

Ohio State Parks - Nature Thing

King of the Butterflies

The Monarch is one of the best known and most beautiful butterfly species. It may not be the biggest, with a wing span of about 4 inches, but its brilliant black, orange and white wings make it look like royalty!

Beautiful Beginnings

A monarch butterfly begins its life as a small egg, laid on a leaf during the spring or summer. After four days, the egg hatches and out comes the larva (lar'-vu), better known as a caterpillar. The caterpillar then feeds on a milkweed plant for two weeks straight and stores this food inside its body. When the caterpillar is good and full, it turns into a pupa (pu-paw) by spinning itself in silk threads. These threads harden into a chrysalis (kri'-su-lis), which looks like a small, dried-up leaf. The chrysalis hangs upside down on a twig for a few weeks. Then, the metamorphosis (met'-u-môr'-fu-sis) is complete, and the stunning Monarch emerges from the chrysalis.

Munching on Milkweed

You could say that the milkweed plant is a Monarch's best friend. The Monarch unrolls its long tongue to sip the nectar (nek'-ter) inside the milkweed flower. The leaves and stem of the milkweed plant provide the perfect home for a mother Monarch to lay her eggs. But wait, there's more! The milkweed plant also provides the Monarch with a natural defense mechanism. The nectar of the milkweed plant is poisonous to many of the Monarch's predators. When the Monarch munches the milkweed, it absorbs this poisonous nectar into its body. When a predator tries to take a bite out of a Monarch, it gets a terrible taste, and decides not to finish its Monarch meal. The butterfly can then make a quick getaway.

Natural Navigators

If you think it's easy being beautiful, just ask a Monarch during migration (mahy-grey'-shuhn). In addition to being eye-candy for humans, Monarchs are best known for the long trips they take when migrating south for the winter months, and north for the summer. These 3,000 mile journeys mean lots of wing-flapping for such a delicate little creature!

This extremely far flight is both mysterious and magnificent. The Monarch's migration begins in Canada and the northern United States, and ends in the oyamel trees of Central Mexico. The Monarchs leave the north in August, and arrive at the oyamel trees in November and December. Over 300 million Monarchs make themselves at home in the trees, and lay their eggs. After the next generation of Monarchs emerges in March or April, they start the migration back to their ancestors' northern homes.

Year after year, Monarch butterflies return to the very same oyamel trees that their great-grandparents flew to last year. How do they know exactly where these trees are? It's one of the mysteries of mighty nature!

Befriending these Beautiful Beings

Unfortunately, the Monarch butterfly population has been declining in recent years, for many reasons. The use of farm herbicides (hur'-buh-sahyd) can kill milkweed plants, which Monarchs need for survival. Harsh winter storms in Mexico are harming the delicate butterfly. Monarchs are also losing their winter homes because of logging. More and more oyamel trees are being cut down for their wood, and to make room for roads and houses. But without these trees, Monarchs won't have a safe, dry place to stay for the winter.

The good news is that you can help by creating a Monarch getaway in your own backyard! Planting milkweed and other butterfly-friendly plants in your garden can help attract Monarchs and provide them with the environment that they need to thrive. Placing over-ripened fruits near these plants will also help to attract them.

You can also see Monarchs and learn more about them in our state parks. Visit the Monarch butterfly gazebo at Maumee Bay, or the butterfly rearing station at Van Buren. Check the calendar for special butterfly events for even more butterfly fun!