

[From Winter 1998-1999]

The Journey South

Every fall a miraculous event occurs. Day-length, and consequently warmth, is reduced and creatures begin to move to warmer areas. The Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge is known for the fall migration of songbirds and raptors, but a little slow-moving creature is also on the move. This creature is not a bird, but the Monarch Butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*). The Monarch is unlike any other insect because it has the ability to fly long distances that can match some of our feathered friends. Their final overwintering destination is the high mountains of central Mexico.

Monarchs breed four to five times per year. Each generation migrates further north to the northern states and Canada where they continue to breed until early fall. At this time, Monarchs begin their descent southward. Research has shown that they use a sun compass to orient themselves toward Mexico and they tend to use the coastline as their pathway to this destination. Since they prefer to follow the coast, the Eastern Shore is a great place to observe these migrating marvels.

Studies have been done on Monarchs for the past few years at places such as Cape May, New Jersey, and Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. This October a pilot study was conducted at Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge and its surrounding area by Mark Garland, Senior Naturalist, Audubon Naturalist Society. While he was here, Mark attempted to locate roosting trees and the pathways used by the Monarchs. In addition, he censused the area three times a day to estimate relative abundance, and he captured, tagged and released Monarchs.



The tagging part of the study is associated with Monarch Watch, a national tagging project based at the University of Kansas. At the end of the pilot study, Mark had tagged 547 Monarchs and had 4 recoveries. The four recoveries were tagged at Cape May, New Jersey earlier in the season. These four recoveries were important since they help us understand the pathway the Monarchs are taking during their migration and the mechanisms that allow them to navigate.

The data collected this year has indicated that the ESVNWR is an important area for migrating butterflies, and more extensive studies should be done in the future.

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