I've mentioned before that our garden is a Certified Monarch Waystation (monarchwatch.org). That means we purposely grow milkweed plants for their caterpillars. Plants in the Asclepias genus are the only ones monarch caterpillars eat and from the looks of things, they're now chowing down in our garden. It's the time of year that this final generation, perhaps the third or fourth of the season, will differ from the earlier ones in that they won't mate and reproduce. Instead, they'll soon begin their journey to the Oyamel fir forests of central Mexico, where they'll make their home until next spring, when they'll make the return trip north.

What fascinates me about this is that there's nothing genetically different about this generation of monarch butterflies than the one that gave birth to them and the ones before them, earlier in the spring. So how do they know that they're supposed to fly a couple thousand miles to a place they've never been before and how do they know the way? That's been studied for decades and scientists don't have all the answers to those questions either. It's just one of the incredible miracles of nature.

Peak migration in our area is usually the middle of September. We happen to lie within a major monarch migration corridor so if you pay close attention, you might see large clusters of them roosting in a tree as dusk approaches and the temperatures drop. They can't fly very well at temperatures below 50°F, so they huddle together in trees overnight to conserve energy and warmth, and then resume their journey in the morning as the sun warms things up. They will continue to feed on nectar from garden plants where they're available.

The ruby-throated hummingbirds – the only species we have here in the eastern United States – have already begun their trip south, and you may be noticing a lot of activity at your flowers and feeders. It takes an incredible amount of energy for those tiny bundles of motion just to exist, let alone make their trip to their winter homes. They'll gain up to 40 percent of their body weight in preparation for the trip. If larger birds did that, they'd have problems getting off the ground!

Most of the hummingbirds that we're seeing at our feeders now aren't those that stayed here through the summer. They're the ones that are passing through on their way to southern Mexico and Panama. Some will stay in southern Florida and there's a small group that spends their winters in North Carolina's Outer Banks.

Birders recommend that we keep our feeders up until we get a freeze, since each hummingbird travels according to its own internal schedule, not in flocks. Heavy feeding goes on all the way to their winter quarters so it doesn't make sense for hummingbirds to travel in large numbers, since food sources along the way may not have enough for everyone. Who wants to wait while others eat and there isn't enough for you, too? So it's pretty much every hummingbird for itself.

The monarchs and hummingbirds are just two of the many butterflies and birds that will migrate to warmer climes for the winter. Be watchful for the next couple of months and you may see an uncommon species stopping off for a snack in your gardens and landscape.

Read more at Kylee's blog, Our Little Acre, at www.ourlittleacre.com and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre. Contact her at PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com.