

School-to-Nature

MONARCH BUTTERFLY

This gorgeous insect is present on Caledonia Conservancy lands from early summer through early autumn; but these creatures migrate just like many birds. Migration south, from the northern USA, begins in mid-August, and their return from their wintering grounds in central Mexico begins early in March. The Monarchs who travel the farthest fly 3,000 miles. The trip south can take up to two months. On the way back north, two or three generations of Monarchs may be born, live, and die, before reaching their summer homes. The red-orange color of the Monarch tells predators that they taste very bad and are toxic; and so they have adapted to survive. The Monarch's antennae have the function of smell, and their feet and leg hairs are used to taste!

Milkweed flowers and leaves are the Monarch's food; Monarch eggs are laid on Milkweed leaves; so planting and growing Milkweed does the Monarchs a great favor. The Monarch caterpillar (shown both very young and full-sized) can eat an entire leaf in five minutes, and will eat 200 times its weight in Milkweed during its lifespan as a caterpillar.

The Mexican holiday, "Day of the Dead" on November 2, coincides each year with the annual return of Monarchs to central Mexico, where these butterflies crowd the trees in protected areas as seen in the photo below. Traditional belief there says the monarchs are the souls of ancestors coming back to earth for a yearly visit. Many people travel to central Mexico just to witness the arrival of these tireless, beautiful butterflies. We are lucky enough to watch them in summer, while they are at work in our own yards, fields, parks, and on Conservancy lands, here in Wisconsin. October 2022 DL

