

Monarchs get royal sendoff in Harrison Township

Wednesday, September 29, 2010

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HARRISON TWP. Students at the Friends School of Mullica Hill experienced the first steps on a butterfly's journey south Tuesday, when kindergartners to fourth-graders released the monarchs they had raised since the school year began.

Dressed as caterpillars, chrysalis and a cocoon-like state and monarchs, the elementary students marched their butterflies through the school grounds, down Route 45, then to the playground where the winged insects were released.

The butterflies have a thousand miles to travel before they reach the mountains of Northern Mexico.

"Each year they go to the same mountain and kind of hibernate," said third-grader Lena Hammod, 8.

Since the first day of school, Lena and the elementary school students have learned about the life cycle of a butterfly from the eggs to the caterpillar stage to breaking through the cocoon. They've also learned that monarchs only feed on milkweed, and have a slew of predators.

"With the little kids, everything we learn about is a cycle," said science teacher Rhonda Pennington, who heads the butterfly project at the Friends School. "They do see life and death, which is fascinating to them."

The students have watched monarch births, but they've also gotten a taste of the darker side of monarch life. In Pennington's classroom, they've seen the butterflies become prey for a parasite and even contract butterfly viruses.

"There's a real conservation point behind this, too," Pennington said. "That's why third-graders marched and said, 'Save the milkweed.'"

Milkweed is the monarch's only source of food, and it's rapidly disappearing as land is built up into shopping centers and housing developments, according to Pennington.

"This year we're passing out seeds, and telling everybody that it's not right to kill caterpillars and butterflies, and not to make too much pollution," said Lena.

Pennington said her students are also made aware of the shrinking monarch habitat in Mexico. When the butterflies left the Mullica Hill School, they were on their way to a set of 12 mountains in Mexico that offer the ideal conditions for their survival for the winter. To make room for crops, farmers in the Central American country are cutting down the forests where the butterflies spend their winter.

"It's a great thing to open their minds about science and how the world works," said Bruce Haines, school headmaster.

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