

Help butterflies flutter, not fade

by David Suzuki

Butterflies are having a global relocation moment. Unlike us, they don't need moving vans, cardboard boxes or a friend who insists the sofa will fit in their hatchback. But they do need somewhere to go.

A study in *Nature Ecology & Evolution* found butterflies are shifting their ranges on every continent. Researchers compiled 6,182 records of range shifts involving 1,758 species in 105 countries.

The findings show a world in motion. One in 10 butterfly species globally has shifted its distribution. Of the species with documented shifts, 80 per cent expanded into new areas, 27 per cent contracted and 22 per cent shifted along elevation gradients. Climate change and extreme weather were identified as drivers in nearly 80 per cent of documented movements.

Butterflies are doing what living things have always done when conditions change: trying to find a place that works. But the route is increasingly blocked by pavement, development, industrial agriculture and lawns shaved into green carpets with little room for anything that crawls, blooms or flutters.

For a butterfly, moving is not as simple as flying north. It needs places to feed, rest, escape heat and lay eggs. Adult butterflies require nectar from flowering plants. Caterpillars require host plants ? specific species they can eat before transforming into the winged creatures that delight us.

That's where people come in.

Julie Yeager joined the David Suzuki Foundation's Butterflyway Project in 2020. She began by getting permission to replant a strip of roadside grass with wildflowers in her Markham neighbourhood. Each year since, with help from city staff, Julie and her neighbours added another section to what is now a vibrant wildflower meadow, buzzing with wild bees and butterflies.

Julie's meadow shows how butterfly conservation can begin close to home, on balconies, in gardens, beside driveways and along schoolyard edges. It begins when people choose to see a nibbled leaf, fallen twig or ?weed? as habitat rather than a gardening failure.

For butterflies, this shift in perspective can be lifesaving. Monarchs helped make that lesson visible in eastern Canada. In 2013, the David Suzuki Foundation launched #GotMilkweed, encouraging people to plant the monarch caterpillar's sole host plant in residential gardens and public spaces. As eastern monarch numbers fell to a historic low, local action took on greater urgency and thousands of residents planted milkweed.

But monarchs are only one part of the story. Many of Canada's butterflies don't make long migrations. They need a complete life cycle's worth of habitat close to home: host plants for larvae, nectar from spring through fall and safe places to spend winter. Most overwinter as caterpillars or pupae, often among leaf litter and stems ? if these aren't removed in overly enthusiastic fall cleanups.

Orange and black painted lady butterflies lay eggs on native plants often considered weeds, including thistles, mallows and pearly everlasting. Their caterpillars need those plants, not just a showy garden full of exotic blooms.

Canadian tiger swallowtails offer another example. Adults visit nectar-rich flowers such as bee balm and purple coneflower, while caterpillars feed on trees including willows, alders, aspens and apple trees.

Julie's meadow is one of many growing through the Butterflyway Project. Since 2017, volunteer ?Butterflyway Rangers? have worked with neighbours, schools, businesses and municipalities to create habitat. Since then, Rangers and their communities have

established thousands of habitat gardens, planted tens of thousands of native wildflowers, grasses and shrubs, and created over 150 official Butterflyways ? neighbourhood networks of at least a dozen habitat gardens.

The goal isn't to turn every yard into a wilderness. It's to create enough food, shelter and connection that butterflies and other pollinators can move through neighbourhoods rather than becoming stranded in isolated green pockets.

Gardening can't substitute for serious action on climate change, habitat loss and pesticide use. Governments and industry must act. But local action isn't trivial. It creates habitat now, helps neighbours see their spaces differently and builds support for bigger change.

So, plant native species suited to your region. Include nectar and caterpillar host plants. Leave some leaves and stems through winter. Ask your city to replace a little turf with habitat. Share seeds, plants and ideas with neighbours.

A Butterflyway isn't a grand piece of infrastructure. It's a series of small welcome mats ? and it can begin outside your door.

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