USU Students Helping the Monarch Butterfly in the Uintah Basin

08/25/2021

USU Students Helping the Monarch Butterfly in the Uintah Basin

It’s a well-documented and yet still baffling migration that happens each year. Thousands upon thousands of monarch butterflies begin their journey that can cover thousands of miles, gathering in both central Mexico and the California coastline to make their winter homes. Yet these migrators are also facing a drastic decline in numbers, and Utah State University students are helping to look for answers in the Uintah Basin region.

“Monarch butterflies are facing a large historical decline over the last 40 years,” said USU senior Carson Liesik. “Their population, as of the beginning of 2020, was estimated at about 30,000 monarchs in the Western United States, which is about a 99 percent drop in their abundance as compared to data from the 1980s. We are hoping to learn how to help the monarch butterfly population recover from its historic decline. This project is a crucial step towards this goal.”

In collaboration from several agencies, including the Utah Department of Wildlife Resources, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, Dinosaur National Monument and the Ouray National Wildlife Refuge, students helped capture and tag monarch butterflies in the Uintah Basin region. The researchers recorded the gender, wing condition, when and where the butterfly was caught and what it was doing. The goal is to find out where these butterflies go and the path they use to get there.

“We tagged each butterfly with a unique number so that if it is recaptured at a later date, we can map its migration path as well as habitat use and activity,” Liesik said. “We are trying to get an idea of where these monarch butterflies are and how they are utilizing the resources available to them.”

Using the data collected, scientists and wildlife professionals will be able to better map where these butterflies go and therefore help protect their food sources and breeding grounds.

“These butterflies are important pollinators and play a meaningful role in the ecosystem,” said Hollee Wood, a USU student who just graduated with her bachelor’s degree in Wildlife Ecology and Management. “This research effort will help us better understand what conservation efforts can best help this struggling species.”

Scientists are not the only ones that can get involved. The public also can play a part in maintaining the butterfly population and perhaps even helping their numbers grow again.

“There are ways the general public can help contribute to the monarch’s recovery,” Liesik said. “They can plant native milkweed at their houses or have a pollinator plot in their yard, especially with flowers that bloom in the late summer or fall. They can also reduce or eliminate the use of harmful pesticides when possible. It is crucial to know that you don’t have to be part of a wildlife agency to help contribute to this project. Everyone can help.”

Liesik, a Uintah Basin native, is entering his final year at the USU campus in Logan. He has previously also worked with USU Uintah Basin’s raptor research crew before being asked to help with the monarch project. Liesik is grateful for all the opportunities USU has offered him in his field to get hands-on experience.

“USU does an amazing job providing opportunities for students like me,” Liesik said. “The university provides us with great opportunities to build relationships with agencies that we may be looking for future employment with. With their help, I’m able to continue my degree as well as practice the skills that are applicable toward my career. I feel they really go the extra mile. They don’t just help you get a degree and get your diploma. They actually help you build a career.”

Wood also enjoyed the hands-on experience this project allowed her to achieve. She said working with all the different agencies allowed her to not only network, but to learn from a variety of different people.

“USU has provided me with lots of ways to get hands-on experience in my field,” she said. “This is just one example of how USU, and particularly the College of
Natural Resources, provides its students with the real-life experiences they need for their careers."

The butterflies were tagged with a special tag on their wing with a unique tracking number. If recaptured in the future, researchers can know where the butterfly came from and glean its migration route. Photo credit: Carson Liesik.

Utah State University students join several organizations in capturing and tagging monarch butterflies. The tagging will help researchers know what paths the butterflies migrate so they can better protect essential breeding and feeding grounds. USU student researchers Carson Liesik (top, third from the right) and Hollee Wood (bottom, second from the right) were both part of the team that tagged the butterflies in the Uintah Basin region.

Writer:
Marcus Jensen
News Coordinator
University Marketing and Communications
marcus.jensen@usu.edu

Contact:

Dana Rhoades
University Marketing and Communications
(435) 722-1788
dana.rhoades@usu.edu

Also from Statewide Campuses
window.addEventListener("DOMContentLoaded",function(){ $('.embed-feed .card').each(function(){ var link = $(this).find("a").attr("href"); if(link.search(window.location) > -1){ $(this).closest(".col-md-4").remove(); } });
if($('.embed-feed .card').length == 4){ $('.embed-feed .card').last().closest(".col-md-4").remove(); } //
$('#content > .row.justify-content-end').remove(); });