

Published January 5th, 2022

Moraga's monarch habitat boasts two decoratively-themed sculptures to help boost its butterfly appeal

By Vera Kochan



Amy Stagg interacts with "Wings." Photo Julie Stagg

The Moraga Garden Club's efforts to help encourage the repopulation of the endangered monarch butterfly has been met with success. Following along the theme of "If you built it, they will come," the habitat, located in Rancho Laguna Park, has had monarch sightings as hopeful as those throughout California.

After an all-time state low of 1,914 last year, the Xerces Society (<https://xerces.org>), a science-based nonprofit environmental organization, was thrilled to report that in October 2021, "over 1,300 monarchs were counted at the Pacific Grove overwintering site; this site did not have a single monarch butterfly during last year's count." The Pismo State Beach Monarch Butterfly Grove and an adjacent site accounted for approximately 8,000 monarchs as opposed to 300 from the prior year. Even more inspiring, observations and reports from volunteers and the public throughout the Bay Area, Santa Cruz, Monterey, Big Sur, Ventura and Los Angeles have made Xerces expand the estimates to over 10,000 monarchs easily accounted for.

The nearly 99.9% decline from the overwintering monarchs of the 1980s in California is largely attributed to encroachment by humans into their habitat and to pesticides. "Populations of monarch butterflies, like other insects, can fluctuate from year to year, in response to the temperature, rainfall, the availability of food, and other factors," according to the website. "Though we are likely to see increases in the size of the western monarch

population this year, it is likely to still be dangerously close to extinction, and there remains an urgent need to address the threats that this butterfly faces."

Adding to the appeal of the habitat itself are two new sculptures meant to be interactive with the public. "Wings," created by artist Patrick E. (the E stands for entomology) is over 5-feet tall and made of metal. The other sculpture is titled "Katy Pillar" by artist Mary Gilles. Made of glass mosaic, the caterpillar-like piece is found within the habitat hidden amongst the vegetation. Both sculptures are securely bolted to underground slabs of cement.

"Wings" creator, Patrick Condon (www.patrick-e.com), has been making original sculptures out of metal and glass since 1995, using metalworking and mosaicing techniques. Most of his art includes giant insects with a ladybug being his first foray into public art. The monarch piece was commissioned by the MGC and funded by a private donor. The town, as recommended by the Art in Public Spaces Committee and approved by the Parks and Recreation Commission, accepted the sculpture for the park. What makes "Wings" so special as an interactive sculpture is, if anyone stands in front of it, there is the illusion that the individual has the wings of a monarch butterfly.

"Katy Pillar" creator, Mary Gilles, (email: mosaicorindaproject@gmail.com), has done fused glass work for about 15 years. A former research scientist at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Gilles wanted to spread her wings (so to speak) in community art. While working on a monarch butterfly mosaic in her studio at Oakland's The Crucible, the Orinda resident found out about the habitat and contacted the MGC. The garden club wanted a caterpillar sculpture, so Gilles set about creating the yellow, black and clean white piece beginning with high density polystyrene in an almost paper mache process. The final stage came in the form of hand-cut glass pieces small enough to be applied in a circle around the body and smooth enough so as not to cut anyone's fingers when touched. The time-consuming process to create "Katy Pillar" became a labor of love which Gilles generously donated.

For anyone wanting to help maintain the garden, email moragafor monarchs@gmail.com.

For general information, visit www.moragagardenclub.com/moraga-for-monarchs.



"Katy Pillar" makes her presence known in the monarch habitat garden. Photo Julie Stagg

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