



Monarch's Milk for the Great Migration

BUTTERFLIES ALWAYS HAVE HELD A FASCINATION FOR 11-YEAR-old Yantis resident Kasey Rhodes.

"I always liked watching the butterflies fly around our farm every spring and fall," Kasey says. "But I got interested in the migration of butterflies when my family and I visited a tagging program at the State Fair." During that program, the entire Rhodes family learned how to tag, track and determine the sex of monarch butterflies. "I then became interested in raising a monarch from a caterpillar," she says. And that's exactly what she did.

The Rhodes family is somewhat adventurous. Kasey and her siblings—9-year-old brother Raleigh and 6-year old sister Sydney—are home-schooled by their parents, Debbie and Trey, with the help of Thee Treehouse Homeschool, so the children can indulge their curiosity when it can be incorporated into a lesson.

During one such occasion, Kasey and her siblings learned that milkweed is the only host plant for monarch caterpillars.

If a female monarch butterfly lays her eggs on anything but milkweed, the hatched caterpillars will starve. In addition to being an essential plant for monarch survival, milkweed serves as a nectar plant for more than 20 other butterflies and moths native to East Texas.

For Kasey to successfully raise her monarch, she and her family searched their 30-acre homestead to secure the necessary milkweed their monarch would require.

Then, she says, "We prepared a habitat, and we found our caterpillar. We then watched it crawl around and eat the milkweed leaves we put in there every day. And then it made its chrysalis and then it hatched, which was cool, watching the chrysalis turn from green with its little gold sack, then orange and then see-through. And then the butterfly came out. Then it pumped its wings to get the blood into its wings. And then we released it in our garden."

In the process of their project, the family dove deep into the



Debbie, Sydney, Kasey, Raleigh and Trey Rhodes at their homestead in Yantis



Milkweed is an essential plant for monarch survival.



Monarchs roost in the millions in El Capulin, Mexico.

DEBBIE RHODES

study of monarchs and their life cycle. They learned the monarch they raised was part of a “super generation,” which has an integral role in one of the greatest migration stories of our world.

Monarchs of the super generation are born in the fall and differ greatly from their parents. They have a life span about eight times longer than other monarchs, which live about four weeks. Super monarchs weigh about an ounce, but their longer life span combined with their distinct development enables them to achieve a 3,000-mile migration across the Gulf of Mexico on paper-thin wings. These super monarchs then overwinter in a remote area of Mexico amid oyamel fir trees.

In March, they breed and return to the continental United States. Once here, they lay their eggs on the milkweed necessary to sustain the life of the hatched caterpillars. Those caterpillars then pupate and emerge as butterflies to fly northward, laying eggs along the way. In the fall, successive offspring then make their way back to Mexico. It takes four to five generations of monarchs to complete the round trip, then the cycle begins anew.

With the knowledge that they had raised a super monarch, Kasey says, “We wondered if we could see the monarchs in their overwintering habitat in Mexico. And that was a dream that came true! We got to go to Mexico.”

The Rhodes family joined forces with their good friends, the Ebel family, on the adventure. The group flew to Mexico City, then traveled by van to El Capulin, a Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve World Heritage site. More than 60 million mon-

archs overwinter there annually amid pine and oyamel fir forests. The monarchs roost at an elevation of 10,000 feet. To view them, the group mounted horses led by fleet-footed guides for a two-hour ascent along a rocky trail.

It was a cool and cloudy day when the trekkers arrived at the roost. Monarchs clung to the trees, but as glints of sunlight spotlighted them, the butterflies would rise en masse to the reward and wonderment of the adventurers.

While the Rhodes’ journey was a celebration of monarchs and the great migration, the family learned that the monarch population sadly has seen extraordinary decline. “We are impacting the monarch’s environment every day by just being people doing what we do,” Kasey says.

Beyond insecticides, a major cause for the population decline is the decimation of native prairie, which includes milkweed and other important flowers. Monarchs, like other butterflies, change their diet as they transition. So, while milkweed is necessary for the caterpillar stage, the adult butterflies get their nourishment from many flowers, including a multitude of native prairie flowers.

“This is not just about the monarchs,” Kasey says. “The monarchs are the, like, poster child for the prairie. But that is only because we can watch them, and we can go down to Mexico and track them.” She adds that the bee population—critical to food crop pollination—also has seen decline. “There is this quote, and it’s really funny,” she says. “It’s as if the bees were talking to us



Raleigh, Sydney and Kasey inspect a native milkweed found on their Yantis property.



Kasey Rhodes discovers a newly hatched monarch caterpillar hiding amid and munching on milkweed.

people and they say, ‘If we die, we are taking you all with us!’ ” While it’s a joke, Kasey well understands the meaning, and Debbie Rhodes underscores the truth behind the joke: “The monarch is an indicator species of what is happening.”

Though Kasey is not yet a teenager, she is on a passionate mission to protect against the further decline of the monarchs, and all pollinators, by publicly speaking out on the topic. To do that, she’s encouraging local mayors to sign the National Wildlife Federation’s Mayors’ Monarch Pledge. To take the pledge, a mayor must implement at least three of 25 action items within a year that benefit monarch health, repopulation and migration.

Kasey’s first pledge came from Yantis Mayor Jerry Miller with backing and support from the City Council and *The Community Chronicle*.

together—people working together for one goal,” Kasey says.

To promote that goal, Kasey and her family and friends are planning a workshop in September. They’re timing it right before the monarch’s high migration season. Kasey will hand out native plant rootstocks and various seeds that she has received from The Botanical Research Institute of Texas. Additionally, Julia Mattux, a local prairie enthusiast, will convert five acres of her property to be used as a monarch habitat and prairie classroom.

As for the other Rhodes siblings, Raleigh supports his sister’s efforts for the monarchs, but he has his own nature-related agenda. “She did her monarch butterflies for 4-H, and I did edible plants—wild edibles and herbs,” he says. “I’m going to make salves and sprays for the farmers market.” He also plans to host a wild edible and herb walk in conjunction with Prairie Day. Raleigh is also an accomplished naturalist artist for his age. Sydney likes learning about and foraging for wild mushrooms with her dad.

“The sweet spot for us is if we can do it here on the property, if it’s interesting to us, and if it’s educational and we can focus on home-schooling, it just works for everybody,” Trey Rhodes says.

The monarch’s plight is complex, and so is the solution. However, Kasey offers encouragement. “I would tell everyone, even if it is a small act of just planting some native species in your garden, or just saving a couple of acres of prairie, it counts,” she says. “If 30 people on one street planted one plant of milkweed, that is 30 plants that monarchs could lay their eggs on. So, all these small acts together make a big difference.”

Monarchs are the only insect to migrate as they do. Their story is one of the greatest migrations of our planet, and East Texas is right in the path of this migration. Kasey, you can bet, will do her part to provide them a bed and breakfast as they pass through, and she will make sure there is some milkweed on the side.

Trey, Debbie, Kasey, Raleigh and Sydney Rhodes live on their homestead in Yantis, where they are keen observers, admirers and cheerleaders for our native species. They are members of Wood County Electric Cooperative.

YANTIS PRAIRIE DAY

Date: September 29, 2018

Address: Yantis ISD, 105 W. Oak, Yantis, TX 75497

Cost: Free

Various expert speakers, seed giveaway, class on tagging, sexing and tracking butterflies and native edible plant and herb walk

Contact: debbie_rhodes@yahoo.com

Kasey points out that rural landowners are the ones who can make the most impact. She says if every landowner allowed just an acre for pollinator plants, they would provide habitat. She emphasizes that these plots don’t need to be connected. They just need to exist. Pollinators are on the move. These plots can act like feeding stations as the butterflies move through. Kasey and monarch lovers like her believe that once such plots are created, the monarchs will come. They could even act as an eco-tourism feature. “This can even bring communities

Electricity Use Rises With Summer Temperatures

DO YOU REMEMBER THE ELECTRICITY BILL YOU RECEIVED AFTER THIS WINTER'S COLD spell? It gave many members a bit of sticker shock. Of course, we all use more kilowatt-hours to stay warm when the cold and ice of January come knocking. The unfortunate result is higher-than-usual bills.

As we look toward summer, a reverse weather pattern also holds the potential to cause higher-than-normal bills. "Compared with last summer," the U.S. Energy Information Administration predicts, "this summer's temperatures are forecast to be warmer." The EIA expects Americans will use more electricity and typical residential electricity bills will increase 3.4 percent over last summer.

Industry experts are predicting record-breaking peak power usage. To keep the system reliable, the Southwest Power Pool, to which Wood County Electric Cooperative belongs, must maintain a small percentage of generation capacity beyond what is needed to meet peak demand. This extra energy capacity is called the "reserve margin," and it measures the system's ability to meet demand for power during the hottest days. The current projections for hotter summer weather and increased demand could test the reserve margin.

With that in mind, we all need to get ready for summer by managing our electricity use.

A few home improvements and simple changes in day-to-day habits can add up to big savings this summer. For example, a few tubes of latex or silicone caulk for your windows will help keep cooler air inside your home and the hot air outside where it belongs. If you insulate your hot water pipes, you can cut water heating costs by 4 percent. And remember to set your air conditioning system thermostat to 78 degrees and maybe even a little higher if you're planning to be away from the house for a while.

Would you like to make an even greater impact on your bill? Check your home's insulation. According to energystar.gov, the insulation in your home's attic should cover joists and be evenly distributed. It is also important to use insulation with a recommended R-value of 30-60. You will not only feel the difference in your home, you'll help offset peak demand.

At energystar.gov, you'll find a variety of tools and tips to help maximize your home's energy efficiency.

Most importantly, Wood County EC is a not-for-profit power provider. That means our mission is to provide you with the electricity you need to improve your quality of life—not turn a profit for investors. An important part of that mission entails providing you with tools to manage your electricity use. Beyond energy conservation, one other tool we offer to help our members avoid high summer and winter bills is a payment option called leveled billing. When you sign up for leveled billing, you'll be billed the average amount over your previous 12-month history, and your payments will be made automatically from your bank account. Anyone who has been a co-op member for at least a year and has a current zero balance is eligible for the plan. If you don't like sticker shock, this is a tool to avoid it.

Our goals are the same as yours. We want to help you stay comfortable this summer with power bills you can afford.



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Monday, First Methodist Church, *Van*
Tuesday, Family Dollar, *Mount Vernon*
Wednesday, City National Bank, *Hawkins*
Thursday, Brookshire's, *Winnsboro*
Friday, Economy Drug, *Grand Saline*