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PROVIDING HABITAT FOR THE MONARCH BUTTERFLY

by LaJuan Tucker, City of Austin and Johanna Arendt, Travis County



Over the past few years, Texas has boasted some of the highest growth rates in the country. Central Texas has seen increased development, urbanization, and economic growth. Natural landscapes are quickly being converted to roadways, housing, and retail.

These dramatic shifts in the landscape are having a significant impact on wildlife. Water sources are being paved over or polluted with runoff. Agricultural lands and native grasslands that provide nesting and foraging sites for birds are increasingly replaced with houses and gas stations. Wildlife now must cross roadways and travel longer distances to find food, shelter, and mates.

There are, however, many ways that residents can help wildlife. Balconies, parks, greenbelts, school yards, and backyards are just a few of the places that can provide important resources for wildlife. As the Central Texas' population continues to grow, so can our responsibility to make sure urban and suburban areas serve not only as economic growth centers, but also as havens for wildlife such as the monarch butterfly.

The iconic monarch butterfly is most famous for its long migrations and its beautiful orange and black markings. Unfortunately, research shows that overall monarch numbers are on the decline. Here in Central Texas, we encounter the monarch butterfly during both its northern and southern migrations, which puts us in a unique position to assist with conservation efforts.

Learn more on November 8, when LaJuan Tucker will be giving a presentation about backyard wildlife at Concordia University. Join us at 6:30pm in Room C270 for a fun, informative program.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Provide monarch habitat essentials: food, water, shelter, and a place to raise their young in parks, yards and open spaces.

Provide native milkweed, the "host plant" for the monarch larvae:

Antelope horn (*Asclepias asperula*)

Green milkweed (*Asclepias viridis*)

Texas milkweed (*Asclepias texana*)

Find more at https://www.wildflower.org/collections/collection.php?collection=centex_milkweed

Plant native, butterfly-friendly flowers that provide nectar sources for adult butterflies: <http://xerces.org/monarch-nectar-plant-guide-southern-plains/>

Supervise pets and children when outdoors to ensure they do not harm wildlife visitors.

Control imported fire ant populations in your yard. Fire ants are predators of monarch eggs and caterpillars.

Use pesticides sparingly or avoid using them altogether. These harmful chemicals are thought to have a negative effect on both milkweed and the butterflies themselves.

THE MONARCH'S LIFE CYCLE

The monarch butterfly's journey is well documented in NOVA's *Journey of the Butterflies*. This petite insect, weighing no more than 0.75 grams, starts off as a tiny egg on a milkweed plant. Milkweed is the monarch's "host" plant -- they lay eggs only on that type of plant. Once the eggs hatch, monarch caterpillars begin to eat the milkweed and sequester the cardenolides found there. Cardenolides are poisonous to most vertebrates, making the monarch repugnant to predators. The bright orange and black coloration the butterfly has after metamorphosis lets predators know it's poisonous.

While the adult monarch is brightly colored, the caterpillar blends in by taking on the colors of its host plant, with beautiful bands of green, yellow, white, and black. In this larval stage, monarchs molt several times as they grow. After its final growth phase, the caterpillar begins its preparation for pupation. Most monarchs will stay in pupation from 9 to 15 days, depending on the temperature. Once the wing muscles have developed, the chrysalis turns clear, exposing the colors for which the butterfly is famed.

After emerging from the chrysalis, the monarch fuses its proboscis, which it will use to suck nectar from flowers, and waits for its wings to dry. If the monarch is located in North America, it will soon begin a journey of around 3,000 miles to overwintering locations in California, Mexico and other southwestern states. How the monarch butterfly makes such a tremendous journey is still a mystery. Some believe that earth's magnetic fields assist the monarch in navigation. Others think

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that the angle of the sun during different seasons gives the butterflies clues. Once they arrive at their overwintering grounds, the monarchs wait for the weather to warm up again before the next generation makes the journey back north.

Although a single generation will make the 3,000-mile flight south, the journey back northward is made by four successive generations. Central Texas is in the bottle neck of the monarch's flight path. Monarchs fly through Texas both on their way in and out of Mexico. Because of our location in the monarch's flight path, local residents have a unique opportunity to help the monarchs on their spectacular journey.

References: Oberhauser Karen S. and Michelle J Solensky ed.

The Monarch Butterfly: Biology and Conservation. New York: Cornell University Press. 2004. Print

About the author: LaJuan Tucker is the Program Coordinator for the City of Austin's Wildlife Austin Program. This program advocates for the creation and conservation of public spaces as critical sources of wildlife habitat and opportunities to connect the community back to nature. LaJuan also administers the Mayor's Monarch Pledge for the City of Austin, is a Habitat Steward Host™ and a Landscape for Life Trainer™.

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