



WEST MARIN WILD

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Viewing Our Miraculous Monarchs (Part 2 of 2)

Throughout spring and summer **Monarch Butterflies** live, eat and play on milkweed plants, the only acceptable food for their picky larva. Monarch caterpillars accumulate bitter chemicals from milkweed which help protect them from predation by birds.

Monarch caterpillars shed their skin several times before maturing, finally attaching to a branch with spun silk, dangling like a holiday ornament. A final dramatic striptease reveals a beautiful jewel-like green chrysalis flecked with delicate gold spots. Inside this magical chamber the caterpillar undergoes metamorphosis, changing into the markedly different body of a monarch butterfly. The chrysalis becomes transparent after two weeks and the butterfly carefully emerges with its wings still folded. The butterfly must pump fluid into the wings to expand them to full size, and allow their wings to dry and harden before taking them out for a test flight. A female monarch then has six weeks to find nectar, mate and lay eggs before she dies.

There are more than 20 monarch over-wintering sites in the Bay Area. In Marin County, they can be found clustered in a Bolinas eucalyptus grove near Terrace Ave. and Marin Way (this site reportedly has up to 20,000 monarchs), in Stinson Beach in eucalyptus trees at the north end of town right off Highway 1, and in Muir Beach in a Monterey Cypress grove above the old wood stairs on Pacific Way (usually about 4,000 butterflies). Monarchs will gather in some years at Fort Mason, Fort Baker and Tennessee Valley in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. These areas appear to be temporary bivouac sites for butterflies before they move to over-wintering areas.

Pacific Grove in Monterey County hosts the most famous assembly of monarchs at the Monarch Grove Sanctuary. Find out more from Monarch Watch (www.monarchwatch.org). Butterflies are best viewed on sunny days over 55° F. The best time is mornings as the sun warms the butterflies. Look on the southeast side of roosting trees for monarchs. If you cannot find the roosting trees, in the late afternoon you can follow monarchs as they fly back to their selected trees before evening. A pair of binoculars is helpful for viewing.

Monarchs have a hard time flying on cool days, so look then for quiet multitudes of motionless butterflies. They cluster together with folded wings on hanging branches, resembling dead leaves. On warm days, as butterflies are illuminated by shafts of sunlight, clusters will spontaneously explode into activity, with incredible swirling clouds of fluttering orange and black monarchs dispersing in search of water or nectar.

Some viewing etiquette: please do not touch the fragile butterflies or shake tree branches to rouse them. If they fall to the ground on a cold day, they will not have the strength to fly back to a branch and will be vulnerable to predators. Stay quiet while viewing - the monarchs are relaxing on their winter vacation. If you are silent enough you can supposedly hear the fluttering of their wings as they fly. Watch your step to avoid trampling any butterflies that are on the ground. If you find a tagged butterfly, follow any instructions for mailing to assist research on migration and population dynamics.

West Marin Wild is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Please send wildlife sightings, interesting animal stories or encounters, topic suggestions, questions or corrections to Box 111, Bolinas.