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## EPIC JOURNEY OF THE MONARCH

As I walk along a seaside trail on New Hampshire's coast, I expect to discover wildlife found only in this part of the state. Instead, to my delight, I find a common butterfly that happens to be migrating through – the monarch. I can't believe my luck at seeing close to fifty monarch butterflies

flittering about and landing on the vegetation close to the trail, a mosaic of color and movement. Some cling onto goldenrod, nearly the only flowering plant left this time of year. They are drinking the nectar and resting for the night before continuing their long journey south, soaring on air currents to conserve

energy. The availability and abundance of nectar along the way is crucial for monarchs, which must make a nearly 3,000-mile journey to their wintering grounds.

A monarch flits off a yellow flower and flutters past me, zig-zagging through the air with grace and determination. It amazes me to think that these paper-thin orange and black wings can power this small insect on a journey lasting more than two months and covering thousands of miles.

The monarchs we see in the fall travel all the way to the high mountain forests of central Mexico. Their arrival coincides with one of Mexico's biggest holidays, the annual Day of the Dead, celebrated with feasts and offerings. It is believed that the monarchs are the souls of loved ones returning home.

After these butterflies overwinter in Mexico, they start the trip back north. Unlike the fall journey, the return trip requires several generations. The butterflies stop in the southern U.S. to mate, lay eggs and die. Their offspring then continue the trip, genetically programmed to head ever northward, until they, too, stop to mate and lay eggs. We see these offspring (or one more generation) arriving in New Hampshire in July or August.

I look around the path, but I don't see the monarch larval food source, common milkweed. I have some growing in my yard in northern New Hampshire and, in late summer, I watched some caterpillars grow. I imagine that one of the monarchs here is one that ate milkweed from my yard.

It saddens me to think that these beautiful butterflies are in trouble. The monarch population has fallen dramatically in recent years, causing it to be listed as a species of Greatest Conservation Need in the 2015 N.H. Wildlife Action Plan. One factor is the lack of this food source, which is the only thing monarch caterpillars will eat. Common milkweed is often considered a weed that people cut back, but if you can leave some, you will be helping this amazing butterfly species.

The lack of milkweed isn't the only threat for the monarchs. They also must deal with illegal logging in their wintering grounds, pesticide and herbicide use on U.S. farmland where much of the milkweed grows, and changes in



our climate and weather patterns that can dramatically impact a local population. Monarchs also will lay eggs on an invasive plant, black swallow-wort, but the caterpillars do not grow enough to metamorphose into adults. Home-owners should be on the lookout for this plant and remove it.

The sun is setting and the cool breeze coming off the ocean makes me shiver. I kneel down close to a flower with six monarchs exploring it for nectar, and soak in the sight of these delicate creatures. They look at me with their large black eyes and hang on tightly with long black legs as the wind tugs at them. I don't want to disturb them any longer and wish them good luck on their journey south.

As I stroll on, I promise to welcome their great-great grandchildren to my milkweed patch next summer. 🐾

*Lindsay Webb, Fish and Game's Landowner Relations Program Coordinator, is an avid outdoors-woman. She spends her free time exploring the natural world on foot, bike, ski and boat. Read about her adventures in each N.H. Wildlife Journal.*



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**Above** - The black swallow-wort is an invasive species of milkweed that may be mistakenly used by monarchs as a host plant, impeding the caterpillar's full growth.



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**Clockwise from top left** - The monarch caterpillar (larva) spins a silk mat from which it hangs upside down in preparation for metamorphosis; the transformation into an adult butterfly occurs during the pupal stage called a chrysalis; monarch butterflies are nectar feeders, making them important pollinators; milkweed is the host plant and sole foodsource of the monarch caterpillar; an adult monarch can have a wingspan of up to four inches.



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## MONARCH BUTTERFLY

*(Danaus plexippus)*

### DESCRIPTION:

Adults are nearly 4 inches wide. Wings are orange with black veins and black margins dotted with white. The caterpillar is banded with yellow, black and white stripes. The chrysalis is blue-green with a band of black and gold.

### RANGE:

Found throughout the U.S.

### HABITAT:

Anywhere that there is nectar, but will only breed when the larval food source, milkweed, is nearby.

### FOOD:

Larva only feed on milkweed. Adults drink nectar from a variety of flowering plants.

### REPRODUCTION:

There are four distinct life stages: egg, larva (caterpillar), pupa (chrysalis), and adult. During the summer breeding season, adults live for 2-5 weeks – up to four generations each summer – each one traveling a little further north than the last. The last generation of the year migrates to Mexico (southern California if on the west coast) and does not mate until February or March, when they begin to migrate north again. It takes several generations for monarchs to reach New England again.

### ECOSYSTEM ROLE:

Important pollinators. Monarchs are toxic to most wildlife, but some mice and birds have developed immunity and will prey on adults and larvae. Spiders, ants, mites and wasps prey on the eggs.

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