

# Monarchs fight their way back to N.S.

Remembering the importance of the butterfly in our gardens

## ENDANGERED PERSPECTIVE

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Ladies and gentlemen, the monarchs have arrived, and I say that with more than a little relief. This is perhaps the most recognizable species of butterfly in all of North America and mine wasn't the only childhood they defined, fluttering through the unkempt weeds of countless rural homesteads with children in hot pursuit, wielding well-meaning nets. But, in my lifetime their North American population has plummeted a staggering 90 per cent, bringing their abundance in the 1990s of over one billion individuals to fewer than 35 million in the winter of 2013-2014. They've rebounded somewhat since then, reaching an estimated 57 million individuals the following year, but they're still a long way from recovery.

The prosperity of the monarch butterfly is intertwined with that of the milkweed plant, a major food source for this insect and the

only place monarch mothers will lay their eggs.

Varieties of this plant grow throughout North America and fuel the extraordinary migration of monarchs from their summering grounds in the United States and Canada to their wintering grounds in the Oyamel fir forests of Central Mexico.

This 2,000 to 5,000-kilometre journey takes two months each way and requires several generations of monarch to complete. The ones who arrive in Canada are often the children or grandchildren of those who set out from Mexico.

Milkweed, as well as other wildflowers which sustain monarchs — aster, goldenrod and purple looserstrife, for example — have been under siege for decades now by farmers and landowners alike.

The use of pesticides and herbicides in particular have caused these essential sources of monarch food to decline drastically, contributing to the 90 per cent population crash mentioned above.

Counting also is the deforestation of their wintering habitat. This ecological drama, playing out across the whole of our continent, has had its impact even

low. But the following year there were 12 spotted here, a result of their rebounding numbers. This year, their population has

here, on the humble shores of Nova Scotia. I'm told by the Mersey Tobacco Research Institute (MTRI) there were no confirmed monarch sightings in our province whatsoever in 2013, the year their North American population struck a historic

apparently grown fourfold and they're heading our way. In fact, they've arrived.

A monarch butterfly photographed at the Mersey Tobacco Research Institute in Kemp, Queens County. **BRAD TOMS**



Two weeks ago, in the confines of Cambridge, Kings County, we spotted our first monarch of the year. So we had best set the table, so to speak, before the rest of our guests arrive.

Taking part in the recovery of the monarch butterfly is delightfully simple; all you need to do is plant milkweed and wildflowers,

pronto.

Anyone with land to spare is encouraged to plant a "butterfly garden," as they're called, which are rich in plants like butterfly bush, yarrow, aster, bonaset, heliotrope, coneflower, cosmos and, of course, lots and lots of milkweed.

Avoid pesticides and herbicides like the plague. Giving up a portion of your home garden or surrendering some of your empty lawn to these butterfly favourites would be akin to inviting the monarch for a visit, an invitation they're increasingly likely to accept.

You wouldn't be alone in this green-thumb activism, either. Right now, there's a co-ordinated effort across Nova Scotia to establish as many of these gardens as possible, turning our province into a haven for this dwindling species and encouraging their recovery.

MTRI has pulled these gardens abroad. Hundreds already exist.

But if you're a lone wolf, like myself, then call your local nursery or garden centre and see what they have in stock.

It could make all the difference to those 200 million lost souls migrating our way, in search of safe harbours and finding

safe harbours and finding

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