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Butterfly Monitoring Project Expands to Las Cruces

The New Mexico Butterfly Monitoring Network (NMBMN) was created in 2020 to help monitor and track the conservation needs of butterflies throughout the state. In March, the network added a survey route in Las Cruces, monitored by the nonprofit Asombro Institute for Science Education at their outdoor classroom, the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park.

"To understand the health of butterfly populations across the state, we have slowly been expanding the reach of the New Mexico Butterfly Monitoring Network," said Anna Walker, Species Survival Officer for Invertebrate Pollinators at the New Mexico BioPark Society, which runs the NMBMN. She added, "The route at the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park is the first in the Chihuahuan Desert Basins and Playas ecoregion, so it will pick up many butterfly species that are unique to this region."

The new survey route covers 1.17 miles along the trails at the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park. It passes through four habitat types with more than 1,500 feet in elevation gain. Asombro Science Educators Natalie Wells and Marissa Bowler walk the survey route every two to three weeks to count and identify butterflies within 6 meters of the trail. They have already documented 14 species of butterflies, even during this unusually hot and dry summer.

As beautiful as they are to look at and observe, butterflies also serve as an important indicator for invertebrate populations and the overall health of the habitats in which they live. Walker elaborated, "There are a massive number of invertebrate species in the state of New Mexico and for a lot of species, we don't even have the basic information that we need to ensure populations are stable. With the help of community scientists, through programs like the New Mexico Butterfly Monitoring Program, we are beginning to fill data gaps, and in the future we will be in a much better place to address the conservation needs of butterflies and other invertebrates."

Together, both Asombro and the NMBMN hope to gather more data to share with the public, inspire others to take an interest in these charismatic insects, and help stakeholders make informed decisions about the health of butterflies and their habitats.

The Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park's trails and picnic pavilions are open to the public free of charge Tuesday through Sunday, 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. For more information on the Asombro Institute for Science Education and the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park, visit www.asombro.org or call 575-524-3334.

