

*We are pleased to publish our 3rd DYK article, focusing on the Monarch butterfly. As a budding Monarch hobbyist, Katherine Stewart provides information about the life cycle of the butterfly, as well as tips on creating a Monarch-friendly environment. We hope you will continue to send suggestions for topics and questions relating to all things of interest in the Northwoods.*



## Did You Know?

June 2022

### "The Monarchs Return"

Katherine Stewart (Middle Eau Claire Lake)

More than two months ago and 2,000 miles south of the Eau Claire Lakes, Monarch butterflies started a northward journey from their winter home in the Sierra Madre Mountains of Mexico to northern Wisconsin. Hungry Monarch butterflies have begun to arrive in the north woods, in search of nectar from early-blooming flowers. Within the next few weeks, the distinctively striped Monarch caterpillars should start hatching and chowing down on milkweed leaves. The caterpillar will molt five times during this larval stage. A new larger skin is always waiting under the skin that is shed. Ten to fourteen days after hatching, a Monarch caterpillar attains its full size of about 2-3/8" long.

The Monarchs that emerged from the chrysalides in my backyard garden in late August made the entire long migration to their winter habitat in the Oyamel forests of central Mexico. These migrating Monarchs, known as the Methuselah Generation, lived for up to nine months. During that time, they migrated south and overwintered in Mexico. In order to extend their life spans, these butterflies delayed reproduction until they began their northward journey in March. This phenomenon, known as reproductive diapause, is not unique to Monarchs, although their long migration is singular in the insect world.

Unlike their far-ranging parents, the adult Monarchs that return to Barnes will live just two to five weeks. Each female will lay about one hundred eggs exclusively on milkweed plants. These eggs will progress to tiny caterpillars, devouring the milkweed as they grow, to chrysalis and finally to butterflies. The warmer the temperature, the more quickly the Monarchs progress through their life cycle.



*"I was amazed, as I observed the Monarchs in my backyard last summer, by how quickly a caterpillar becomes a chrysalis. Late one June afternoon, I noticed a Monarch caterpillar hanging from a leaf in the characteristic "J" shape that portends its transformation to a chrysalis. When I checked back less than three hours later, a beautiful green and gold chrysalis hung in its place."*

As of mid-May, the official 2022 Monarch count numbers from Mexico had not been released. But loss of habitat, both in Mexico and in the Monarchs' summer range, threatens their existence. Monarch caterpillars feed exclusively on milkweed, so establishing a patch of milkweed is a great way for you to bolster Monarch populations.

Adult Monarchs need to eat, too. So consider incorporating native nectar sources (i.e. flowers) into your landscaping. Coneflowers, Blazing Star, Bergamot and Black-Eyed Susans are all good choices for our region. Even those annoying dandelions are an important early-season nectar source for newly-arrived Monarchs.

It is a great privilege to occupy and care for the little slice of heaven my family calls "the cottage." While I know that my little garden isn't going to make much difference in the decline in Monarch numbers, it will make an incremental difference and that's enough for me.

By planting milkweed and other native plants, you can provide habitat and food for butterflies, bees, hummingbirds and other pollinators. It's a small contribution in the big scheme of things, but one that is both enjoyable and educational.