Saratoga Library English Conversation Club:
Monarch Migration
Nov 5, 2026



Butterflies are among the most beautiful of all insects. One of the most **distinctive** butterflies is the ***monarch*** *butterfly.* **Monarch** butterflies are known for their **distinctive** orange and black wings and their migration patterns. White dots border the wings.

The bright orange color helps warn predators that the monarch is **poisonous**. The **poison** comes from the monarch's primary source of food, a plant called **milkweed**.

Monarch butterflies are also pollinators that are well known for their impressive long-distance **migration** This week, we will read about the Western **monarch** butterfly which is native to California and how citizen scientists are trying to help the endangered population.

Vocabulary: Review these words and match them to their meanings.

1. catastrophic (kat-uh-STROF-ik)	a. a wild plant with milky sap and pods that release seeds with silky hairs, which is the primary food for monarch butterfly caterpillars
2. to isolate (too EYE-suh-layt)	b. causing sudden and widespread damage, ruin, or suffering
3. **migratory** (MY-gruh-tawr-ee)	c. a safe place that provides shelter or protection
4. milkweed (MILK-weed)	d. to fall, drop, or decrease very quickly at a very fast rate
5. monarch (MON-ark)	e. a substance that can cause sickness or death if it is eaten, breathed in, or absorbed by a living thing
6. pesticide (PES-tuh-syd)	f. relating to animals or birds that regularly move from one region or climate to another, usually for food or breeding
7. to plummet (PLUHM-it)	g. to separate someone or something from others so they are alone
8. **poison** (POY-zuhn)	h. a chemical substance used to kill bugs, insects, or other organisms that damage crops or plants
9. sanctuary (SANGK-choo-er-ee)	i. a king, queen, or emperor who rules a kingdom; also a large, brightly colored orange and black migratory butterfly
10. survival (ser-VY-vuhl)	k. absolutely necessary, essential, or extremely important for life or success
11. swarm (swawrm)	L. the state or fact of continuing to live or exist, especially in spite of difficult or dangerous conditions
12. **vital** (VY-tuhl)	m. having a special quality, style, or appearance; notable.
13. **distinctive** (dih-STINGK-tiv)	n. a large group of insects or other small creatures moving together in a tight crowd

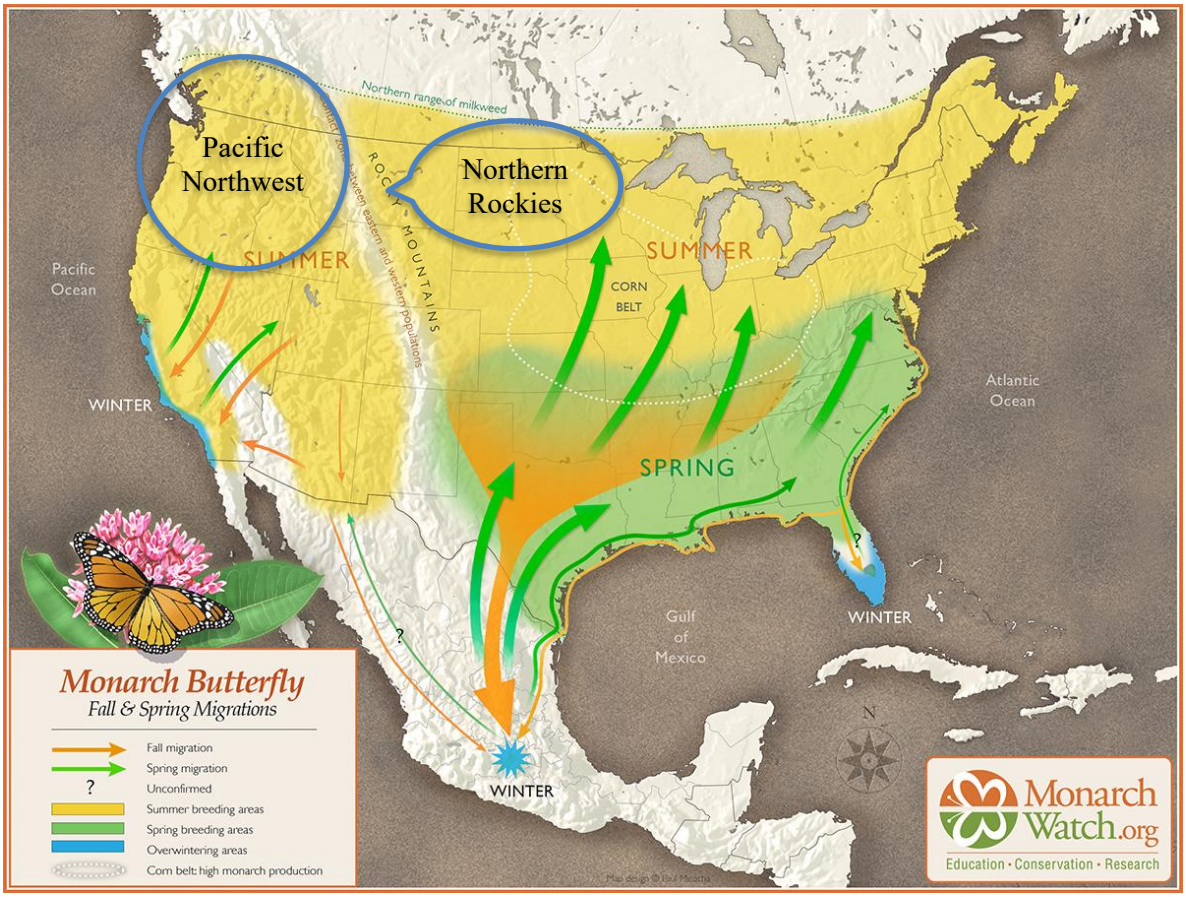
Answer Key:1-b; 2-g, 3-f; 4-a; 5-i; 6-h; 7-d; 8-e; 9-c; 10-L, 11-n, 12-k; 13-m

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The Western Monarch Butterfly

The **monarch** butterfly is native to the United States. In fact, North America is the evolutionary heartland of the species. Over the last 20,000 years, **monarchs** expanded along with native **milkweed** plants across the entire United States, southern Canada, Mexico and parts of South America. In the Americas, **monarchs** are divided into two groups: western **monarchs** and eastern **monarchs**.

The Rocky Mountains generally divide these two populations, limiting their contact. Eastern **monarchs** breed in Canada and the Great Plains in the United States. They travel to central Mexico in winter. Western **monarchs** breed west of the Rocky Mountains in the United States. In this article, we will focus on western **monarchs**.



The Great Monarch Migration: The West Coast's Silent, Golden Flight

As autumn approaches, **swarms** of **migratory monarchs** fly to California from the Pacific Northwest, the Northern Rocky Mountains, the desert areas of Arizona and New Mexico, and parts of Nevada and Utah. These butterflies can migrate annually 300 to 1,000 miles (about 500 to 1,600 km).

The western population overwinters in hundreds of groves (groups of trees) along the California coast and into northern Baja California, Mexico. California plays a **vital** role in their **survival**. The coastal areas of the state serves as the winter **sanctuary** for the entire western population of monarchs. The

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sanctuary is a narrow strip of land along the California coast as shown in the light blue area of the map above.

Seeking the Goldilocks Zone

Why the California coast? Monarchs are cold-blooded insects, meaning they cannot control their own internal body temperature. It is affected by the temperature of their environment. If it is hot outside, their body heats up; if it is cold outside, they become cold and cannot move.



As a result, they cannot survive freezing winter temperature. They also cannot take extreme heat. The coastal groves of California offer a "Goldilocks" climate—not too hot, not too cold, with high humidity that keeps the butterflies hydrated.

When they arrive, usually between October and February, the monarchs gather in dense clusters or groups. They look for specific trees such as native Monterey pines and Monterey cypresses. They have also adapted to non-native trees. By packing tightly together on branches, the butterflies create a shared blanket of warmth, shielding each other from coastal winds and winter rains.

A Multi-Generational Puzzle



One of the most interesting aspects of this migration is that the butterflies making the trip south have never been to California before. During the spring and summer, monarchs live short lives of just two to six weeks, focusing entirely on mating and laying eggs on milkweed plants. However, the generation born in late summer is different.

Fewer daylight hours and cooler air causes this "super generation" to enter a condition called reproductive diapause (ree-pro-DUK-tiv DY-uh-pawz). This means their reproductive organs do not mature. This allows them to put all their energy into flight and survival.

This single generation lives up to eight months, flying hundreds of miles west, overwintering on the coast, and then flying back inland in the spring to start the cycle anew. How they navigate back to the exact same groves year after year is a subject of great scientific study. Research suggests they rely on a combination of the sun's position, the Earth's magnetic field, and special internal biological clocks.

A Population in Peril

Unfortunately, the monarch migration is under severe threat. In recent decades, Western **monarch** populations have **plummeted** significantly due to habitat loss, climate change, and **pesticide** use. Real estate development along the California coast has destroyed many historical groves, while farming practices have destroyed the **milkweed** plants necessary for caterpillars to feed on.

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In the late 1990s, scientists and volunteers counted over one million butterflies along the coast. By 2020, that number hit a devastating low of less than 2,000 individuals, pushing the Western migration to the brink of collapse. Fortunately, the population has shown signs of a modest, fragile recovery in recent years, thanks in part to community science programs and habitat restoration efforts.

How You Can Help

The future of the Western **monarch migration** rests largely in human hands. Anyone living along the **migration** route can contribute to their survival by making simple changes:

- **Plant native milkweed:** If you live inland (more than 5 miles from the coast), planting native **milkweed** provides essential breeding grounds for spring monarchs.
- **Grow nectar-rich flowers:** Planting flowers that bloom in the fall and winter gives **migrating** adults the fuel they need to sustain their long journeys.
- **Avoid pesticides:** Reducing or eliminating chemical **pesticides** in home gardens protects **monarchs** and other vital pollinators from accidental poisoning.



The Western **monarch migration** is a reminder of the intricate connections within our ecosystems. By understanding and protecting this fragile pathway, we can ensure that future generations will also look up to see the West Coast skies painted in brilliant orange and gold.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever seen a monarch butterfly? If so, where did you see it?
2. Have you been to Natural Bridges State Beach in Santa Cruz? Just a short distance inland from Natural Bridges is home to California's only State Monarch Preserve.
3. What other insects or animals migrate from cold areas to warmer ones?
4. Do you think it is important to save habitat for monarch butterflies or to use land for housing and farmland?
5. How can people and monarch butterflies co-exist? Do you think it worthwhile to support the monarch butterfly?
6. If you have a garden, do you grow flowers? What kind?
7. Discuss the phrase, "Goldilocks climate." Have you heard of Goldilocks before?
8. If you live in the Bay Area, would you plant milkweed and flowers for butterflies?

References

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