

MONARCHS STRUGGLING

■ Western populations of iconic butterflies have plummeted based on results of an annual survey



U.S. Geological Survey/Contributed Photo

A monarch butterfly visits a flower bloom.

Growing up in the Shenandoah Valley, livestock pastures peppered the landscape. Black and red angus, and Holstein to supply the dairies, were commonplace. Spring and early summer sprouted lush green fescue and stands of various weeds unbeknownst to me at the time, save for the patches of flowering thistle and milkweed, head high to a five-year-old.

Back when youth were allowed to roam free, I would stroll across the county road and explore the neighbor's pasture toting an empty Mason jar. I was fascinated with all things wild, to include the brilliant variety of butterflies and moths that frequented the fuchsia thistle blooms.

Standing motionless amid the spiked stalks, I waited for a butterfly to land and pipe the sweet nectar from a flower. Slowly reaching out, I delicately pinched its folded wings between my chubby fingers, admired the spectacle momentarily, then released them, similar to catch-and-release fishing. Occasionally, a new or particularly fine specimen would make its way into the jar to be added to an immaculately framed representation of our local species.

Tiger and pipevine swallowtails, common buckeye, eastern tailed blue and painted lady to name a



UPLAND PURSUITS

BRAD TRUMBO

few. And, of course, the royal highness monarch with its orange and black hues. While monarchs rely on milkweed for reproduction, I found they visited the thistle nearly as often as the swallowtails.

Monarchs present a nationwide distribution as an iconic pollinator species. They display a fascinating behavior of seasonal migration, similar to songbirds. East of the Rockies, monarchs overwinter in southern portions of Florida and Mexico. In our neck of the woods, the winter "hiver" is the southern California coast.

At present, a number of environmental factors, including the loss of milkweed habitat, are threatening monarchs across their range. A Feb. 25 article in *The Guardian* cited illegal logging and land use changes in Mexico as compounding factors in a 68% population decline on the winter hiver since 2018, and the population west of the Rockies is faring no better.

In 1997, the Xerces Society established the Western Monarch Thanksgiving Count, similar to the Audubon Society Christmas

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Bird Count, where "citizen scientists" document monarchs on their western winter hiver. According to Washington State University, the 10 million monarchs documented in the 1980s declined to 30,000 in 2018, and fell below 2,000 in 2020.

Dramatic loss of the western monarch population led to special interest groups petitioning the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to protect the butterfly and their habitat with a listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). A FWS status review determined that "... listing the monarch butterfly as endangered under the ESA is warranted but precluded by higher priority actions." In other words, there are more than one hundred imperiled species ahead of the monarch in need of FWS resources and protection.

Additionally, under the ESA, an insect species cannot be segregated into subpopulations like birds, mammals and fishes. Therefore,

the FWS must consider the status of the monarch butterfly as one population across its North American range. If the western monarch were to be carved off as its own "distinct population segment," it's ESA listing priority would likely be much higher.

While it appears that our western monarchs are spiraling toward extinction, there is always hope and potential for recovery. Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever and the Xerces Society promote pollinator initiatives that benefit monarchs among other pollinators. Many Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever chapters are willing to cost-share on pollinator enhancement projects, like the Blue Mountain chapter in Walla Walla, Washington.

Additionally, two congressional bipartisan bills, the Monarch Action, Recovery, and Conservation of Habitat (MONARCH) Act, and the Monarch and Pollinator Highway Act, were recently introduced to avoid the extinction of the western monarch.

The MONARCH Act would authorize \$62.5 million for western monarch conservation projects, and another \$62.5 million to implement the Western Monarch Butterfly Conservation Plan, paid out over the next five years.

The Monarch and Pollinator Highway Act would establish a fed-

eral grant program available to state departments of transportation and Native American tribes to carry out pollinator-friendly practices on roadsides and highway rights-of-way.

But positive change does not require an act of congress. Milkweed promotion in our backyards can benefit the western monarch. Research suggests milkweed patches as small as two- to five-square-yards in area could be affective for increasing monarch reproduction. Patches that small are easily managed in a backyard flowerbed or garden, and the western native "showy milkweed" boasts a beautiful spiked ball of pink bloom worthy of any flower garden.

While recent legislation is late to the table for the western monarch, the potential for new conservation funds and our ability to act as interested citizens suggests hope for this iconic pollinator. Will the western population boast a success story similar to species like the greater sage grouse or bald eagle? Only time and a few congressional votes will tell.

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Where wild country rubs shoulders with a freeway

The view was quintessential wilderness except for the 18-wheelers rolling by on the freeway, almost near enough to discern the name of the trucking company on the trailer.

And absolutely near enough to hear the exhaust moan as the drivers downshifted to make the grade above Pritchard Creek.

Of course wilderness is just a word.

And it's a word, whether deployed as a noun or an adjective, whose definition, much like beauty, is determined by whoever's doing the looking.

When I'm hiking I prefer the typical symbols of wilderness — mountain peak, glacial lake, primeval forest — to the freeway's cacophony, diesel aroma and flotsam of soda cans and hamburger wrappers whipped about by the incessant artificial wind.

But I also appreciate the rare occasions when these two worlds, so different, rub shoulders in what seems a comfortable companionship.

I came across such an intersection recently above the Durkee Valley, about 20 miles southeast of Baker City.

It all started with a map. (Many of my experiences do; I would rather be a cartographer than almost anything else, but I lack any of the requisite skills. My complete absence of artistic ability alone disqualifies me absolutely from the profession.)

I was nosing around a web-



ON THE TRAIL

JAYSON JACOBY

based map, searching for a short and nearby hiking spot that I hadn't visited. I noticed a series of roads branching off the Burnt River Canyon road, on the west side of the Durkee Valley.

I had driven past the intersection many times but always on my way to a different destination.

I vaguely recalled, though, that I had assumed on those occasions that the roads either didn't go far, or that they ran into private property.

But when I checked my paper BLM map I was pleasantly surprised to see that the roads head straight into a considerable chunk of public ground — a bit more than four square miles all told.

And at least on the map — and with the more detailed view from Google Earth's satellites — it appeared that a loop route was feasible.

Along with my wife, Lisa, and our kids, Olivia and Max, I drove to Durkee Valley on Easter Sunday, one of the few days this spring when the wind wasn't beastly.

It was in fact a fine morning, with the temperature in the 60s, more typical of early June than of early April.

The dirt road heads northeast, on the right side of a dry gulch. After a few hundred yards we reached the first junction, and the start of the loop. I had checked the route

If You Go ...

From Baker City, drive east on Interstate 84 and exit at Durkee, near Milepost 327. Turn right at the stop sign and drive through the "downtown" of the unincorporated town of Durkee, named for a pioneer family. After a third of a mile, just beyond the railroad tracks, turn right at a stop sign onto Old Highway 30.

Drive west on Highway 30 for 1.5 miles, then turn left onto paved Burnt River Canyon Road. Follow the road, which turns to gravel, for 2 miles. There is an open area on the right side of the road with plenty of room for parking. There's a BLM sign noting that the primitive road is not suitable for passenger cars or trailers.

See map on Page 6B for details about hiking directions.

on a topographic map and it looked as though the left fork had slightly less steep grades, so we went that way.

The road — now little more than a path, although accessible for four-wheel drive, at least when dry — crosses the gulch and then climbs the shoulder of a ridge.



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Lookout Mountain dominates the northeastern skyline from the juniper-dotted hills above the Durkee Valley, about 20 miles southeast of Baker City.

The slope is taxing at times but my attention was diverted in the short range by wildflowers and in the long by the increasingly expansive views.

The sandy brown soil was carpeted in places by phlox, my favorite early spring bloom. It's a low-growing species — what you'd call a ground cover in a garden —

and its blossoms, usually pink or an intense purple, brighten the dull hillsides from a football field away.

The road gains about 600 feet in elevation as it ascends the narrow ridge. We paused for a minute to have a drink of water and enjoy the view, which included the heart of Durkee Valley and the snowy

ridges south of the valley.

This is the classic transition zone between sagebrush steppe and the pine-fir forests of the uplands. There are plenty of trees, all of them western junipers, the lone conifer that can tolerate the arid climate here.