

King (and Queen) of Butterflies On the Move



The Monarchs are, once again, in the midst of migrating through Central Texas on their way to overwinter in central Mexico. Their yearly southward migrations are legendary and large numbers, virtually the entire population, funnels through Texas on their way to Mexico.

Our first Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*) of the fall season appeared here at the biology station on the morning of September 1st, nectaring at the tropical milkweed or bloodflower (*Asclepias curassavica*). In an amusing yet awe-inspiring display of poetic universality, our first northward moving individual of the Monarch's sister species, a Queen (*D. gilippus*), appeared here in the afternoon of the very same day.

Monarchs, Queens and Soldiers (*D. erisimus*) are the three milk-

weed butterflies found in Texas with the Queen and Soldier being common only in the deep south while the Monarch moves through the state twice a year. Out here in the forest at the biology station we see Queens only in the fall and see Monarchs only during their biannual travels.

Last year we played host to all three species, with three separate occurrences of Soldiers in the fall but our common milkweed butterfly here is the Queen. We usually see Monarch caterpillars on the milkweeds only in the spring and Queen caterpillars only in the fall—but this year is going to be different.

Last Saturday, I watched (and photographed) a female Monarch busily, excitedly laying eggs all over the tropical milkweed in the dem-



A female Monarch (Danaus plexippus) laying eggs at the tropical milkweed (Asclepias curassavica) in the demonstration garden at the Stengl "Lost Pines" Biology Station on Saturday, September 17, 2005.

stration garden at the station. She laid at least 2 dozen eggs or more in about 10 minutes, then rested for awhile and laid some more. My guess is she was happy to find the plants!

Monarchs are supposed to be in "reproductive diapause" (meaning they're not supposed to have mated or be laying eggs) during migration but this female hadn't read the migration manual, appar-

ently. Just goes to show that there are exceptions to just about every rule when it comes to nature.

And lucky me will get to watch the caterpillars develop over the next 2 to 3 weeks (at least some, I hope, will survive the fire ants) and will know that at least some of the overwintering Monarchs at the Mexico roost sites are uniquely Texan.