

BREAKING

Kids help SJTA make butterflies a priority along A.C. Expressway

MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST Staff Writer

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A Monarch butterfly flutters in to feed on native goldenrod in Cape May Point Oct. 3, 2017.

Dale Gerhard / Staff Photographer

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EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP — At first the South Jersey Transportation Authority may not seem to have much in common with butterflies.

But when you think about the thousands of acres the SJTA oversees, through the Atlantic City Expressway and Atlantic City International Airport, the connection makes more sense.

The authority has the ability to make a huge difference for wildlife, SJTA Project Manager Nicholas Marchese said.

It has made habitat enhancement along the 40-mile long expressway a priority for years, Marchese said, starting with tree and wildflower plantings, which continue.

Now the SJTA also is focused on installing 20 houses each for bats, butterflies, bluebirds and American kestrels along the road, he said. This website utilizes technologies such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as for analytics, personalization, and targeted advertising. [Privacy Policy](#)

That's why SJTA staff members were at Slaybaugh Primary School here Wednesday, which was National Learn About Butterflies Day, with butterfly houses and a weeping willow tree to donate.

Marchese told a morning assembly in the cafeteria how important butterflies and other pollinators are for the production of vegetables, fruits and flowering plants.

"Our roadway cuts through the Pinelands and takes area where butterflies used to be," Marchese told the kids. So he said the authority's job is to plant natives like milkweed and goldenrod for them.

"They are less colorful plants," Marchese said of the natives. But he said butterflies such as monarchs, which have lost about 90 percent of their population in the last 30 years, prefer and need them.

Slaybaugh is the first of several schools to which SJTA will donate butterfly houses, which look similar to bird houses but have slits for butterflies to enter for shelter. They were constructed by students at technical high schools in Gloucester and Camden counties.

Third-grade teacher Donna Efstatos, who started an edible school garden about a year ago outside her classroom with another teacher, said her class raises monarch butterflies from eggs each year. The students watch them grow as caterpillars then form chrysalises, then name and release them after they emerge as butterflies, she said.

But some years, the insects emerge on a rainy or windy day, and huddle in nearby trees. Now they will have a butterfly house to go to for shelter, she said.

The SJTA butterfly effort is part of a bigger project called the READI Program, an acronym that stands for 'Roadway Environment Advancement Initiative,' he said.

There are 35 acres of wildflower plantings along the expressway, Marchese said. The authority has begun planting more perennial native flowers and native trees in them, rather than nonnative annuals as it did in the past, he said. And it is expanding the planting area.

Some butterfly species lay their eggs on native trees, and their caterpillars that hatch from eggs eat the leaves until they are ready to pupate. According to the Native Plant Society of New Jersey, native **trees** such as oaks, black cherry, eastern red cedar, American holly and many more provide food for various butterfly caterpillars.

The weeping willow is one of the host plants for the mourning cloak butterfly, one of the first to emerge in the spring.

The SJTA controls more than 5,000 acres at the airport and another 1,750 acres along the expressway, said Chief Engineer Stephen Mazur.

Mazur and Project Manager John F. McDonnell also told the kids about the **Million Pollinator Garden Challenge**, an effort to encourage people to plant gardens for pollinators like butterflies, moths and hummingbirds.

"Let's get involved. You can do it at home and at school," McDonnell said.

Contact: 609-272-7219 MPost@pressofac.com Twitter @MichelleBPost Facebook.com/EnvironmentSouthJersey

Did You Know?

There is a South Jersey Butterfly B/Log run by Stockton University Professor of Writing Jack Connor. It is available at <https://blogs.stockton.edu/sjbfs/>.

It says it "features a running collection of posts and photos about sightings, trends, field trips, and other news relevant to our efforts to learn more about these beautiful creatures." **This website utilizes technologies such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as for analytics, personalization, and targeted advertising. [Privacy Policy](#)**

