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### BUNCOMBE RECOVERS

## Buncombe launches Helene recovery site

Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Buncombe County has launched Buncombe Recovers, a Helene recovery website to keep the community informed on progress as we recover from the impacts of Tropical Storm Helene. The site at [engage.buncombecoun-](https://engage.buncombecounty.org/buncomberecovers)

[ty.org/buncomberecovers](https://engage.buncombecounty.org/buncomberecovers) will provide up-to-date progress reporting, disaster recovery programs and resources, and information on rebuilding efforts. Buncombe Recovers will function as a one-stop shop for survivors seeking assistance and community members looking for answers about the complexities of recovery efforts.

In telling the story of Buncombe County's rebuilding, Buncombe Recovers focuses on the following key areas:

- Debris management
- Economic revitalization
- Health and social services
- Housing Infrastructure
- Natural and cultural resources
- Helene spending transparency

- Community engagement
- Resource connections

Ultimately, Buncombe Recovers will be a critical hub for the community to share feedback about revitalization priorities. Visit [engage.buncombecounty.org/buncomberecovers](https://engage.buncombecounty.org/buncomberecovers) and subscribe to receive updates about Buncombe County's ongoing recovery efforts.



## Monarchs proposed for threatened species listing



**Word from the Smokies**  
Holly Kays  
Guest columnist

Before National Geographic published its famous August 1976 cover story detailing the search for the monarch butterfly's wintering grounds, nobody knew where these strikingly beautiful creatures vanished when the weather grew cold. A 2,000-mile migration was thought to be a "foolish idea," said Wanda DeWaard, founder of the outdoor education company Earth Kin LLC, who has led a monarch tagging program in Great Smoky Mountains National Park since 1998. Ever since, this natural phenomenon has fostered fascination among scientists and enthusiasts.

But it's a phenomenon under threat, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Monarch populations east of the Rockies spend the winter in central Mexico, while those in the west migrate to southern California. Today, there are 80% fewer monarchs overwintering in Mexico than in the 1980s, and California wintering populations are 95% smaller than they were at that time. In response to these figures, the USFWS issued a December 2024 proposal to list the monarch butterfly as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

"The iconic monarch butterfly is cherished across North America, captivating children and adults throughout its fascinating lifecycle," USFWS Director Martha Williams said in a press release announcing the listing proposal. "Despite its fragility,



**A monarch caterpillar clings to a milkweed leaf. Monarch caterpillars feed exclusively on plants from this genus.**

PROVIDED BY JIM HUDGINS/US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

**TOP: A monarch butterfly perches on an aster plant blooming during the fall in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.**

PROVIDED BY WANDA DEWAARD/WARREN BIELENBERG

it is remarkably resilient, like many things in nature when we just give them a chance."

Though isolated populations of monarchs exist in 90 different countries, islands, or island groups worldwide, their lineages all trace back to North America, where the butterfly has a complex life cycle and migratory pattern that scientists still don't fully understand.

**See MONARCHS, Page 9A**

## Recovery continues at plane crash site

### NTSB to conduct test on aircraft's black boxes

**Christopher Cann**  
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – Investigators on Friday forged ahead with search and salvage operations after the collision of a passenger plane and a U.S. Army helicopter that killed 67 people, as families and communities across the U.S. and in other countries mourned the victims in the deadliest aviation disaster in over two decades.

Divers continued to scour the icy Potomac River on Friday for "aircraft components" to support the National Transportation Safety Board's investigation into the cause of the crash, according to Washington's Fire and EMS Department.

The NTSB said investigators recovered the cockpit voice recorder and flight data recorder from the passenger plane and will analyze the black boxes for critical information about the moments leading up to the collision. Officials are still searching for one recorder from the Black Hawk helicopter.

NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy said authorities will "leave no stone unturned in this investigation" and promised a "whole-of-government effort."

A preliminary report on the incident is expected within 30 days of the collision, officials said.

Meanwhile President Donald Trump continued speculating on the cause of the crash on Friday, writing on Truth Social that the helicopter was flying "too high."

"The Blackhawk helicopter was flying too high, by a lot," he wrote. "It was far above the 200 foot limit. That's not really too complicated to understand, is it???"

### Pilot, student among victims

While authorities focus on the cause of the crash, families across world are mourning loved ones.

The victims of Wednesday's collision include a pilot who was planning to be married in the fall, a student heading back to college after a funeral, an attorney returning home on her birthday, a group of teenage figure skaters as well as their parents and coaches; two Chinese citizens; and a Philippine National Police colonel.

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# Recovery

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A spokesperson said in a news briefing that Col. Pergentino Malabed, who served as the chief of the supply management division, was “on official travel” at the time of the incident.

“His untimely passing is a profound loss to the PNP, where he served with honor, integrity, and dedication throughout his career,” the Philippine National Police said.

## Teams of specialists deployed

A team of federal forensic specialists and medical examiners has been deployed to help local officials as they pull bodies out the Potomac River and work to identify the remains.

At the request of the NTSB, the Mortuary Operational Response Team has begun offering services to the D.C. Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, including the collection of medical records, DNA samples and fingerprints.

DMORT provides medical examiners, pathologists, forensic odontologists, dental assistants, funeral directors and other experts for “technical assistance and personnel to recover and identify the remains of disaster victims,” the Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response said in a statement.

Immediately after the accident the administration deployed tactical medical providers to support emergency responders, along with experts from ASPR’s Disaster Behavioral Health Team to support the family members.

“The team conducted a rapid behavioral health needs assessment which (DC) officials will use to put resources in place,” ASPR said.

**Flight cancellations, restrictions**

A temporary ground stop was issued Friday at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, according to the Federal Aviation Administration. The FAA said departures were “grounded due to airport volume” until 8:45 a.m. EST

As of 9 a.m. Friday, 65 departing and arriving flights had been canceled. One of the runways at the notoriously busy airport is closed because of the collision.

The airport, which immediately closed after the crash, had reopened by 11 a.m. Thursday. More than 500 flights were canceled that day.

An FAA official told Reuters on Friday that the agency also was barring most helicopters from parts of two helicopter routes near the airport and only allowing police and medical helicopters in the area between the airport and nearby bridges.

The FAA official said the restrictions affect Route 1 and Route 4 near the airport. NTSB member Todd Inman said Thursday it appears the helicopter at the time of the collision was transiting from Route 1 to Route 4. He said helicopters in the Washington area use a very well-defined system.

The FAA told lawmakers who have questioned the close proximity of the military and civilian routes that it planned to continue the restrictions for the foreseeable future as it conducts a

complete evaluation.

**Air traffic control staffing studied**

The staffing at the airport at the time of the collision is drawing intense scrutiny after multiple news outlets reported a single air traffic controller was responsible for directing helicopters and commercial airliners. The New York Times and NBC News reported that an FAA report said those tasks are typically split between two staffers.

The airport is home to the busiest runway in the country. In recent years, shortages of air traffic controllers, near collisions and the addition of more direct flights at the airport have fueled safety concerns.

In response to a request for comment, the FAA referred questions to the NTSB, which is leading the investigation.

“We cannot comment on any aspect of open investigations,” the FAA said in an email. “The FAA will quickly take any actions necessary based on evidence from the investigation.”

*Contributing: Charles Ventura, USA TODAY; Reuters*

# Monarchs

Continued from Page 1A

In the spring, overwintering butterflies mate and fly north, eventually stopping to lay eggs once they find milkweed.

This new generation continues its northward journey. Over the course of 3-5 generations, each with a lifespan of 2-5 weeks, the monarchs arrive in southern Canada. But the last generation lives much longer, with sexual maturity put on hold while they fly south to central Mexico for the winter. When spring returns, they complete their development to mate and lay eggs.

“It’s a pretty amazing process,” DeWaard said. “I think it’s important to have a little wonder and awe and mystery in our lives, and they certainly provide it.”

DeWaard has been finding wonder and awe in monarchs since the 1990s, when she first spotted their caterpillars at her home in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, munching milkweed. She was fascinated and contacted Monarch Watch, a program based at the University of Kansas that includes a monarch tagging program. Tags help researchers better understand how monarchs move across the landscape. At the time, little was known about the monarch’s distribution in the Southern Appalachians.

“Whoever I talked to at Monarch Watch wasn’t even sure monarchs breed in the Smokies,” DeWaard said. “And I said, ‘Well, I’ve seen them in my yard.’”

In the years since, DeWaard has worked to fill that knowledge gap, leading countless groups of people in monarch tagging events. Most of her work takes place in Cades Cove, where prescribed fire keeps the meadows open and encourages the growth of milkweed and other nectar-producing plants. However, monarchs may sometimes be found in other open areas such as Cataloochee and Purchase Knob.

Over the years, DeWaard has witnessed “a very different pattern” of monarch butterfly presence in the Smokies than what she might have expected before she began observing them. The Smokies’ first monarchs usually arrive as milkweed shoots leaf out in April. They lay eggs, and this new generation continues its journey north. Another round of breeding typically occurs in September — a deviation from the typical northward progression of reproductive activity. DeWaard hypothesizes that these butterflies might be dispersing from the more crowded regions in their quest to procreate. Migrating monarchs also stop by in the fall, filling up on nectar in the fields.

DeWaard’s tagging numbers have fluctuated over the years, ranging from fewer than 100 in the early 2000s to a record of more than 1,100 in 2018. She oversaw the tagging of 724 monarchs in 2023, but last year only 154 monarchs were tagged, despite DeWaard holding three to four tagging events each week. It’s difficult to draw inferences from these figures, however, as factors such as number of tagging events, weather, and other issues can impact tagging.

In recent years, Andy Davis, assistant research scientist at the University of Georgia’s Odum School of Ecology, has been working to paint a more complete picture of how monarch populations fare when they leave their winter strongholds. In 2022, his team published a paper analyzing more than 135,000 citizen science monarch observations stretching from 1993-2018, gathered during an annual summer data collection event conducted by the North American Butterfly Association. While some areas saw net increases and oth-



**Smokies Life Park Keepers listen as Wanda DeWaard explains the monarch tagging process during a fall tagging event.**  
PROVIDED BY  
ANDRÉ  
BROUSSEAU/  
SMOKIES LIFE

ers saw net decreases in monarch populations, “overall, there’s no long-term decline in the numbers of monarchs in the summer over the last 30 years,” Davis concluded.

Davis’ data indicates that, while steep declines in the number of overwintering monarchs are well-documented, successful breeding in the warmer months make them “perfectly capable of bouncing back in the summer.” He surmises that plummeting winter populations are due to a “transit problem.” A subsequent paper Davis and his co-researchers published in October 2024 explored this issue.

“There has been a clear decline in the success rate of monarchs actually reaching Mexico,” he said. “By the time they get to Texas, their numbers have dwindled to 80% less than they were 20 years ago. It’s a massive, massive decline that is pretty much going unnoticed.”

In its listing proposal, the USFWS says that habitat loss, insecticide exposure, and climate change are driving the decline in overwintering monarchs. In the Midwest, for example, an important region for summer breeding, milkweed stems decreased by nearly 40% between 1999-2014, the listing proposal states; about 90% of corn and soybean crop acreages are planted to tolerate herbicides that kill milkweed and other native plants. The listing proposal calls for an increase in milkweed and nectar-producing plants, protection and enhancement of overwintering sites, reducing the impact of insecticides and herbicides to monarchs and their environment, and maintenance of public support for monarch conservation.

Davis said his research shows that the increasing prevalence of *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha* (OE), a protozoan parasite that affects monarchs worldwide, is having a larger impact on migration. Migrating while infected is like “running a marathon with the flu,” Davis said. Sick monarchs usually die on the journey.

In nonmigratory populations, OE infection rates as high as 100% have been observed, but rates in migratory monarch populations have historically been extremely low, around 1%. In recent decades, however, the OE infection rate has skyrocketed, he said. Davis attributes this to non-native tropical milkweed species, often planted by well-meaning people looking for a way to help monarchs. Because they remain in leaf longer, tropical milkweeds accumulate a buildup of OE, which then infects any monarch using the plant.

Another well-intentioned intervention may also be having an impact. Monarchs raised in captivity grow up weak and directionally challenged, Davis said, with some research indicating a migratory success rate only about one-third that of their wild-grown relatives.

“My message to people is, we just need to be hands-off,” he said. “You can have a butterfly garden in your backyard, but leave the monarchs alone and don’t interfere.”

Both DeWaard and Davis said they expect the monarch will continue to survive as a species — it’s the migration that’s under threat.

Biologically speaking, it’s an important phenomenon, cleansing the population of weak or sick individuals and bringing butterflies from all over the continent together to exchange genes, keeping the species strong and resilient.

But more than that, it’s a mystical marvel, drawing attention and appreci-

ation to the important roles insects play in the world we share.

“The migration is what makes the monarchs so charismatic,” said Davis. “It’s a special thing that’s almost unique among butterflies. It’s part of their story, and if we were to lose that, it would be a great tragedy.”

*Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author hollyk@smokieslife.org.*

*To learn more about the monarch listing proposal or comment by March 12, search docket number FWS-R3-ES-2024-0137 on Regulations.gov . To help monarchs and other pollinators, plant native flowers, avoid pesticides and herbicides, mow less, and participate in citizen science efforts to monitor populations. Contact DeWaard at earthkin@bellsouth.net to get involved with monarch conservation efforts in the Smokies.*



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