

Federally Endangered Rusty Patched Bumble Bee Spotted at Monarch Research Station

Rare pollinator sighting highlights the value of native habitat restoration across Linn County

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A federally endangered rusty patched bumble bee has been documented at the Monarch Research Station for the first time in the organization's 10-year history, offering an encouraging sign for ongoing efforts to restore native habitat throughout Linn County.

A rusty patched bumble bee queen was observed near the Monarch Research Station in August. Once abundant throughout much of the Midwest and northeastern United States, the species has experienced dramatic population declines across much of its historic range and was listed as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act in 2017.

Habitat loss, pesticide exposure, disease and climate change are among the factors contributing to its decline. Iowa remains one of the states where rusty patched bumble bees continue to be detected, with sightings concentrated primarily in the eastern portion of the state.

“This is exactly the kind of discovery that reminds us why restoring native habitat matters,” said Clark McLeod, Founder and Chairman of Monarch Research. “We're not simply planting flowers and trees. We're rebuilding pieces of an ecosystem. When a federally endangered species finds its way to habitat we've worked to restore, that's incredibly encouraging.”

The approximately 80-acre Monarch Research Station includes native prairie plantings, trees and grasses that provide food, nesting areas and overwintering opportunities for pollinators and other wildlife.

A Broader Mission

Although Monarch Research began with a focus on monarch butterfly conservation, its work has expanded to encompass native trees, plants, pollinators and the broader ecosystems they support.

Bees are among the world's most important pollinators, supporting native ecosystems as well as agricultural production. Protecting them and other native pollinators requires more than individual species conservation. It requires restoring the diverse, connected habitat upon which entire ecosystems depend.

Today, that broader habitat restoration is central to Monarch Research's mission.

Longtime Monarch Research supporter Ann Hammond has seen the impact of that work firsthand.

Hammond first spotted a rusty patched bumble bee on her 12-acre property in August 2021 after years of restoring the landscape. When the property was purchased, its woodland floor was dominated by invasive Japanese barberry and lacked a healthy native understory. Hammond and her family removed invasive plants, restored a pond, established prairie, planted native trees, forbs and grasses, and continued expanding native habitat following the 2020 derecho.

“We were thrilled to see the positive impact of our restoration efforts,” Hammond said. “Removing invasives, planting native trees, forbs and grasses, and abstaining from the use of pesticides does restore biodiversity and can potentially save endangered species from extinction.”

Hammond credits Monarch Research with helping begin her family's conservation journey, which started with raising monarch butterflies and grew into broader habitat restoration.

Her advice to other landowners is straightforward: reduce pesticide use, plant native species and spend time observing the life those changes bring back.

“Flowers are beautiful, but a flower with an insect is exquisite,” Hammond said.

Bringing a Native Oasis Home

The discovery also underscores a central idea behind Monarch Research's Native Oasis program: meaningful habitat restoration doesn't require 12 or 80 acres.

Native Oasis helps Linn County residents convert portions of traditional turf grass into diverse native habitat that can provide food and shelter for bees, butterflies and other wildlife. The program incorporates a variety of native flowering plants designed to provide valuable habitat throughout the growing season.

Because much of Linn County is privately owned, even relatively small habitat projects can become part of a larger network of native spaces across the community.

“A homeowner doesn't need acres of prairie to make a difference,” said McLeod. “When hundreds of people each create a small piece of habitat, collectively we can begin building something much larger...a community that provides refuge for pollinators and other native species.”

Monarch Research currently has a limited number of openings remaining in its Native Oasis program. Linn County residents interested in creating native habitat on their property can learn more and apply at [Monarch Zones - Monarch Research](#)

Residents who believe they have spotted a rusty patched bumble bee should not handle the insect. Instead, they are encouraged to photograph it and submit the observation for expert identification. Confirmed sightings can help researchers better understand the distribution of this endangered species.

About Monarch Research

Monarch Research is a Linn County-based nonprofit dedicated to restoring native habitat and strengthening ecological resilience through reforestation, pollinator conservation, education and community-based environmental programs.

Information about the rusty patch bumblebee provided in part by Sarah Nizzi, Pollinator Conservation Specialist & NRCS Partner Biologist at the Xerces Society.

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