



## Little WINGS ON THE PRAIRIE



**BY TERRY HALL, NATURALIST, OAHE DOWNSTREAM**

If you have never put on a bee costume complete with a full head mask, I would not recommend wearing it on a hot summer day. I did this as part of a volunteer duty at the first annual Little Wings on the Prairie Festival event held July 18, 2015, at Oahe Downstream Recreation Area near Pierre.

The festival hosted a number of activities and teaching stations where children, their parents and others could learn more about pollinators with a focus on butterflies. It was held at the South Dakota Prairie Butterfly Garden near the park's entrance. The garden was established in 2013 utilizing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Connecting People with Nature – Let's Go Outside Fund. Additional funding came from the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks' (GFP) Division of Parks and Recreation Development Fund, South Dakota Chapter of the Wildlife Society and a small grant through GFP's wildlife diversity program.

During the event, children and elementary teachers were thrilled to see the flowers in full bloom; which they had planted earlier in the school year. The annual flowers had been given to area elementary schools as seeds with small individual pots. After about a month of growth, classes brought their plants to the garden to be transplanted. The garden has a number of plots for the locally-grown, annual flowers. Most of the garden is comprised primarily of South Dakota native perennials carefully selected by Team Butterfly, the members of which are from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), GFP and South Dakota State University (SDSU) Extension.

Included in the perennials are butterfly milkweed and swamp milkweed; important food sources for monarch caterpillars. These milkweeds are stored inside the caterpillar and passed on to the adult butterfly. The adults are then protected from birds and other predators who might consider them an easy meal, as they apparently taste horrible. In North America, herbicide use has eliminated the populations of wild milkweeds to the point where the population of monarch butterflies has drastically been reduced. According to a report by the World Wildlife Fund, the butterflies migrating to Mexico declined from an area covering approximately 44.5 acres outside Mexico City in 1996 to a mere 1.65 acres in 2013.

In 2013, the Butterfly Garden was planted not only to provide a refuge for monarch butterflies and other pollinators, but to provide valuable information about our declining pollinators and their importance globally. Information is displayed at the entrance to the garden via a kiosk display and educational pamphlets. Local biologist Charlene "Charlie" Bessken of the USFWS came up with the idea of the garden and worked with GFP's district park supervisor, Pat Buscher, to make the garden a reality. The Little Wings on the Prairie Festival was another effort to further promote pollinator awareness. The event was the work of three Butterfly Garden team members: Charlie, Maggie Lindsey with GFP and Amanda Bachman with SDSU Extension.

The event attracted other agencies, as they demonstrated how they were creating habitat or promoting pollinator awareness. In the booth hosted by Pheasants Forever, staff helped kids and adults



make pollinator balls. These balls consisted of mud packed with perennial seeds that could be dried until next year for planting. The Discovery Center staff showed young biologists the different parts of flowering plants. Jen Fowler, Rapid City teacher and author of the Butterfly Activity Guide (available online), gave a special tour of the garden for the kids. Fort Pierre National Grasslands staff talked about restoring native grasslands as they gave away packets of perennial seeds, butterfly pins and pollinator posters. All kids received special nylon disks to fly and decorate as a reminder of the festival.

At the end of the event, Amanda Bachman gave a tour of the garden for the adults, pointing out different perennials and describing a few characteristics of each species.

The attendees left that day with a greater appreciation for the importance of butterflies, bees and other pollinators and the beneficial effect they have on our daily lives. Gardening to attract butterflies, butterfly watching and butterfly conservation are drawing the attention of thousands. 🐾



## 2015 HIGHLIGHTS

- 🦋 Garden booths where kids could do a variety of activities related to pollinators.
- 🦋 Rock painting.
- 🦋 Pierre's Cookie Lady, Janet McKenzie, helped kids decorate their own butterfly cookies.
- 🦋 The "Migration Maze" was a favorite among adults and children alike. In constructing the maze, Maggie Lindsey laid out a pattern on paper and we brought it to the three-acre patch of tall grass west of the Butterfly Garden. Signs were posted in the maze, informing participants of various facts about the monarch migration to Mexico. If the participant chose a dead end, he or she had to start over. Each stop on the trail had a sign with a different event happening to the butterfly.
- 🦋 The "Pollinator's Parade" gave children a chance to wear the costumes, antennae and wings they made earlier in the day.
- 🦋 And of course, who wouldn't love to see a giant, fuzzy bee? I made my appearance during the parade dressed in the department's bee costume as "Beesley" (sweating profusely, I might add). I was quite the hit, but responses varied. Some kids hugged their mothers' legs, but most children gave me fist-bumps, handshakes or hugs as I knelt down for photos with them.



**MARK YOUR CALENDAR**  
FOR NEXT YEAR'S LITTLE WINGS ON THE PRAIRIE FESTIVAL  
**SATURDAY, JULY 16, 2016**  
**FROM 9:00 A.M. TO NOON**