

ButterBike visits Junction

Each spring millions of monarch butterflies leave the mountains of Central Mexico, where they survived the winter, to begin their annual migration north. This spring they are accompanied by cyclist Sara Dykman (age 32) from Kansas who is biking 10,000 miles from the monarch overwintering colonies in Mexico to Canada ...and back...with the butterflies. Or as Dykman would say, "Butterbiking with the butterflies."

This week Dykman took a break from Butterbiking to visit Junction Elementary and share her story of the monarch with students. During her presentation, the lucky Junction kids looked at photos and listened to stories from her first 1,100 miles. They learned all about the unique monarch migration, and tried out some of her camping gear. "It is so rewarding to connect my adventures to students," said Dykman. "I want to show people how incredible the world is and be an example of what it means to follow your dreams and take care of the planet."

After class she returned to her home away from home at the Native American Seed Farm, which hosted her and gave her a tour of their farm. The local farm, run by the Neiman family, produces native seeds for people looking for a low-maintenance and economic way to restore wildlife habitat to their land and support the migrating monarch. "Our farm gives people access to the native plants that know how to survive Texas' hottest summers and coldest winters. We are proud that our farm can support, not just Sara as she bikes through Texas, but all the migrating monarchs as well," said Emily Neiman, Native American Seed Farm's ecotourism manager.

These rest stops and presentations are key to the success of Dykman's adventure. "As much as I love biking, what I will remember most are the people like the Neimans that invite me in and the students that have hundreds of questions and can't wait to hear more," reflected Dykman. "They motivate me to keep moving."

And keep moving she must. In order to follow the migration, Dykman must cover about 300 miles per week on a bicycle loaded down with everything she needs for life on the road. From camping equipment to presentation materials, her bike is heavy, and she moves slowly following the monarch migration while raising awareness about the importance of monarchs and threats to this iconic species. "The monarch migration is such an incredible migration," boasted Dykman. "Not only are these iconic butterflies flying thousands of miles, but it is a multigenerational, multinational migration. And unless people along the route plant native nectar plants and

milkweed in their gardens and on their lands and lawns...the monarchs are likely to go extinct."

The eastern monarch populations have been in steady decline since counting began in the 1990s. In 1996 monarchs covered 21 hectares of the Mexican Oyamel Fir Forest. By 2014, monarchs covered only 0.67 hectares. This 80% decline can be attributed to habitat loss and climate change.

Adding to the conservation dilemma is the fact that monarchs call three countries home. Monarchs depend on Mexico, the United States, and Canada to work together to protect the migration. "The future of the monarch migration is in the hands of people from all three countries," reported Dykman. "In Mexico, people need to protect the Oyamel Fir forest that the monarchs depend on to survive the winter, and in the United States and Canada, people need to plant milkweed."

Milkweed is the only food source of the monarch caterpillars, and gives the monarchs the toxins they need to be poisonous and avoid being eaten by most predators. Milkweed has been in a fast decline as industrial farming uses more broad-spectrum herbicides and land development encroaches on wild lands. Monarch Watch, a University of Kansas monarch education program, estimates that 6,000 acres of milkweed habitat are lost daily to development.

However there is some good news, because unlike many species that need untouched wilderness to thrive, monarchs simply need waystations, or gardens that have milkweed plants to lay their eggs and feed their caterpillars, as well as flowering plants that the monarchs and other pollinators can feed on the nectar. "Every garden adds up, and every garden is part of the solution," Dykman emphasized. "Schools, city halls, churches, parks, farms, and neighborhoods are planting milkweed and native flowering plants to help save the migration."

The efforts of so many people have made the monarch an iconic symbol of education, conservation and team work. Unless people from Mexico, the United States, and Canada can work together to implement conservation strategies, the monarch migration could disappear from the planet. "I am biking to raise awareness and encourage people to plant native gardens with milkweed. Be part of the solution and be part of the migration," said Dykman. "The future of the monarch is in the hands of all of North Americans"

Follow Dykman's videos, photos, blogs, and a daily progress map as she Butterbikes with the butterflies at www.beyondabook.org and get your pollinator garden started at www.seedsource.com.



Photo courtesy of Sara Dykman

Above: Sara Dykman rides along with Monarch Butterflies.

Right: Cyclist Sara Dykman made a stop at Native American Seed Farm during her visit through Junction. From left, are Jan Neiman, Emily Neiman, Sarah Dykman and Bill Neiman.

Below: Dykman visited Junction Elementary and talked to students about the geography and diversity of the monarch migration, the biology of the butterflies, and the importance of challenging yourself and following your dreams.



Photo courtesy of Emily Neiman



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