



(From left) Just released during an annual event in Southwest Harbor, Maine, Sophie the monarch butterfly sports a Monarch Watch ID tag. Sometimes the butterflies need encouragement to settle on a blossom.

All Aflutter Along the Shore

Southwest Harbor's annual butterfly release enchants folks of all ages

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MIMI BIGELOW STEADMAN

Gaggles of eager children clutching small paper containers surrounded Ann Judd as she counted down.

"Three ... two ... one!" she announced, and with an excited flurry, the kids opened their packages above their heads. Hundreds of vibrant black-and-orange painted lady butterflies filled the air, gliding toward the lush blossoms encircling us. *How magical*, I thought, wishing I could set one free, too.

A few lingered on the children's tiny fingers. One little girl held hers up and announced, "This is Sparkles!"

A young boy gingerly placed his butterfly on a flower, exclaiming, "He blends right in!"

I could see that Judd, the volunteer organizer and director of the Charlotte Rhoades Park and Butterfly Garden in Southwest Harbor, Maine, was enjoying the youngsters' wide-eyed enthusiasm at this festive Butterfly Release benefit. Held every July, it's a fundraiser for a garden created by community teamwork on property originally owned by Charlotte Rhoades, a local podiatrist, and given to the town by a subsequent owner who specified the

town make it a place for parents and children to enjoy together.

"Kids have been our focus since the beginning," Judd told me later. "A local schoolteacher suggested the butterfly garden, a fifth-grade class proposed it at the annual town meeting, and children helped us plant it back in 1998. Throughout every season, we welcome lots of school groups and families."

Having been fascinated by butterflies since my own childhood, I was looking forward to the party as I headed to this quiet side of Mount Desert Island, Maine. I arrived to find



Getting There

>>> Southwest Harbor is on Maine's Mount Desert Island, roughly 47 miles southeast of Bangor. From Interstate 95, take I-395 to US 1A. Follow US 1A/US 1 through Ellsworth, then take SR 3 across the bridge onto the island. Follow SR 102 (Main Street) for about 8 miles into town.



(Clockwise from below) Monarch caterpillars prefer milkweed plants. A garden volunteer helps children search for them amid the milkweed. Face-painting is also a popular festival event.



volunteers handing out butterfly stickers and painting butterfly images on grinning young faces. Along garden paths, kids, parents, and volunteers searched for butterfly eggs and caterpillars amid flora selected to attract the colorful insects.

The spectacular monarch is of particular interest as the Rhoades garden is one of about 2,000 nature organizations involved in Monarch Watch, a nationwide educational research program affiliated with the University of Kansas. Wild monarchs arrive at the garden every June to lay eggs that soon hatch into caterpillars. Judd told me that she gathers baby caterpillars and distributes them to families, schools, and libraries to nurture through their metamorphosis. The caretakers often become quite attached to their charges, and even adults tend to name their butterflies.

After the monarchs emerge from their chrysalides, volunteers demonstrate how to place one of Monarch Watch's 9-mm-wide, adhesive-backed tags on the underside of the hind wing

so it does not interfere with the butterfly's flight. Each tag bears a registration number plus a toll-free number, website, and email address to report recovered butterflies. Those released here during the summer live for two to six weeks and may be found a few miles away. But monarchs born in Maine from August through September join millions of others headed to overwintering grounds in the mountains of central Mexico. Genetic coding in the migrating monarchs gives them an innate ability to find their way and a lifespan of up to eight months.

Last summer, participants in the Rhoades garden program tagged more than 200 monarchs. One, fostered by the Northeast Harbor Library, arrived at the party in a netting cage.

"The children named her Sophie," librarian Eileen MacLean explained as she affixed a tag. "Now it's her time to go out into the world."

Releasing her hold, MacLean whispered, "Goodbye, Sophie!"

We watched her flutter to a zinnia for a taste of nectar—and freedom. 🦋

DO Charlotte Rhoades Park and Butterfly Garden

is open daily year-round. Volunteers are on site Thursdays, 9:30–11:30 a.m., mid-April to mid-October. Tickets for this year's July 25 Butterfly Release benefit are \$30 and include a butterfly to release (under 12 free, butterfly not included). Patron tickets cost \$150 and include six butterflies. Reservations required. (207) 244-9264; rhoadesbutterflygarden.org. **Monarch Watch** distributes tagging kits and monitors recovered tagged monarchs. monarchwatch.org.

STAY The Claremont Hotel

, a genteel Victorian-era summer resort overlooking Somes Sound, offers 24 updated guest rooms. Rates start at \$185. (800) 244-5036; theclaremonthotel.com. **The Lindenwood Inn**, in the heart of the village, has 15 guest rooms plus a hot tub and pool. Rates start at \$155. (800) 307-5335; lindenwoodinn.com.

EAT Lunchtime salads and sandwiches come with views of passing lobster boats at the casual **Boathouse** at the Claremont, which also has a formal dining room. (800) 244-5036; theclaremonthotel.com. Candle-lit dinners await at the award-winning **Red Sky**. (207) 244-0476; redskyrestaurant.com. **The Captain's Galley** at Beal's Lobster Pier cooks lobsters, lobster rolls, and other fresh local seafood to enjoy at picnic tables. (207) 244-3202; bealslobsterpier.net.

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