

“Royal Butterfly” Visits Smithville & the Lost Pines

Smithville-Crawford Airport had another long-distance visitor last week. Mexican pilot Francisco “Vico” Gutierrez and his wife Nane arrived in their Papalotzin (means “royal butterfly”) ultralight on Tuesday, October 4th at almost precisely 6 pm.

What makes their visit noteworthy is not that they arrived on time but that their plane is painted with a rather large representation of a Monarch butterfly and the fact that they arrived not from the south but from the north—from Canada to be exact—because they are flying along the migration route of the Monarch.

Vico is not only the pilot of the plane but is also the driving force behind the “Papalotzin Project,” a journey from Canada to Mexico following the migrating Monarch butterflies. The object of the project is to document the flight and increase public awareness of the remarkable challenges that the Monarch butterfly faces during their astounding migration.

The project is funded by World Wildlife Fund (Mexico), the State of Michoacan, TelCel, a Mexican cell phone company, and private donations. For more information about the project—and daily updates of their flight and experiences—visit www.papalotzin.com.

As most everyone knows, the Monarch migrates from the north-eastern and north central US and Canada to their overwintering grounds in the mountains of central Mexico. By experiencing some of the challenges—for example, bad weather and contrary winds—that the butterflies face during their journey they hope to educate people to the unique qualities of the Monarch butterfly migration and the problems they face on their southward flight.



Their four-person ground crew, which is following the flight and filming a 1½ hour documentary of the journey, arrived a couple of hours later and joined my wife, Pat, and I and Vico and Nane at La Cabaña for dinner. We offered to put them and the film crew up at the Wyer Residential Laboratory building at the Stengl “Lost Pines” Biological Station and they gratefully accepted.

Knowing that their lives had been “ordered” for quite some time—since mid-August they have been in almost constant motion, from Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto and Windsor in Canada through upstate New York to New York City, Washington DC, Virginia, Tennessee, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma and Dallas—Mike Quinn, invertebrate biologist at Texas Parks and Wildlife, and the manager of Texas

Monarch Watch, and I chose to forgo the usual media frenzy and instead opted to have them tell us how active they wanted to be.

Tired from the whirlwind of activity that had been their lot since the end of August, they were pleased to have a couple of days to relax and unwind. So they spent a quiet couple of days in the Smithville and central Texas area. Vico and his wife spent some of Wednesday in Austin shopping for camping and other necessary supplies for their continuing journey. In the meantime, the film crew had time for a much needed afternoon siesta (!) before interviewing Mike Quinn about the specific problems that face the Monarch in Texas.

Texas is an important stopover for the migrating butterflies because



Pilot Vico Gutierrez (left) and Smithville Times Editor Mark Gwin walk around the Papalotzin ultralight at the Smithville-Crawford Airport after their flight last Thursday afternoon. The 2-seater ultralight left Ottawa, Canada on August 22nd and will arrive at the Monarch butterfly overwintering sites in time for Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, November 2nd.



The Papalotzin Project and Documentary Film Crew at the Stengl "Lost Pines" Biological Station. From left: Gregory Allen (producer/camera), Pat Schappert, Tania Colazo (production assistant), Andrew Donaldson (camera/sound), Phil Schappert, Mike Quinn (Texas Parks & Wildlife), Luis Jimenez (still photographer/2nd pilot) and Nane and Vico Gutierrez (pilot and project leader).

virtually the entire population, that had once spanned two countries from the corn belt of Middle America through to Canada and the far northeast, is funneled through the state on their journey south. The resources that the butterflies find here are some of the last that they will encounter before the final push to their overwintering roosts.

On Thursday morning, just before the cold front came through, I was thrilled to have Vico take me up in the Papalotzin ultralight. It was fun and terrifying at the same time—how can being 2000 feet up and having nothing around you but a lap belt and couple of shoulder belts be anything but terrifying to someone who's afraid to climb too high on a ladder? Still, it was exhilarating and eye-opening.

Without a doubt, it's a different world up there. Vico flew me north to fly over the station so that I could get some aerial photographs of the UT property. If this is what a Monarch butterfly "sees" as they fly over the central Texas countryside then I'm in even more awe of them now than I was be-

fore. How do they manage to do it?

On Thursday afternoon the film crew and I walked out to the pond where they interviewed me about my book and my unique perspective—being a Canadian biologist in the Texas landscape—about the Monarch, its migration and the problems which face this endangered phenomenon.

Later that afternoon, Mike Quinn and Smithville Times Editor Mark Gwin joined us for a final look at the plane at Smithville airport. Vico took Mark up for a short flight towards town and over the Colorado River valley before returning to the airport. I'll leave it to you to ask Mark about his flight, but it was quite breezy now that the front had completed its passage through the area and Vico was worried about their flight to Boerne the next day.

Friday, of course, dawned gray, dreary and overcast with sustained winds of up to 20 mph and the threat of rain between Smithville and Boerne. They had all laughed when I told them the bit about "if

you don't like the weather in Texas, wait five minutes" but now they knew it was true.

Vico and the crew reluctantly decided that it would not be a good day for flying so they left to visit Vico's nephew in San Antonio

with plans to fly back to Smithville on Saturday morning, after dropping Nane off at ABIA for her return flight home, to move the Papalotzin ultralight to its next appointment in Boerne.

The last we saw of Vico was when he dipped his wings over the station on a beautiful sunny Saturday morning. From Boerne they are headed to Eagle Pass, Del Rio and then home to Mexico. Their eventual destination is the same as the Monarchs—the high central plateau of the mountains of Michoacan near the town of Angangueo and Vico's home of Valle de Bravo.

Their day of arrival, again carefully coordinated with that of the migrating butterflies, is *Día de los Muertos*, the Mexican "Day of the Dead," November 2nd. This is not inconsequential since the locals consider *la mariposa Monarca* to be the souls or spirits of departed relatives. Another name used for the Monarchs, *las palomas*, literally "the doves," are seen as the souls of the lost children.

Either way, they'll be home.



A migrating Monarch butterfly roosts on a Mustang Grape leaf on the evening of October 5th at the Stengl "Lost Pines" Biological Station. The Papalotzin crew was able to see and photograph a number of Monarchs and a Monarch caterpillar during their stay.