

Monarch butterfly exhibit illuminates beauty on the wing

Gail McCarthy, staff writer

— Gloucester is known for its fishing industry, its artists and its history. But unbeknownst to many, it is also home to a quiet natural wonder — the meadows and trees of Eastern Point provide respite for a multitude of monarch butterflies during their annual migration.

Kim Smith, an East Gloucester artist and interior and garden designer, discovered their resting spot one evening last September as she went out to photograph the monarchs for a book she is working on. She describes the book as a poetic tale. She planned to use the photographs to look back on as she created her watercolor illustrations over the winter.

Those photographs will be exhibited this month at Sawyer Free Library. Smith will present an informal talk at 7 p.m. Sept. 13 at the library. She has information and articles to hand out, including one about how to attract butterflies to one's garden, something she calls "summer magic."

"Civilizations the world over have given a spiritual interpretation to the metamorphosis of Lepidoptera. We are so fortunate to be part of this extraordinary phenomenon," Smith said. "I'm trying to get people to plant for the pollinators because I think it's our responsibility to support native flora and fauna. I really try to get people to think about planting native species as compared to some generic foundation shrub that doesn't support any wildlife. The more educated people become, the more they will want to conserve because it's special to them."

She shared a quote from a Senegalese conservationist, Baba Dioum, because it expresses her intent with the monarch photo exhibit: "In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand and we will understand only what we are taught."

Smith has a vast knowledge of plants. Though there are roughly 108 species of milkweed native to North America, she planted her garden with two kinds, common and marsh milkweed, because monarchs will lay their eggs on these plants.

Smith's inspiration for the monarch book blossomed from the hundreds of butterflies fluttering in her garden. She designed her garden to attract butterflies and all kinds of pollinators. She had been aware of Gloucester's role in the monarch migration. Millions of monarchs fly thousands of miles each year to winter in the mountains of Mexico. They travel about 50 miles a day and places like Gloucester are important stopovers.

Last fall she went in search of the butterflies to photograph on Eastern Point, which is home to many nectar plants for monarchs.

"I was there around dinner time and I watched them all fly into one tree. They came from all over the meadow and they headed to this one spot. I thought what if I'm here when they're waking up. But they were gone by the time I returned," recalled Smith.

But she persisted over the next three weeks, during which she took thousands of photographs from dawn to dusk. At times, she waited for two hours for the monarchs to awaken. On one of these trips, she met Eastern Point residents Joseph and Helen Garland, who were out strolling hand in hand. They had suggested to Smith that she contact the library to share these photographs.

She titled the exhibit "Sleeping Transformations," which is derived from the monarch's scientific name, *Danaus plexippus*, which translated from Greek means "sleepy transformation."

Over the years, Smith has studied this particular butterfly. "They are part of this extraordinary tale that links Mexico with the United States and Canada," she said.

The monarchs winter in volcanic mountains in central Mexico in the forests of Michoacan. Around the spring equinox, they start to emerge. The generation of monarchs born in Gloucester at the end of the summer are called the Methuselah generation. They are born in a state of immaturity. These are the monarchs that will make the 3,000-mile journey to Mexico, arriving around the time of the Day of the Dead celebration in October, Smith said.

She wants to encourage residents to think about the future.

“Their ephemeral grace not only inspires hope, but also gives us the courage to be active in the search for solutions. The all-too-fragile link of the butterfly to the health of the environment embodies the urgent need for positive change,” Smith wrote in an article. “... As a community, we need to do all that we can to support butterfly habitats, to protect and to plant wildflowers to sustain caterpillars and to provide nectar for adult butterflies, discontinue the use of poisonous pesticides, make a commitment to grow organically and sustainably, and to purchase locally grown produce from organic farmers.”

The Sawyer Free Library exhibit includes about 45 photographs, including some of the larvae and chrysalis stage.

Smith has studied at the Massachusetts College of Art, the School of Fashion Design in Boston and the Museum School in Boston.

“When I experience something in the garden, I want to share it. Now we have hummingbirds. We never had hummingbirds until I started planting things to support them. They migrate too,” Smith said.

Smith authored a soon-to-be-published book, “Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities! Notes from a Gloucester Garden,” for which she created watercolor illustrations.

Mary Weissblum, chairman of the Gloucester Lyceum which is sponsoring the event, was eager to share Smith’s work. “The monarch stops here in its migration at the sanctuary on Eastern Point and it’s a glorious site to see,” she said. “It is certainly one of the wonders of nature and this is a timely exhibit.”

Ten percent of the sale of each photograph will be donated to The Michoacan Reforestation Fund.

Information about Smith is available by visiting www.kimsmithdesigns.com.

Copyright © 1999-2006 cnhi, inc.

Photos



A new exhibition, “Sleeping Transformations: The Journey of the Monarch Butterfly,” featuring the photography of Kim Smith, will hang in the Matz Gallery at Sawyer Free Library through Oct. 1. Smith will give a gallery talk Thursday, Sept. 13, at 7 p.m. Courtesy Photo