



Monarchs Make North Coast Magic: Catch It While You Can

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Monarchs born west of the Rocky Mountains spend winters at various roosting sites along California's central and south coast. Our coastal forest habitats are similar to wintering grounds in Mexico, where butterflies born east of the Rockies spend their winters.

The Pismo Beach Monarch Butterfly Grove is one of the largest wintering sites in the nation, and we have been seeing lots of these beauties on the North Coast as well. Mature stands of eucalyptus trees, like those near Sebastian's Store at San Simeon Cove, offer clustering spots for the colorful visitors. The wintering season is from November to February, so soon they'll be fluttering away.

Monarchs meet and mate at their coastal getaways in late January and early February. After that, females travel north and east in search of milkweed plants on which to lay their eggs. Many of them end up in the Sierra Nevada foothills where there are large milkweed patches, but these opportunistic insects will lay their eggs almost anywhere milkweeds are plentiful.

In the wild, a female lays an estimated 100 to 400 individual eggs. Her energy spent, she soon dies. Four days after being laid, the eggs hatch into caterpillars, which ravenously munch on milkweed for about two weeks.

One of nature's most magical transformations is the conversion of a fully developed caterpillar into a stunning gold-specked chrysalis. Ten days later, a butterfly emerges from the chrysalis. The whole process, from egg to adult, takes about a month.

Every year, there are usually four generations. Hatchlings from the first generation, born in March and April, live two to five weeks. During this time, they mate and produce another generation of eggs, which hatch out and fulfill their life cycle in May and June. In July and August, a third generation is born. Then, a remarkable thing happens. The fourth generation, born in September and October — just before temperatures drop and winter snows arrive in the mountains — migrates to the coastal wintering grounds, where they have never been! How they navigate such a voyage is still something of a mystery.

Instead of living for a few weeks, the migratory generation can live four to six months. What we are seeing now is the last 2014 generation that arrived in November overwintered through the New Year, and have recently mated.

The females are heading out to find suitable milkweed habitats for egg laying.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has recently announced a campaign to restore and enhance monarch butterfly habitat in backyards, schools and public open spaces. Adult monarchs get nourishment from many kinds of flower nectar, but larvae feed strictly on milkweed.

Milkweed is drought-tolerant, so it might be good to add to your garden. By providing nectar for adults and milkweed for the larvae, you may be rewarded by having a front row seat at this amazing creature's egg, larva, chrysalis and butterfly life cycle.

