

## Monarch butterfly

### *Danaus plexippus*

A monarch's life is one of great activity, travel, and transformation. It starts as an egg, which adult butterflies lay on milkweed plants, the preferred food of monarch caterpillars. After four days the egg hatches and a caterpillar emerges. After two weeks of non-stop eating, the caterpillar forms a shell-like chrysalis. Over the next two weeks it transforms into an adult monarch butterfly and emerges. If the monarch emerges in summer it will live several weeks and lay more eggs. If it emerges in the fall it will migrate south. This migratory generation may live up to seven months.

Widely admired, monarch butterflies have wings that are a colorful orange with black veins and their black wing margins feature two rows of small white spots. Their wingspan ranges from 3.5 to 4.0 inches. Adults exhibit sexual dimorphism, meaning the males are slightly larger than females. They also have a black "spot" of scales on each hindwing. The monarch has six legs like all insects, but uses only its middle legs and hindlegs to walk. Monarchs are foul tasting and poisonous due to the presence of toxins in their bodies, which the caterpillars get from feeding on milkweed. Predators such as birds learn to avoid them.

Monarch flight has been described as "slow and sailing" with individuals attaining speeds of approximately five mph. By comparison, the average human jogs at a rate of 6 to 8 mph. Each year, monarch butterflies migrate a long way (up to 1,500 miles) to parts of Mexico, Florida, and California. So long, in fact, that the butterflies that fly south in the fall are not the same ones who return the next year. It requires three generations of monarchs to complete their epic journey.

Due to the loss of prairie habitat (that was widespread across the Chicago region) monarch numbers are declining. Studies show that the number of monarchs overwintering in Mexico demonstrates a long-term downward trend.

Planting common milkweed in your yard is a great way to help these butterflies. You should also provide wet rocks and soil for butterflies to puddle. Puddling provides butterflies with water and necessary minerals.

