

Monarch butterflies tagged with stickers in Chicago garden as they migrate south

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Near the driving range in Chicago's Lakeview area, a faint but sweet smell floats in the air. One can follow it to a collection of beds where flowers sprout, surrounding a community garden in which vegetables and

herbs grow.

A hummingbird and a goldfinch fly close to the flowers. And now, monarch butterflies can be found all around, drinking nectar, fluttering from plant to plant, resting on the grass.

Millions of monarchs are passing through Chicago during the first few weeks of September as they make their way south toward Michoacán in Mexico.

Now, the Lakeview Community Garden at Diversey is tagging super monarchs as they stop in Chicago as part of their migratory route.

"Super monarchs are quite different from earlier season monarchs in that they're in sexual diapause; they are not here procreating, they are simply nourishing themselves," Lorraine Kells said. These super monarchs, which are in a nonreproductive state, are also physically larger.

And now they're drinking nectar, Kells explained, "powering up to make that 3,000-mile journey down to the trees of Michoacan."

Judith Kolar exclaimed, "I got one! I got one!" as she brought a net over to Kells and Nancy Juda, both of whom are involved with the [community garden](#). They had gotten together to tag butterflies last week.

After gently removing the female monarch from the net, Kolar held it carefully between her thumb and forefinger while Kells tagged the discal cell of one of its hind wings with a small sticky circle.

"The tags give us an indication of the health of the migration and the numbers of the migration, which is very important," Kells said.

Kolar then positioned the butterfly on her hand and let it fly away.

"I love it," she said with a smile.

She then sat down to record the butterfly's information for Monarch Watch, which tracks the monarch butterfly migration with help from volunteers. Kolar also signed a handwritten card that Kells handed her that read, "I have received (blank) fabulous monarch tags," and which asked for the tag series.

"I have to make sure my gardeners take responsibility for this," said Kells, who has been a gardener since she was 4 years old and grew up "nurtured by the taste of something fresh." She worked with [native plants](#) in Chicago and California for about three decades.

"The important thing to note is that even if those tags are not recovered, the number of tags that went off with the butterflies is recorded. That data is recorded," Kells added.

The group of women has so far tagged 10 butterflies, since the process requires patience and care. They had a total of 25 tags to work with.

"But seeing that everybody takes to this so readily—it isn't difficult to do—they take to it so readily and they just have such delight in doing it that we do want to order more tags next year and have a greater outreach to the community," Kells said.

The community garden where the magic happens consists of a few beds, not all of which are together. There's a pollinator bed, which is meant to attract mainly bees and wasps—but which also attracts black swallowtail caterpillars.

There's also a monarch way station with at least three kinds of milkweed,

and the periphery garden where the vegetables, fruits and herbs are grown next to a variety of flowers.

But everything started with two raised beds owned by the Chicago Park District that had nothing more than a few sapling trees and cigarette butts in them, Kells said. The garden has been building a momentum for about six years, she added.

And she has spent the last few encouraging others to get involved. The city of Chicago's motto, she pointed out, is "city in a garden"—*urbs in horto* in Latin.

Almost anyone with access to a registered garden can provide a nectar space for migrating [monarch butterflies](#), or a monarch way station.

"Any neighborhood with a garden, a yard, a school group, a church garden, a school garden, can do this kind of work, as long as they have the five necessary ingredients for the butterflies," she said.

Finding a space of at least 100 square feet, ensuring exposure to the sun at least six hours a day, and planting milkweed and flowers close together to provide shelter are the first three criteria.

Additionally, planting at least 10 milkweed plants of two or more species—Kells recommends native species—and plants that provide nectar is key to attract monarchs.

As climate changes and monarch habitats decline, experts expect their migration patterns to change as well. Which is why creating habitats, supporting monarch conservation and tagging to track any changes is so crucial at this moment in time.

The second monarch butterfly the women were able to capture

Wednesday held tightly onto the net, not wanting to let go. The group laughed and commented on the small creature's strength.

"We're thrilled. We're very excited. It's such a wonder to see the joy, the face of an adult who has just discovered something and experienced something she has never felt before in her life," Kells said later, "and just touching one of these living creatures, tagging it and knowing that that tag is going to work its way with a butterfly, down to Michoacan."

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