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KU News Release

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KU researcher plans national effort to create 'waystations' for monarchs

LAWRENCE -- University of Kansas ecology professor Orley "Chip" Taylor is starting a national effort to create 10,000 "monarch waystations" over the next three years to help preserve the dwindling numbers of monarch butterflies in the United States.

"We need a large-scale effort to help preserve the monarch," said Taylor, who serves as director of Monarch Watch, an outreach organization based at KU that is dedicated to tracking the monarch's migration and conserving its habitats. "The idea is to get everyone who is interested in the monarch butterfly and those interested in gardening to create monarch habitats."



These habitats contain milkweeds and nectar plants, Taylor said. Monarchs lay eggs on milkweed plants, and larvae use the plants to feed until they become adult butterflies. The adult butterflies feed by obtaining nectar from flowers.

Taylor wants the public to create waystations, which he named after the stops used by steam engines and the Pony Express in the 19th century, to help stabilize and preserve the monarch.

"Steam engines needed stops to pick up water and coal," he said. "The Pony Express riders needed stops to pick up food and fresh horses. The same principle applies with the monarch. The monarch needs resources and places across the continent to breed and sustain its migration."

Taylor is one of the nation's leading experts on monarchs and has studied them since 1992. Monarch Watch has tracked the annual migrations of monarchs between the United States and Mexico for 14 years, an effort that has involved hundreds of thousands of volunteers across North America.

The monarch population has declined since its peak in 1996, Taylor said. Urban sprawl and the use of herbicide-resistant crops, plus an unusually cool summer in 2004, caused the monarch population to shrink to one-tenth its size compared to its peak and one-fourth its size during an average year.

In fact, the monarch population in Mexico was so low last winter that it may take some time to recover. The monarchs began their spring migration from their winter habitats in Mexico north to the United States in March, but early reports from Southern states indicate the migration is not off to a good start, Taylor said.

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In recent years, development, especially in prime monarch breeding grounds of the upper Midwest of the United States, is eliminating habitats for monarchs. According to the American Farmland Trust, farm and ranch land is disappearing at the rate of 3,000 acres per day or 1.2 million acres per year. During a five-year period starting in 1992, 6 million acres of farmland -- an area the size of Maryland -- were converted into subdivisions and other developments.

Widespread adoption of herbicide-resistant soybeans and corn in the past five years has resulted in the loss of at least 80 million acres of monarch habitat, Taylor said. In the past, farmers used tilling to control weeds, which always left enough milkweeds and nectar plants around for monarchs to sustain themselves. With herbicide-resistant corn and soybeans, however, farmers spray herbicides more liberally, leaving far fewer milkweeds and nectar plants available for monarchs.

To offset the loss of milkweeds and nectar plants, Monarch Watch wants individuals across the nation to create Monarch Waystations as a way to preserve these key sources of food. Waystations can be created in home gardens, schools, parks, zoos, nature centers or anywhere there are unused plots of land.

"This effort won't replace the amount of milkweed that has been lost or even keep pace with the habitat losses each year," Taylor said. "On the other hand, waystations will get the public involved in the conservation effort and hopefully these people will educate their fellow citizens. We are losing wildlife habitat at an incredible rate, and we have to do something about it to avoid losing the monarch butterfly."

Monarch Watch has developed a waystation kit that includes information about how to create the best habitat for monarchs. The kit contains seeds for milkweeds and nectar plants. The kits are available for a small fee by going to <http://www.monarchwatch.org/ws> or calling (800) 780-9986.

Individuals who create waystations can have them officially certified by Monarch Watch, Taylor said. Upon certification, the sites will be included in the international Monarch Waystation Registry (<http://www.monarchwatch.org/ws>). Those people or organizations with certified monarch habitats are eligible to display a sign indicating they have created a monarch waystation and are contributing to monarch conservation.

"The sign helps convey the conservation message to those who visit your waystation and may encourage them to create their own monarch habitat," Taylor said.

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The University of Kansas is a major comprehensive research and teaching university. University Relations is the central public relations office for KU's Lawrence campus.

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