

Last Spring Generation of Texas Monarchs

Late May through early June is the last time we'll see Monarch butterflies (*Danaus plexippus*) in Texas until late September and early October when they will once again pass through the state on their way south to Mexico. But the spring migrants that arrived in late March and April left us a gift on their way north: a spring generation of native Texas Monarchs.

The eggs that females deposited on the early spring milkweeds hatched into caterpillars that ate the leaves and flowers of the plants for about a month before becoming chrysalids. Finally, the adult butterflies emerge, some 40 days after the egg was laid, and we have the fruit of their gift: large orange and black butterflies fluttering around our gardens and meadows.

We don't see most of the emergent butterflies because they quickly resume the journey of their parents and fly northward in search of elusive mates or actively-growing milkweeds, but some do remain in the area to captivate our eyes. Late in the season some of these beat up old butterflies—my favorite kind—show some evidence of living!

Personally, I'm not overly fond of the collector's dream: the perfect specimen with bold, vibrant color and unblemished wings. Instead, being the ecologist and nature watcher that I am, I prefer to see living butterflies that show signs of having lived a full and useful life. After all, only butterflies can make more butterflies—and its not the easiest job in the world since, on average, only one or two of every 100 eggs will survive to become butterflies.

The earliest spring migrants that show up tattered and torn, with pale orange-white wings, provide ample evidence of their harrowing journey from central Mexico to central Texas. Similarly, the late spring residents can also tell us stories about the Texas heat, drought and the scarcity of mates or hosts, if we only take the time to look.

Recently, some early migrant Queens (*Danaus gillippus*, near relatives of, but with less of the "traveling jones" that besets, the Monarch) and late spring resident Monarchs, both species with multiple tears, rips and holes in their wings, and paler than normal coloration, have been hanging around the meadows and butterfly gardens at the Biology Station.

It's always nice when relatives come to visit but man, the stories they could tell!?!



An old male Monarch, Danaus plexippus, attempts to obtain nectar at a horsemint, Monarda citriodora. Note the holes through, and the ragged edges of, his wings—now that's living!