

WISCONSIN FARM BUREAU FEDERATION'S



Rural Route

June | July 2015 • vol. 21 no. 3 | wfbf.com

*The
Maddie
Project*
Page 44

More Milkweed Needed for Monarch Butterflies

By Jim Hebbe

Like most of us, I remember finding monarch butterflies in the summers of my youth. I marvelled at their bright orange patterned wings and black speckled bodies. But I had no idea that every monarch is part of an amazing annual migration, from wintering grounds in central Mexico up through the southern and Midwestern United States and even into Canada, and back again.

No single butterfly ever completes this migration itself. It's a fascinating, multi-generation relay race where adults pass the baton by laying eggs which become caterpillars, and new adult butterflies make the next leg of the journey.

The monarch you find in Wisconsin this summer is already the third or fourth generation compared with one who departed the forests of Mexico in late winter.

Monarchs are still found today, but in much smaller numbers. The population has dropped by 90 percent in the past 20 years. Causes of this include loss of crucial overwintering sites in Mexico, expanding urban development and the modernization of agricultural practices in the United States.

It turns out monarch caterpillars feed on only one type of plant: milkweed. They don't mind the toxins in the plant (the reason livestock avoid it), but their predators do. Historically, milkweed has been considered a weed, and we've become very adept at keeping it out of our fields. I used to use a weed wiper in no-till soybean fields to specifically address milkweeds. Now, with the advent of Roundup Ready crops, we have cleaned up many of the tough weeds that used to exist in no-till farming systems, and milkweed rarely is seen

in a crop field anymore. Less milkweed means fewer opportunities for monarchs to pass the baton and continue their migration.

It is unlikely that milkweed will return to fields of corn and soybeans, but there are opportunities to restore monarch habitat elsewhere on the agricultural landscape. Farm buffers, fence rows, pastures, and farmsteads are all potential sites not only for milkweed, but also flowering forbs and shrubs for bees and other pollinators that are important to many crops. There is also a tremendous opportunity in utility right-of-ways,



which can serve as migratory pathways for pollinators.

Monarchs share habitat with many other pollinators, which makes monarch population size a useful indicator for the presence of other pollinators. The importance of this cannot be overstated because we rely on pollinators for food stability.

Many stakeholders are stepping up to address this complex issue. The agricultural industry is funding new projects; university researchers are refining techniques; and the Natural Resources Conservation Service is offering assistance. Recently, I added pollinator and beneficial habitat as an enhancement practice to my Conservation

Stewardship Program contract. A small impact overall but a step in the right direction.

The Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation is joining Wisconsin-based Sand County Foundation, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and other agricultural interests to encourage practical steps that farmers can take to create habitat while maintaining productivity.

As the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considers listing the monarch under the Endangered Species Act in the coming year, our efforts should focus on the voluntary, proactive steps we all can take to reverse the decline in monarchs and pre-empt the possible regulatory approach. ■

Jim Hebbe is a director of the Green Lake County Farm Bureau. Jim and his wife, Val, were the 2012 recipients of the Leopold Conservation Award.



Val and Jim Hebbe

Find resources for monarch butterflies and important pollinators:

www.monarchjointventure.org

On your farm: www.wi.nrcs.usda.gov

In your community: www.monarchwatch.org

BUILT FOR THE NEXT 60 YEARS!

Wick Buildings has been helping Midwest farmers, families and businesses by providing long-lasting, low-maintenance buildings since 1954, that's 60 years!

And Wick uses only the highest quality materials and latest construction techniques and technology.

Buildings with quality and value, and no compromises.



800-356-9682 • WickBuildings.com

