

The Mysterious Monarch Migration

By Susan Hildebrandt, Master Gardener



Ah! The elusive butterfly! The Monarch, in particular, whose amazing migration often eludes even the savviest gardener. Some have heard the tiny Monarch travels up to 3,000 miles in his ambitious trek to overwinter in Mexico; others have heard it takes several generations to complete this lengthy journey. The truth is both are correct!

Photo: Ed the Butterfly-2022, from Put-in-Bay. Follow his journey below.

Let's begin in Central Mexico where there are presently several million Monarchs roosting in trees in the forests of the Sierra Madre mountains. These monarchs are the same delicate creatures who emerged from their cocoons last August at breeding grounds in southwestern Canada and New York State. In masses, these Monarchs migrated thousands of miles over lakes and plains to their Monarch sanctuaries in Mexico.

The Monarchs presently wintering in Mexico, however, won't be there for long. When temperatures warm, the Monarchs become more active and begin to mate for the first time. Although they are now 8 or 9 months old, this generation of Monarchs was born biologically and behaviorally different from their ancestors, and they do not mate or lay eggs until the spring following their late summer birth. By mid-March, the Monarchs leave Mexico and begin their northward migration. The first breeding stop will normally occur around Texas, where the Monarchs will stop to rest and the females will lay eggs on milkweed plants. This plant is essential to the survival of the Monarch population, as the butterfly larva will feed only on the leaves of milkweed plants. Shortly after laying her eggs, the female butterfly will die.



Ed as a Caterpillar
Photo: Doraine Toms

After 3-4 days, a caterpillar emerges from the egg, and he feeds on the milkweed leaves for a period of almost two weeks.

He then forms a chrysalis, where he remains for 2-3 days before emerging as a butterfly.



Ed in Chrysalis form
Photo credit: Doraine Toms

A new generation is born. With luck, these offspring will now continue the trek northward, stopping along the way to rest and lay their eggs on milkweed plants.

This series of events continues, with each butterfly that emerges lasting only two to four weeks. Finally, by early summer, the third or fourth generation of Monarchs has reached the summer breeding grounds in New York and Canada. Within a few weeks, these butterflies will give birth to the final generation. those special Monarchs that will live for 8-9 months, instead of just a few weeks...the generation that will spread its wings in September and make the 3,000-mile trek south and west to their winter home in Mexico.

Today the Monarch population is less than ten percent of what it was twenty years ago. Since the milkweed plant is essential to the development of this species, we are encouraged to plant Monarch Way Stations to help ensure the survival of this beautiful butterfly.