

Butterflies Return to Edgewood

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San Mateo, Burlingame

by Shaun Bishop / Daily News Staff Writer

Pollution once pushed the Bay checkerspot butterfly out of nature preserve.

Its wings are barely bigger than a pair of postage stamps, but it was clear Thursday that the Bay checkerspot butterfly's significance to a group of local conservationists had transcended its small size.

With the release of about a dozen butterflies at a ceremony held at Edgewood Park and Natural Preserve came the culmination of a long struggle to bring the checkerspot -- a threatened species not seen at the park for years -- home.

"I thought it was a very magnificent butterfly," said Jared, 9, one of more than a dozen children on hand for the ceremony. "It's very incredible," he added.

"It brought tears to my eyes," said Carolyn Curtis, founding president of the Friends of Edgewood conservation group.

An effort to revive the butterflies' presence came after years of investigation headed by local butterfly conservation expert Stuart Weiss revealed why the black, white and orange insect had rapidly disappeared from Edgewood in the late 1990s.

The culprit, Weiss says: automobile traffic on nearby Interstate Highway 280.

In what Weiss calls a "drive-by extinction," the pollution from an estimated 100,000 cars per day driving on I-280 fertilized the rolling hills of Edgewood with ammonia, a

byproduct of the catalytic converters found in modern cars.

The nitrogen-enriched soil set the stage for rapid growth of invasive Italian ryegrass, which choked out the native plants that had survived on the nutrient-poor soil and provided food for the checkerspot. The last time checkerspots were seen in the park was in 2002.



Melissa McRobbie / Daily News file

Sarah Pike, 4 1/2 years old, of San Francisco, holds a butterfly for the first time at Edgewood Park and Natural Preserve in Redwood City on Thursday. The Bay checkerspot butterfly sitting on her thumb is one of about a dozen released Thursday to celebrate the resurgence of that species in the park.

To Weiss, the connection was clear: the closer the land was to the freeway, the thicker the nitrogen-hungry ryegrass.

"Nitrogen pollution is really the biggest environmental change that nobody's ever heard of," he said.

With the help of roughly \$100,000 in grant money from a variety of sources -- including Pacific Gas & Electric Co., REI Inc., the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the Friends of Edgewood -- the green fields were strategically mowed to allow the native plants to grow back.

As the habitat grew into place, Weiss gathered 1,000 caterpillars from Coyote Ridge in Santa Clara County, which has a large checkerspot population, and placed them in Edgewood in February and March.

Volunteers will now take periodic counts of the population and occasionally mow the grass to ensure the native plants survive and support the checkerspot.

"We are stewards of this land and this place. That is our responsibility," said San Mateo County Supervisor Rich Gordon.

Weiss encouraged motorists to drive the speed limit when passing Edgewood Road

on 280. He said slowing down to 65 instead of 80 could halve the nitrogen output from the car.

Researchers will know by February 2008 whether their attempt to reintroduce the butterfly has been successful, Weiss said.

Thursday, though, was a time to celebrate the wonder of the forgotten creature.

"There's something about butterflies and humans that just links us emotionally," said Peter Ingram, president of the Friends of Edgewood.

"People were motivated by beauty and rarity," Weiss said. "I think beauty is a value that cuts across everybody."

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