



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**America's Capital
I Never Promised you a Butterfly Garden**

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Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, reporting from Washington, DC. The Smithsonian Butterfly Habitat Garden is a little-known park near the National Mall. It is located at Constitution Avenue and 9th Street NW, adjacent to the Museum of Natural History. I discovered this small park while I was waiting for Reporterette to arrive so we could see the Lewis and Clark Exhibition at the Natural History Museum.

I suspect most people enjoy watching butterflies in flight, as they are pleasant looking creatures. But it seems we take them for granted. If one flutters by, we don't say, "Look, there goes a butterfly!" In contrast, consider another creature on this planet. When an elephant makes its way past us, we don't ignore it. In all likelihood we say, "Look, there goes an elephant!" For some strange reason, elephants seem to get our attention. Anyway, in this town, we can extend this idea:

On the Up Side

- "Look, there goes a senator!" (Accompanied by a small security detail.)
- "Look, there goes an ambassador!" (Accompanied by a larger security detail.)
- "Look, there goes the President!" (Accompanied by an invasion size army.)
- "Look, there goes a very rich ex-politician!" (Accompanied by his equally rich partners of their recently founded K Street lobbying firm.)
- "Look, there goes a demonstration!" (Accompanied by one or two spectators, who other than the demonstrators, are the only people in DC who care about the demonstration in the first place.)

On the Down Side

- "Look, there goes the National Debt!" (Which can't be seen, because it supposedly doesn't exist.)
- "Look, there goes a lawyer...and other one....another one....and....God, they're like ants!"
- "Look, there goes a lobbyist." (As he heads into the Federal Court house, cuffed at his hands and legs.)
- "Look, there goes Karl Rove." (As he heads-up yet another campaign to slur his competition.)

Granted, the national debt is visible, although it seems not to be to our Congress. Anyway, here is a well-thought-out segue into the principal subject matter of this report: Speaking of butterflies.

The Butterfly Habitat Garden and Dead Canaries

As I entered the butterfly garden, I expected to be surrounded by butterflies. From my watching the revealing PBS TV documentary, "Butterflies Don't Make Butter." I knew it was a bit late in the season. Some butterflies go into hiding in cold weather and others snow-bird it to the south. Nonetheless, the weather was warm. Yet not one butterfly could be found in the Butterfly Habitat Garden. The welcoming sign at the Garden entrance proclaimed, "A butterfly's presence is a good indicator of the health of a habitat."

No butterflies in a habitat designed especially for butterflies? I began to think about the canary in the coal mine. In the old days, underground miners used canaries to test for carbon monoxide. If the canary died, the miners increased the ventilation in the mine shaft. Next, they put in another canary. If it died, they increased ventilation again, put in another canary and gave it another go. And so on, until they ran out of canaries or the cave's air became fit for birds and humans.

This practice continued until (a) The public got wind of those cute little birds being gassed, and (b) The Prevention of Carbon Monoxide Poisoning on Canaries Lobbyist Association donated tons of money to Pennsylvania Avenue politicians. Suddenly, the age-old "Canary in the Cave" saying lost its edge, as did the jokes about the practice. Instead, a new saying emerged, "Turtledove in a Cave." Such is progress...until The Prevention of Carbon Monoxide Poisoning on Turtledoves Lobbyist Association is formed.

Looking around, I smelled a lot of carbon monoxide in the air. I was next to 9th Street, which is a major thoroughfare in this part of town. Oh well, if I were going to worry about a little carbon monoxide poisoning while doing these reports, I should not be on the streets. So, I went about looking at the foliage in the Butterfly Habitat Garden, keeping an eye out for a possible resident.

Tagging and Counting Butterflies

Toward the middle of the garden, I came upon a person working on a sign. I concluded he must be a low-level, low-wage worker---you know, working with signs and all. Plus, he was dark-skinned. So, my enlightened biases kicked-in: *Must be an immigrant:*

- Reporter, "Buenas dias. Habla Ingles?"
- "Yep. Do you?"
- "Oh, good. ...Where are all the butterflies?"
- Butterfly Person, "They've gone south or into shelter for the winter."
- *I could breathe easy. No "Turtledove in the mine" problem here...* "What's that sign you're working on?"
- "Monarch Butterfly migration. Gathering data on their numbers and schedules."
- I took a look at the sign, as seen in Figure 1.

Every year between 60–100 million monarchs from the eastern United States embark on an epic journey of up to 4,825 km (3,000 mi) to central Mexico.

Figure 1. Migration statistics.

- Reporter, "How can anyone possibly know there are between 60 and 100 million Monarch Butterflies in the East? How can anyone know they fly 3,000 miles to Mexico?"
- "Many local butterfly organizations sponsor programs to count butterflies."
- *Count butterflies?* "I see." But I didn't see.

- Butterfly person, "I must be going. Good talking with you."
- "Yes, same here. Thanks for the information."

As I was leaving, I looked at another part of the sign, as shown in Figure 2. I did a double-take. At first glance, I could not make out the fact that the picture showed a school of butterflies. Maybe the correct term is a den of butterflies, or a covey, whatever. But there were a lot of them on one bush. If butterflies drop stuff from their intestines, I'll wager the ground below this bush was covered in butterfly butter.



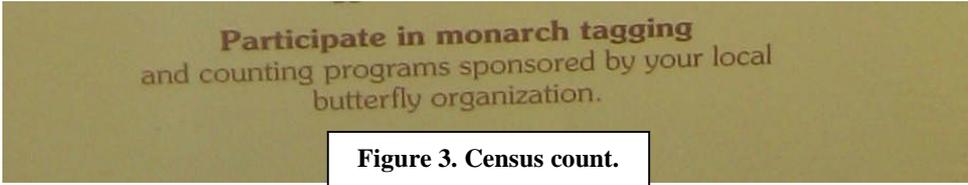
Figure 2. You've seen one, you've seen them all.

What do you think? You know, about that counting program? I don't mean to sound like a butterfly bigot, but one Monarch Butterfly looks pretty much the same as another Monarch Butterfly.

As seen with the yellow numbers in the middle of this picture, I attempted to count butterflies, but I couldn't discern where one butterfly began and another ended. And these butterflies are not flying! Imagine the difficulty of keeping tabs on them as they take-off for Mexico---fluttering about in seemingly random flight patterns. The next time you are looking at butterflies---really looking---notice how they bounce up and down in the air. They resemble commercial jets that have been flown recently by drunk pilots.

What was I doing in the middle of a butterfly garden, reporting there were no butterflies? Talk about a non-news day. I could be situated a few blocks southeast of here, reporting on a dope shooting, or a few blocks to the northwest at the White House investigating another Karl Rove back stabbing. Ah well, hard news is hard to come by. Besides my life and my reputation were safer here than other places in DC where I would be in the crosshairs of dope peddlers and Karl Rove. As you can see, I'm not a Karl Rove fan. OK, back to the Garden.

The bottom part of the sign read, as shown in Figure 3:



Participate in monarch tagging
and counting programs sponsored by your local
butterfly organization.

Figure 3. Census count.

Where is that butterfly expert?! Tagging? Counting the damn insects would be hard enough. How could they be tagged? Imagine a conversation between two butterfly-tagging experts:

- Harold, "Horace, I snagged another Monarch. Get that staple gun ready."
- Horace, "No can do. We're using leg bracelets. The Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Butterflies has succeeded in getting butterfly staple guns banned. ...Now, if we can just get this bracelet around that little bugger's leg."

Reporterette showed up, and we headed for the Lewis and Clark Exhibit.

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