

MONARCH BUTTERFLY

DANAUS PLEXIPPUS

Native or not?

Monarch butterflies live in North, Central and South America as well as Australia, some Pacific Islands, India, and even Western Europe. Monarchs have been coming to Australia for centuries but was first recorded as established here in approximately 1870/71. They needed their host plant Milkweed to establish here before they could flourish.

So how did they get here?

Well, luck really! They essentially rode the winds from America to Australia by island hopping across the South Pacific Islands. They likely made the final leap to Australia from New Caledonia on strong or stormy winds. This is a naturally occurring event and therefore a natural change in distribution. The debate on them being native or not largely comes from milkweed not being native to Australia and humans being responsible for it's arrival and establishment here.

Without these plants they likely wouldn't have been able to survive here.

So are they bad for our ecosystem?

Not really no! Butterflies are an important part of the food chain and they also make great bioindicators - a way to measure the health of an environment.

They feed from weeds not native plants so they're not competing with native species for food.

There will always be concerns over them being "flying weeds" but their impact is so negligible it's not a concern or priority.

Diet

Monarch caterpillars exclusively eat milkweed and will devour 200 times their weight in milkweed.

The adults however are not quite as picky. They will feed on nectar from a variety of plants including the flowers of milkweed.

Fun fact!

The average butterfly flaps its wings around 20 times per second. The Monarch Butterfly, on the other hand, flaps its wings around 5 to 12 times a second.

Temperatures

Beach days and vitamin D please!

Monarchs need warmth to be able to fly. They can't even crawl if it's below 15°.

The optimal temperature for monarchs is 28° but they can fly and be released at 20° if it's not too overcast.

They will bask and/or shiver to warm themselves up enough to fly or crawl up vegetation.

Fun fact!

When the caterpillar hatches from the egg it will eat the egg shell first.

It goes through 5 growing stages and sheds it's skin at each stage. The caterpillar will also eat the shed skin!

Reduce, reuse recycle right?



Chrysalis

The gold spots on Monarch Butterfly chrysalises are due to carotenoid pigments from their milkweed diet.

The word "chrysalis" is actually derived from the Greek word for gold, "chrysos".



The males have a small black dot on each of the hind wings. These are scent glands which help the males attract female butterflies.



I'm poisonous!

Monarchs bright orange colour signals to potential predators that it's poisonous and will likely make them sick.

What? How?

Caterpillars eat milkweed which contains a poison called cardiac glycosides. They retain this poison as adults which acts as a great anti-predator mechanism. It usually just causes vomiting and rarely death.

Fun fact!

Pied Currawongs and Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike don't seem to be affected by this poison!