

Lemmer establishes Monarch Butterfly Waystation in Hazelhurst

Southern migration in full swing

By Julie Huotari

SPECIAL TO THE LAKELAND TIMES

A Hazelhurst woman has used her lifelong passion for gardening to establish a bona fide Monarch Butterfly Waystation and she's got the hardware to prove it. Jodi Lemmer submitted a description of the habitat that she's nurtured for decades to the University of Kansas' Monarch Watch organization.



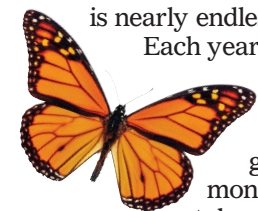
She was granted waystation status and the sign she earned is now "planted" in her garden scape.

She's always had plenty of monarch butterflies and other pollinators visiting her gardens and she's released butterflies on a small scale since her grown children were very young. It wasn't until a few years ago when she began paying closer attention to the news of the embattled, endangered monarch butterfly that she got serious about her raise-and-release operation.

"My gardens were already full of the plants they love. Years ago, I planted one milkweed and now I have at least 50," Lemmer said. "I've always loved gardening so I figured I'd look into what it takes to have an official habitat."

Monarch Watch defines an acceptable butterfly habitat in six steps: Size, exposure, shelter, milkweed plants, nectar plants, and habitat management. There are currently more than 35,000 registered waystations, including Lemmer's.

Why the big fuss? Pollination, of course. Without pollinators we won't have most plants. Without plants we won't have most things we depend on like crops for livestock, cotton for clothes and even coffee. The list is nearly endless.



Each year from late August to October, the southern migration of the monarch butterfly takes place. Over the last couple of decades, the eastern monarch population (east of the Rocky Mountains) has declined nearly 90 percent, according to the Wisconsin Monarch Collaborative. The WMC is one of the newer organizations championing the recovery of the monarch butterfly, joining Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, Save Our Monarchs Foundation and Monarch Watch, to name several.

Monarch populations have been nearly decimated by habitat loss and fragmentation, pesticide use and, ac-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOGRAPHS

Jodi Lemmer's grown sons Tyler, left, and Travis, right, still help her from time to time with monarch caterpillar care and butterfly release.



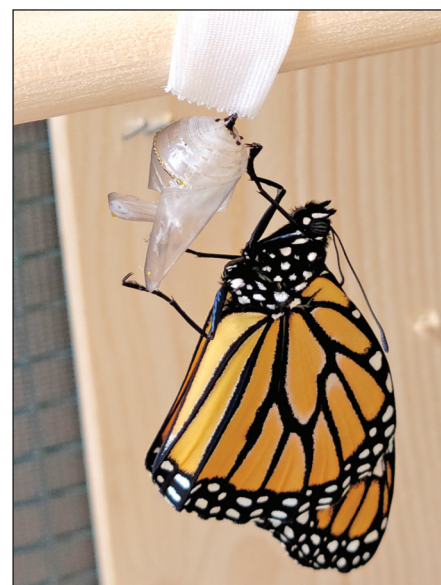
Jodi Lemmer tends to her garden with supervisor Bentley. She said she spends up to 20 hours weeding her front garden alone each growing season.



Milkweed is the only plant monarch caterpillars eat, such as this familiar Common Milkweed shown in full bloom.



After this monarch chrysalis hardened, Jodi Lemmer carefully moved it to a protected enclosure where its chance of survival rocketed from less than 3 percent to nearly 100 percent.



A monarch butterfly grips its chrysalis casing for about four hours after closing to pump its wings with fluid stored in its body and to allow the wings to dry.



After these monarch chrysalides hardened, Jodi Lemmer carefully moved each to a protected enclosure where their chances of survival rocketed from less than 3 percent to nearly 100 percent.



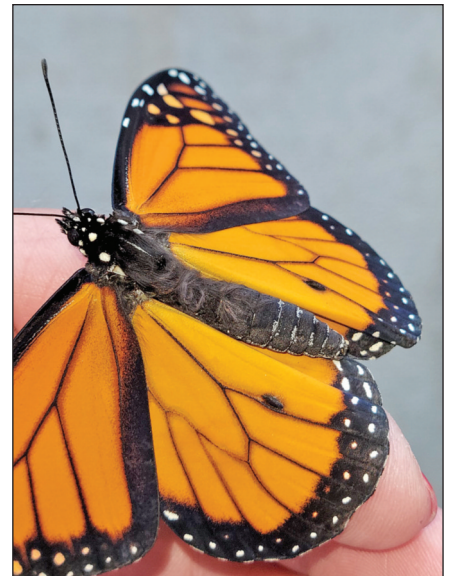
The shell of the chrysalis becomes transparent when the monarch is ready to enclose.



These fat boys or girls are in the final caterpillar stage, scientifically called fifth instar. Soon they will enclose themselves in a chrysalis (pupate).



Jodi Lemmer took this photo of her Monarch Waystation sign before staking it outside in the pollinator habitat she created over decades.



Jodi Lemmer prepares to release this male monarch, easily distinguished from a female by two distinct black dots on his lower hind wings.



Jodi Lemmer's property is more a pollinator habitat than a yard. By shrinking the lawn and planting native plants like milkweed, bee balm, black-eyed susans, butterfly bushes and much more, she has earned "Monarch Waystation" status through the University of Kansas' Monarch Watch program.



Nectar plants such as the purple coneflower are as important to the monarch butterfly as milkweed is to the monarch caterpillar.

ording to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, intensified weather events due to climate change. Widely acknowledged by aforementioned organizations and scientists as a "flagship" pollinator, the monarch is a species bringing awareness to the endangerment of all pollinators.

In other words, monarchs are so attractive that people are literally volunteering in droves to save them, which effectively helps all pollinators — even the ones not well-liked but still important.

Operation butterfly

Because of pesticides and predators, the likelihood a caterpillar reaching adulthood is less than three percent. With the monarch population at a frightening decline, many gardeners and butterfly enthusiasts are volunteering to gather eggs or caterpillars to raise them in a protected area.

After researching and consulting some monarch websites and Facebook groups, Lemmer made an in-

vestment in butterfly enclosures. She has five of them now: Medium-sized metal frames (sort of like cages) enveloped in fine mesh to keep the caterpillars in and the predators out. Her latest cage is large and home-made by a friend. It's framed with wood and has wooden dowels in the upper portion of the enclosure to hang the chrysalides once they've hardened after pupation.

This strategy allowed her to raise and release 108 healthy monarchs in 2021, her best year to date. She kept all of her enclosures sheltered outside in her lean-to.

A monarch butterfly will lay eggs only on the underside of the leaves of milkweed plants. Once the eggs hatch, the caterpillars (also known as "cats") will go through five molts (shedding of skin) in a few weeks. The phases between molts are called instars.

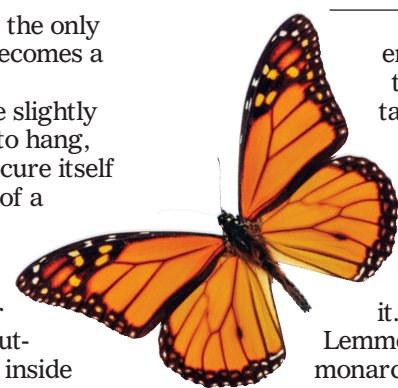
They are voracious feeders and grow quickly. By the time they reach fifth instar, they're fat cats, indeed. Having plenty of milkweed in the

garden is vital, because it's the only food a cat will eat until it becomes a butterfly.

Next, the cat will become slightly lethargic and seek a place to hang, spinning a silk button to secure itself to a leaf, branch or ceiling of a butterfly enclosure. It will hang upside down in "J" form until it pupates — turning its final outer layer into a chrysalis while the butterfly continues to develop inside for 10 to 15 days. When the chrysalis becomes translucent, the black and orange wings can be seen inside and this is the cue that the butterfly will emerge, or enclose, very soon.

The new butterfly with undeveloped, wrinkled wings will grip onto the chrysalis membrane, pumping fluid from its body into the wings until they are full and extended. It will take another four hours for the wings to dry. Then, and only then, will the butterfly be ready for release.

Lemmer not only facilitated that



entire process more than 100 times this summer, but she taught it all to the children in her neighborhood.

"I lent them some of the cages and when they completed their releases, they brought the cages back," Lemmer said. "They loved it." Her sons, Travis and Tyler Lemmer, both were taught the monarch lifecycle by Lemmer growing up. Tyler still lives nearby and occasionally stopped during the day to check on the operation.

Nectar plants

Lemmer remembers gardening, bringing in crops and canning with her grandparents.

"I was raised that way. When I first moved into this house in 1999, my garden was nothing," Lemmer said.

She rented a rototiller and got to work. Her husband, Rob Lemmer, who passed away nine years ago Au-

gust in a tragic automobile accident, came home from work that day and asked her what she was doing. "I want a bigger garden," she said and he joked that she might regret it some day when she was an old lady.

Today she has gardens all around the house. A plot of milkweed that almost seems like a small field, stunning white hydrangeas the size of saucers, bird feeders, garden decor and thick sets of native nectar plants makes it seem like a professional landscaping company did the design.

The nectar pollinating plants are the things most pertinent to this story because nectar is as important to the monarch butterfly as milkweed is to the monarch caterpillar.

"I have bee balm, liatrice, butterfly bushes — everything they love," Lemmer said.

Closer scrutiny reveals black eyed susans, purple coneflowers, sunflowers, field daisies, lilies and fruit trees. A pollinator's paradise.

"It's my stress reliever. That's my

happy place," Lemmer said. "And the two dogs, too. They race out there and sit with me the entire time. It's their happy place, too."

The migration

The 2021 southern migration has begun. The entire life cycle from egg to cat to butterfly is called the first generation of the migration and it happens three more times. Butterflies from the first three generations only live about 28 to 32 days. The fourth generation, however, is the migrator and it lives eight to nine months.

The migration north begins in central Mexico and goes as far north as Canada, before turning around and heading back right about now.

From Wisconsin it travels some 1,500 miles to central Mexico to winter over, millions of butterflies concentrated in one small area. As a

child growing up in Sun Prairie, Lemmer said there was a massive flock of monarchs that rested in her parents' hickory tree during the migration south.

"It's always been on my bucket list to visit the winter sanctuary in Mexico," she said. "My sister and I are going to do it in the next two or three years. It would be amazing."

For beginners Those interested in learning how to help the monarch butterfly population bounce back should start with research before delving in. Here are some great starting points:

- monarchwatch.org
- saveourmonarchs.org
- wiatri.net/Projects/Monarchs/
- xerces.org
- On Facebook, follow Monarch Madness in Wisconsin
- On Facebook, follow Pollinator Friendly Yards



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