

Enter the Monarch Butterfly!

by Sally Cureton

The Monarch Butterfly depends on the Milkweed for its very existence. Sometime during the month of March each year, these butterflies leave their winter homes to begin the trip north. During that journey, the females will lay their eggs on the underside of Milkweed plants and then die soon afterwards. When the caterpillars hatch in about 3-12 days, depending on temperature, they feed only on the Milkweed plant. Eventually they will migrate to the same regions where their parents lived the previous summer. When the Monarch caterpillar eats the Milkweed it stores in its body a poison from the plant called cardenolides. This poison subsequently resides in the wings and exoskeleton of the mature butterfly and thereby makes it toxic to potential predators. Most predators know to avoid eating a Monarch Butterfly because not only will it taste bad but it may also make them ill. There tends to be some variation in the amount of toxins in various plants. But whatever the caterpillar eats remains in its body as a butterfly throughout the remainder of its life.

When the caterpillar is ready to pupate, it will attach itself head down to a convenient twig. It will shed its outer skin and create a pupa that resembles a waxy, jade vase. After about two weeks, the Monarch Butterfly will emerge. It will inflate its wings with blood stored in its abdomen. Once the Monarch's wings have stiffened and dried, it can fly. As an adult, this butterfly will live on nectar and water. It will sip nectar from flowering plants using a tube that resembles a soda straw, called a proboscis. When not in use the proboscis is coiled under its head. Even though the Monarch weighs only .02 ounces, it can have a wingspan of up to 4 inches.

The Monarch Butterfly is the most common species in North America of what is called the milkweed butterfly. They all lay their eggs on the Milkweed plant. Others in this group include the Queen, and the Soldier Butterfly. Most Milkweed Butterflies are found in Asia and Africa. In the fall, Monarchs east of the Rocky Mountains migrate to central Mexico, and those west of the Rockies go to the California coast. This migration is an amazing feat on their part. It is estimated that it will take a Monarch about two months to fly from the Washington, DC area to its wintering grounds in Mexico. No one knows exactly how far they can fly in one day, but one that had been tagged was recaptured 265 miles from where it had been released the previous day. The average distance traveled is about 50 miles per day. Frequently they will travel in groups of dozens or even hundreds. They take advantage of air currents and soar just as birds do.

When they are migrating, there can be tens of thousands of them moving along the coastlines. Many of their wintering sites have become tourist attractions. The extensive landscaping found in the United States and Canada, typified by the removal of roadside weeds and the large-scale use of pesticides has made a large dent in the Monarch population. Another factor that has made their numbers decline is the increased deforestation of their wintering grounds in Mexico. There are many people in this country intent on helping the Monarch survive. Scores of resources are available for milkweed plants as well as Monarch eggs and caterpillars. Hopefully this magnificent creature can continue to give us all yet one more marvel of nature to look forward to each year.