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Butterflies take flight at Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum

Premier attraction stocked weekly with shipments from around world

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It happens every week in the city's stylish Lincoln Park neighborhood. Hundreds of immigrants arrive, usually still in the same drab coverings they wore just a few days earlier when they left their native lands in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

They are butterflies in their chrysalises, and after a few days they undergo a metamorphosis, emerging to become the extraordinarily beautiful, delicate creatures that populate a tropical enclosure at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum.

Because the insects live only a couple of weeks, keeping the museum's premier attraction filled with lively, healthy butterflies is a tricky and demanding job. The museum is forbidden by federal statute from breeding its own butterflies, so it must buy young insects from dealers, taking deliveries from exotic locations on a rigid schedule and hoping winter weather doesn't interfere.

"The main challenges come this time of year when the weather is bad and air transport is made difficult with flight delays and cancellations," said Doug Taron, the museum's biology curator who set up the butterfly haven and has run it for 10 years.

Adult butterflies are too fragile to be shipped, so they are gathered and transported in their chrysalis stage to the museum, 2430 N. Cannon Drive.

Recently, Taron and his staff unpacked two boxes of chrysalises. One, not much bigger than an oblong carton of fancy chocolates, had been air-freighted overnight from a dealer in England. It carried 117 butterflies representing 15 species from Kenya, Malaysia and the Philippines. The other, holding 214 butterflies representing six species, came in that morning from a farmer-supplier in an Ecuadorean rain forest.

After unpacking the chrysalises, staffers pin them to boards inside a sealed glass case that faces into a public part of the butterfly exhibit. Visitors lucky enough to be there at the right time can witness the drama of their emergence.

Butterflies come out of the chrysalis with damp wings plastered to their bodies. The insects then pump a



liquid into tubes inside their wings, which stiffen them so the wings spread out and take shape.

Curator Vincent Olivares calls it "a beautiful sequence to watch," but it also is a risky time for the insects.

"When the chrysalis cracks open, the butterfly has at most about five minutes to safely emerge," he said. "If the wings dry out before it is out of the chrysalis, they end up deformed, and the butterfly won't live."

In the last couple of decades, butterfly exhibits have become extremely popular, but most are allowed to exhibit only homegrown native species. About 20 more substantial, permanent facilities like the Nature Museum, are allowed to import exotic species. Breeding the species on the premises remains forbidden.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture requires each facility to be sufficiently sealed off so exotic butterflies can't escape into the local environment, a safeguard against introducing potentially damaging agricultural pests.

The Nature Museum can't stop the male and female butterflies it exhibits from engaging in reproductive behavior, but it has a built-in birth control method.

"In nature, female butterflies only lay their eggs on the leaves of plants that caterpillars eat when they hatch from the eggs," Taron said. "We deliberately put plants into our display that caterpillars would never feed on. Without that stimulus, the females never lay their eggs in there."

The haven's butterflies do not produce descendants, but they do get to live out their full life span, Taron said.

"Most of them live much longer here than they would survive in the wild because they have no predators eating them in our exhibit," he said.

To keep the exhibit stocked, every week the museum typically brings in two exotic shipments and one domestic shipment from Florida dealers for a total of 700 to 800 butterflies.

After the mature insects have safely emerged from their chrysalises, they are collected and released into the haven, another spectacle visitors can watch if they are there at the right time. The releases are at 2 p.m. weekdays and at 11:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. on weekends.

For the most part, Taron said, the museum has been able to keep a robust population going without interruption.

"We only once had really had serious problems, and that was after the 9/11 terror attacks, when there was no air travel for about a week," he said. "By the time we got first shipments again, the population in the haven had shrunk to pretty small numbers."

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