


Monarch Butterfly

Danaus plexippus

STATUS

Special Concern 

Not Listed 

85



© WESLEY PITTS

Species Description

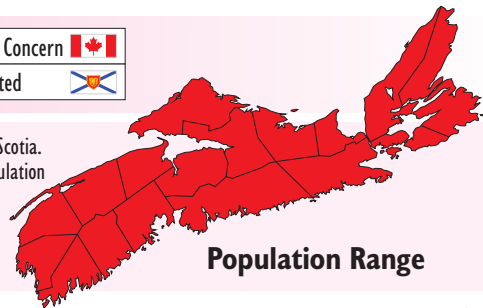
Monarch Butterflies have bright orange wings (10 cm wingspan) with heavy black veins and wide black borders that contain two rows of white spots. Monarch eggs are laid on the underside of milkweed leaves and hatch into tiny white caterpillars (2-6 mm long) with black heads. They become striped yellow, black, and white as they grow and shed their skin four times (5 instars), growing to 5 cm long. After two weeks they transform into a gold-green chrysalis, which typically hangs from a plant or an overhang. Monarchs emerge from their chrysalis after two weeks.



Caterpillar

© WESLEY PITTS

Occurs throughout Nova Scotia. The eastern Monarch population ranges from Alberta to Newfoundland and south to Mexico, where it winters.



Population Range

Habitat

Found wherever wildflowers flourish, such as open fields, meadows, gardens, and along roadsides. The presence of milkweed is key as Monarchs only lay their eggs on its leaves. Native plants such as Goldenrods, Asters, Boneset and Joe-Pye-Weed are important nectar sources. Adults migrate to Mexico in the fall and form dense congregations on forested mountaintops.



© BRENNAN CAVENHILL, PARKS CANADA



© MEGAN CROWLEY, PARKS CANADA

Feeding on Swamp Milkweed flowers

Monarchs are observed from late June to October in the habitat described above. Report your first sighting of the year to Journey North.

Interesting Points

- Caterpillars eat milkweed leaves which contains a toxic compound called cardiac glycoside. Ingesting this makes them poisonous to predators such as birds.
- Monarchs can travel over 4000 km to reach their overwintering sites in Mexico! No other insect makes this type of annual, long distance migration. With multiple generations per year, their children's grandchildren are the ones that migrate south the following year.



From left to right: tiny egg about to hatch, first instar caterpillar, caterpillar in "J" about to transform, green and gold chrysalis, and a butterfly soon to emerge.

Similar Species

Viceroy:

Slightly smaller; inner black margin on hind wings; mimics the Monarch's colouration but is not poisonous.



Tiger Swallowtail:

Similar size; yellow with four black bands; blue on hind wings, with distinct "tail".



Threats to Survival

- Widespread use of pesticides and herbicides.
- Planting of "roundup ready" glyphosate-tolerant crops (corn and soy).
- Overwintering habitat loss in Mexico (logging, development, agriculture, etc.).
- Loss of breeding and nectaring habitat in Canada and the USA.
- Climate change and severe weather events (impacts overwintering habitat, survival during migration and breeding).

How You Can Help

Join the Butterfly Club and plant a chemical-free butterfly garden with Swamp Milkweed and wildflowers. Over 1000 Butterfly Club members have created habitat for this species to date and you can too! Do not use any chemicals on your property and buy chemical-free food. Report your first milkweed, egg and butterfly sighting to Journey North each year.



Pesticide application



Butterfly Club enthusiasts



Emerging from chrysalis & shedding skin



Contacts, Information, Sighting Reports & Stewardship Opportunities

Contact: NS DNR (902) 679-6091

Info: www.sararegistry.gc.ca, www.monarchwatch.org

Sighting Reports: www.speciesatrisk.ca/sightings, www.learner.org/jnorth/monarch

Stewardship: Butterfly Club: www.facebook.com/MonarchButterflyClub