Recently, Torino and other volunteers planted 30 milkweeds at Teaneck Creek Conservancy in hopes of luring more monarchs to a patch of land that used to be a dumping ground for highway debris before residents restored it into a cherished greenbelt. It is one of several efforts around the region to increase the number of monarchs passing through this year.

"It's a small thing we can do," Torino said. "I just hope it works. Some folks say the population is coming back. I'm still not seeing it."

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