



Nature Guides


The Monarch's Migration Marathon

Early June 2011

Featured Species: Magnificent Migrant Monarchs & Butterfly Wildscaping

The arrival of the magnificent Monarchs has begun, and peaks in early June. Most of these arrivals are the offspring of the Monarchs that originally began the migration in México – an incredible trip for an insect weighing less than a gram. We can welcome the Monarchs by providing a hearty native plant nectar meal and a cozy milkweed habitat.

Monarchs feed on the nectar of many plants, but only breed where milkweed occur. Females identify milkweed by smell—testing the plant juices with their antennae. Fertilized eggs are laid singly on the underside of milkweed leaves, and a single female may lay as many as 400 eggs. Within 4–5 days the eggs hatch, and tiny caterpillars (the larvae) emerge. The caterpillars become brightly-coloured with yellow, black, and white bands and chow down exclusively on milkweed. They grow 2700x their original size over the course of two weeks! Growing that fast requires them to grow new skin (molt) five times. Milkweeds, named after their milky sap, are poisonous to many vertebrates, and by eating it the caterpillars also become poisonous, which persists in the adult stage. At about three weeks old, caterpillars enter the inactive pupal stage, and change into jade green chrysalises with golden dots. Inside the chrysalis, the caterpillar undergoes metamorphosis and emerges after about two weeks as a colourful, winged adult!

Dedicating part of or your yard to milkweed species such as Common Milkweed, Swamp Milkweed, and Butterfly Milkweed can attract Monarchs . There are a lot of other beautiful butterflies that can be attracted too. Adult butterflies visit a variety of flowers for nectar such as Wild Bergamot, New Jersey Tea, Joe-Pye Weed, Common Boneset, Black-eyed Susan, and goldenrods. Host plants are plants that eggs are laid on, and are a food source for the caterpillars. Here are just a few examples (note: these plants are not a complete list of host plants, and are not native to all parts of Ontario; split names show both adult and larvae):

- Eastern Tiger Swallowtail: Prunus (cherry) species including Wild Black Cherry, Pin Cherry, and Choke Cherry, as well as White Ash and Green Ash, and for southern populations Tulip-tree and Common Hop-tree.
- American Painted Lady: several Asteraceae species including Pearly Everlasting, Marsh Cudweed, Field Pussytoes and other pussytoe species
- Red Admiral: Stinging Nettle, Canada Wood-nettle, and Common Hop
- Baltimore Checkerspot: Turtlehead, White Ash, Green Ash, viburnum species
- Mourning Cloak: birch species, White Ash, Largetooth Aspen, Trembling Aspen
- Eastern Comma: Stinging Nettle, Canada Wood-nettle, Hackberry, and American Elm
- Question Mark: Stinging Nettle, Canada Wood-nettle, Hackberry, Common Hop
- Mottled Duskywing: New Jersey Tea, Narrow-leaved New Jersey Tea

Planting species native to your area is ideal. More butterfly gardening tips can be found [here](#).

Other happenings:

Top R4R Picks

Resources for extending the learning

**Monarch Butterfly: Royal Mail.
Activities for Grades 5–8**

Elementary, Middle

See "Migration" and "Butterfly Tree"

Saving the Monarch

Elementary

**Monarch Butterfly: Royal Mail–
Activities for Grades K–4**

Elementary

See "North–South" and "Do You Know
Where Monarchs Rest?"

- As May was the month of migration, June is the month of mating and nesting.
- Some of the long-distance migrants, such as the graceful [Whimbrels](#) that were seen in the Great Lakes area in late May are just arriving to their sub-Arctic and Arctic breeding habitats. Boxer, Fowler, Elki, Hope, and Indi are Whimbrels that gained satellite transmitters while feeding in Virginia. Now we can see their journeys north [here](#).
- Male songbirds are singing it up to establish and maintain a territory, and attract a mate. [Bird song](#) is at its best at the break of dawn, hence the term 'dawn chorus'. Just before sunrise different species pipe up at different times, and from a previously quiet forest emerges a flurry of noise. Taking in a dawn chorus is a good spring ritual. To catch it in style, wake up early (~4:30am), and head outside with a head lamp, lawn chair, and thermos to enjoy the gradual crescendo and climax, which usually occurs 30 minutes before sunrise.
- Wildscaping efforts can also benefit Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. Their tiny hearts beat more than 600 times a minute. At the normal metabolic rate they could starve within a few hours without food. Luckily, they can enter a state of torpor to conserve energy. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds prefer red and orange tubular flowers for nectar such as Jewelweed and [Bee-balm](#) (note: Bee-balm is native to Ontario, but not to the Kawarthas). Their heart rate is even higher during their startling courtship. The male displays by diving in a U-shape pattern from as high as 12-15m above the female, and doing extremely fast side-to-side arcs in front of a perched female.
- [Chimney Swifts](#), often described as "cigars with wings", can also be seen performing courtship displays. 'V-ing', most pronounced after pair formation, involves two swifts flying together. The rear bird snaps its wings upwards to form a 'V', the leader joins, and the pair gracefully glides downward. As their name implies, Chimney Swifts [nest](#) in chimneys or the walls of abandoned buildings. Historically and currently where suitable habitat still exists, they nest(ed) in large hollow trees. Logging removed most natural sites, and Chimney Swifts adapted to 'human' chimneys. Contrary to common belief, Chimney Swifts do not nest in colonies. Unmated birds, however, commonly [roost together in large flocks](#), and sometimes in a chimney with a single nested pair. Like many other aerial insectivores in North America, Chimney Swifts are experiencing strong [population declines](#), and are listed by [COSEWIC](#) as threatened in Canada.
- Osprey young hatch. The young are fed a lot of fish, which the male catches and brings to the nest. The [female dissects and parcels it out](#).
- Five-lined Skinks, Ontario's only lizard and a Species at Risk in Ontario and Canada, are mating. Look for them on sunny rock outcrops with deep cracks.
- [Midland Painted Turtles](#), and a bit later in the month [Snapping Turtles](#), searching for nest sites become a familiar sight along roads and train tracks. Well-drained, loose, sandy soil or fine gravel is preferred. The females use their hind legs to create a depression to lay eggs in. Painted Turtles lay 5-10 white eggs, and Snapping Turtles lay 15-30 eggs. She then covers them up. The eventual sex of the [baby turtles](#) is determined by the incubating temperature. Cooler temperatures (22-26°C) produce males, while warmer temperatures ($\geq 30^{\circ}\text{C}$) usually result in females. Hatch success is low, and many nests are dug up by raccoons, skunks, and foxes. Road mortality also causes significant loss of adult and hatchling turtles.
- [Bunchberry](#), [Goldthread](#), [Fringed Polygala](#), [Starflower](#), [Canada Mayflower](#), [Yellow Clintonia](#), and [Common Solomon's Seal](#) are woodland flowers that begin to bloom.
- Adult [mayflies](#), also known as fishflies, emerge from lakes and rivers forming mating swarms. Mayflies belong to the Order Ephemeroptera. In Greek ephemeros means 'short lived' and pteron means 'wing'. Depending on the species, adults only live for 30min to a day, just enough time to mate and lay eggs. In Ontario there are 188 known species of mayflies, all which have slender bodies and two or three [long terminal filaments](#).
- Clear, cool, moonless June nights provide the perfect opportunities to observe the [Milky Way](#), and to contemplate that not only are you looking at it, but you are in it. [Our solar system](#) is located on one of the spiral arms of the Milky Way galaxy, about two-thirds, or 25 000 light years, out from the galaxy's centre. Binoculars will reveal the tiny stars in the "river of milk".
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