



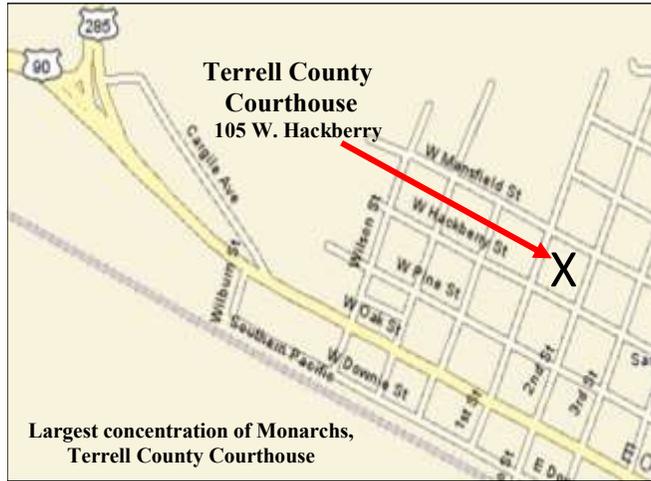
Monarch egg



Monarch caterpillar
Derek Ramsey - wikimedia.org



Beginning of pupation
Derek Ramsey - wikimedia.org



Largest concentration of Monarchs,
Terrell County Courthouse

Monarch Butterflies in Terrell County



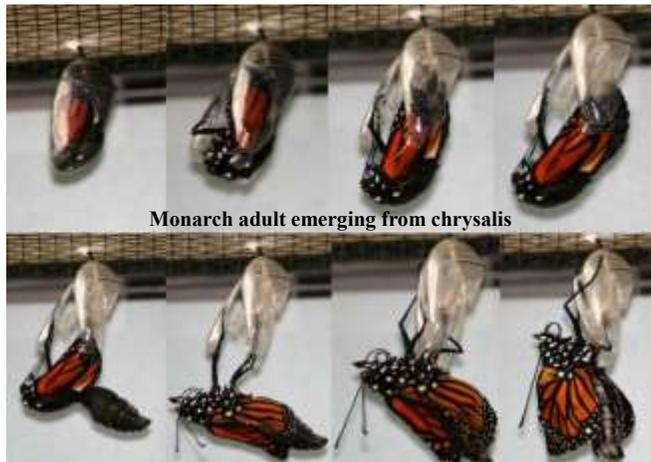
Monarch butterfly ~ *Danaus plexippus*



Monarch chrysalis
Greyson Orlando - wikimedia.org



Monarch adult
William Warby - wikimedia.org



Monarch adult emerging from chrysalis



Sanderson Chamber of Commerce
PO Box 734
Sanderson TX 79848
432-345-2324
www.sandersonchamber.com



Derek Ramsey - wikimedia.org



Kenneth Dwain Harrelson - wikimedia.org

The Amazing Monarch

(Photos courtesy of Public Domain and as attributed.)

When one thinks of desert, a vast, empty wasteland comes to mind. But the deserts of the Great Southwest are not like that at all. Our deserts are filled with life. Plants and animals thrive in the arid regions, and especially in our section of the Chihuahuan Desert. A wide variety of animals and plants have adapted to harsh conditions and every nook and cranny is inhabited. Our insect life is diverse, and the populations of animals swell during parts of the year as migratory species invade the area on their way to winter quarters in Mexico, Central America and South America. And so it is with the Monarch butterfly, the royalty of the insect world. With its striking orange, black and white patterns, it is instantly recognizable to expert and neophyte alike.

Although Monarch migration begins in mid-August in the north, the first arrivals in Terrell County begin the first week in October. The leafy green canopy of the Terrell County Courthouse pecan trees acts like a beacon, drawing thousands upon thousands of the colorful insects. At times the tree branches are bowed by the weight of Monarchs making their nightly sleepover. For a period of several days, one flight leaves and another arrives to take its place, until the main body has passed through on their way to their winter bedding grounds in Mexico. A few Monarchs remain behind, either too tired or too hungry to finish their migration, or simply because they like what they see.

To prepare for the migration, Monarch caterpillars feed on many species of milkweed, replenishing their store of fat for the journey and to tide them over during the winter months in Mexico. They have an exclusive diet of a plant that is toxic to other creatures. They not only thrive on milkweed, its toxicity also makes them bitter-tasting to predators, an effective defense mechanism. Their bright coloration is a warning to predators and they are easily avoided by experienced birds and animals. Once they have tasted a Monarch, they never want another one.

In the life cycle of the Monarch, as with all insects, the journey begins with the hatching of an egg, usually laid directly on milkweed leaves. After three to five days incubation, the egg hatches into the larval form, the Monarch caterpillar. Brightly colored with bands of black, white and orange, those same colors will be prominent in the adult. After nine to fourteen days of intensive feeding, the caterpillar begins to transform into the chrysalis, a protected stage where the larva matures into the adult. For eight to thirteen more days the

transformation continues until the mature adult emerges, straightens and dries its wings and launches itself into the skies.

From about March to August, four generations of Monarchs are born in their northern roosting areas. The fourth generation begins the migration to Mexico, which is usually complete by December. During the winter months in Mexico the Monarchs survive on food stored in their bodies. Towards the end of February the breeding season begins and the impregnated Monarchs begin their long migration northward in March. Once they arrive back in the north, the new generation is born and the process begins again.

The last generation before migration in the fall is born with their reproductive organs on hold. They will not be sexually mature until they arrive in Mexico to mate and continue the next generation. During that time they are feeding intensively on all kinds of plant nectar. As they make their migration, they roost at night in clusters and feed on nectar as much as possible. When they reach Mexico, they mature sexually and begin to breed again.

An interesting adaptation of Monarchs is the hormone that suspends their sexual activity in the fall. That same hormone also increases the normal lifespan, giving migratory Monarchs a lifespan of eight months, as opposed to the two to six week lifespan of summer breeding monarchs.

The Monarch is a creature of grace and beauty as it gently flits from flower to flower, drawing out the life-giving liquid that sustains it and enables it to become a world traveler.

Terrell County is very fortunate to be on the Monarch flyway. It enables us to see the yearly pageantry of one of the most famous spectacles of the natural world. We can aid in their journey by planting their favored milkweed in our yards and by protecting them as they alight in the Courthouse trees.

And, we should treasure these times when the Monarchs are present. It may not always be so. Even now, deforestation in Mexico threatens to destroy the groves where the Monarchs stay during the winter. Without protection there, we may be seeing the last great migrations of the regal Monarch butterfly.