

Butterflies and Flamingos

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I know you are tired of hearing about Monarchs, but this new story is so weird that it has to be told. Besides, it suggests a solution to the Monarch problem. And I will be brief, for once.

First, the bad news. Evidence on our farm this summer, unfortunately, supports my hypothesis ([Quest of a Broken-Wing Butterfly](#)) that the population of Monarchs in eastern North America has passed a tipping point such that they are probably “committed to extinction.” My hypothesis was born in part from observation of a lone male, who, despite, quick knowledge of our milkweeds and butterfly bush, persisted in frantically flitting about our entire property. My suspicion was that he was looking for a female Monarch, and my concern is that the number of Monarchs in the eastern flyway is now so small that chances of an amorous encounter are slim. Those encounters are essential to avoid rapid population collapse, given the fact that the annual migration from Mexico to Canada and back to Mexico requires three or four generations.

I saw five Monarchs this year, each on a different day, four of them being female. They went to the milkweeds but seemed restless and flitted all about the property, albeit not as frantically as the male the previous year. This year, for the first time, no Monarch larvae (caterpillars) appeared on any of the milkweeds on our property. Their absence is unmistakable, because ravenous larvae literally strip the leaves from milkweeds. I’m not a butterfly, but I am pretty sure that it is impossible for a female Monarch to lay fertile eggs without the cooperation of a healthy male Monarch. In any case, no fertile eggs were laid on the milkweeds on our property this year.

Now, the good news. We had a party last weekend to celebrate our grandchild Sophie’s 16th birthday. Weather was perfect. We had lunch outside on the large wooden table shown in the film clip¹ for Our Children’s Trust (<http://ourchildrenstrust.org/trust-films/AClimateOfTRUST>). Anniek brought several helium-filled balloons, one of them a Monarch butterfly. It was a breezy day, and nobody noticed that one of the balloons, the Monarch, had disappeared. Near the end of the day the Monarch was discovered. Despite a weight that kept it tethered to Earth, it somehow bounced in the breeze down a long driveway and took a left jog, ending in a milkweed patch².

Wow, what a feat by a plastic butterfly. It must have meaning. It gave me a great idea. You know the plastic pink Flamingos that beautify many lawns? If Monarchs go extinct, why don’t we all have plastic Monarchs in our yards? That will be a lot easier than fighting chemical companies about defoliants and stomping around the planet complaining about climate change.

Moreover, modern technology can improve these butterflies. Electronics can be added. They could keep watch and record our comings and goings. Even better than in Orwell’s “1984”.

However, if you are an old fuddy, here is an alternative: [join a petition](#) to list the Monarch as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. If listed, the U.S. government would be required to take action to protect Monarchs.

And join the [People’s March](#) next Sunday – there will be many marches all around the world.

¹ BTW, someone viewing that clip commented on Jake’s interesting way of gnawing on strawberries; we might all do it that way if our front teeth were about to fall out.

² The patch started five years ago when Sophie and Connor helped me transplant milkweeds from Frogtown Road, as described in [Storms of My Grandchildren](#).



Sophie with runaway Monarch at the milkweeds by the horse fence (sorry, bad photography, milkweeds are in lower left corner, missed the fence and horses on left, but got the goldenrod).