

Good news! Some butterfly populations bounced back in 2019

By Laurie L. Dove, How Stuff Works, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.01.20

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Image 1. The marbled white butterfly (*Melanargia galathea*) population rose by up to 66 percent in 2019 in England. Photo: Ian Kirk/Wikimedia Commons. Licensed under CC BY 2.0

After years of declining populations, there's happy news of a bright spot for butterflies.

In both the United Kingdom (U.K.) and pockets of North America, butterfly numbers are bouncing back. For some species, this population news signifies that 2019 was their best year for growth in more than two decades, according to the journal *Butterfly Conservation*.

The butterfly populations that experienced the most growth benefited from unusually warm and wet climate conditions. These ideal circumstances resulted in a greater number of caterpillars. The caterpillars successfully cocooned. They lived through their immature stages of development. Then they emerged as healthy adult butterflies.

In North America, for example, the 2019 count of monarch butterflies after their migration from Canada to Mexico revealed a 144 percent increase in population over the previous year. In the U.K., one of the species that exhibited substantial population growth in 2019 was the marbled white butterfly. Its population rose by 66 percent, according to *Butterfly Conservation*.

For some geographically restricted populations, the population boom may have saved them, for now, from extinction. The Lulworth skipper is one of the U.K.'s smallest butterflies. It is found primarily along a stretch of coast in southwest England. This diminutive flying insect comes in shades of moss green, burnished copper and charcoal. It has experienced plummeting population numbers in recent years. However, in 2019, its population rose 138 percent.

Experts point to favorable weather for butterfly development. They also credit intensive conservation efforts in recent decades. Volunteers and nonprofit organizations, such as butterfly waystations and education efforts, have done a lot of conservation work. These efforts have turned around long-term population decline for some butterfly species.

This is great news for butterflies. It is also great news for the people who admire them. However, scientists warn that the war to save them isn't yet won. Take the monarch butterfly population native to California, for example. Their cousins overwintering in Mexico had a baby boom. However, California monarchs still lost 86 percent of their population in 2019.

"We're really heartened to see a shift in the fortunes of many of our most-loved species," said professor Tom Brereton. He is the associate director of monitoring and research at Butterfly Conservation in southwest England. "The long-term situation for butterflies in general does remain a cause of concern though, with more species declining than increasing since the 1970s."



Quiz

- 1 HOW did butterfly populations increase substantially in 2019? How do you know?
- (A) Conservationists worked to increase the size of their habitats. "For some species, this population news signifies that 2019 was their best year for growth in more than two decades, according to the journal *Butterfly Conservation*."
 - (B) Weather conditions allowed more caterpillars to make it to adulthood. "These ideal circumstances resulted in a greater number of caterpillars. The caterpillars successfully cocooned. They lived through their immature stages of development."
 - (C) Volunteers closely tracked the size of various butterfly species. "Volunteers and nonprofit organizations, such as butterfly waystations and education efforts, have done a lot of conservation work."
 - (D) Habitats experienced cool conditions that allowed record growth. "Take the monarch butterfly population native to California, for example. Their cousins overwintering in Mexico had a baby boom."
- 2 Select the sentence from the article that suggests certain butterfly populations were in danger of disappearing completely before 2019.
- (A) In North America, for example, the 2019 count of monarch butterflies after their migration from Canada to Mexico revealed a 144 percent increase in population over the previous year.
 - (B) In the U.K., one of the species that exhibited substantial population growth in 2019 was the marbled white butterfly.
 - (C) For some geographically restricted populations, the population boom may have saved them, for now, from extinction.
 - (D) These efforts have turned around long-term population decline for some butterfly species.
- 3 Which answer choice MOST accurately characterizes Tom Brereton's reaction to the increase in butterfly populations?
- (A) Brereton is upset with the lack of effort to conserve butterfly species, while still sharing excitement about the population increases.
 - (B) Brereton is pleased with the growing butterfly populations and expresses optimism that they will continue to grow in the future.
 - (C) Brereton is anxious to see that the Lulworth skipper is increasing its population, because he worries it will run out of habitat space.
 - (D) Brereton is happy to see that some species are rebounding, but still cautions that most species have been declining for several decades.
- 4 What does the author do to build understanding of the butterfly populations that have bounced back?
- (A) The author describes the methods used to reduce threats to butterfly populations in different areas of the world.
 - (B) The author explains the percentage by which specific butterfly species in various locations have increased their populations.
 - (C) The author compares the way the appearances of two butterfly species in the United Kingdom work to confuse their predators.
 - (D) The author outlines the ways that human activities have changed conditions in the habitats of certain butterfly populations over time.