



## Audubon at Home in Northern Virginia

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### Monarch Butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*)

The amazing monarch butterfly captures the imagination like no other insect in the world. It is the only butterfly known to make a two-way migration as birds do, traveling 2,000-3,000 miles round-trip. Because it cannot overwinter in cold climates, this species is dependent on conservation of habitats in all three North American countries – Canada, the U.S., and Mexico. Monarchs in eastern North America winter in the Sierra Madre Mountains of Mexico. As spring weather warms, monarchs mate and lay eggs that become the next generation. Following complete metamorphosis (egg, larva, pupa, adult), each generation travels farther north. These adults live 2-5 weeks. It takes 3-4 generations to reach Canada. The last generation of the year, appearing in late summer, is unique in that its reproductive cycle is suspended until the following spring. This is the generation that turns around and migrates back to Mexico and California. Some of these butterflies can live 9 months!

### What Monarch Butterflies Need

**Food:** Adults feed various nectar bearing flowers. These occur in “nectar corridors,” or a series of habitat patches with flowering at appropriate times allowing monarchs to stop and refuel during migration. Monarchs build up fat reserves to migrate south in the fall and to sustain them over winter, a time when they feed very little, if at all. Nectar is supplemented with water from mud puddles that is rich in salts and minerals.

**Breeding:** Monarchs need milkweed. Larvae feed on it exclusively. There are over 100 species of milkweed in North America, but only about ¼ of them are important as host plants.

**Shelter:** Monarchs roost in tree crevices, shrubs and dense brush.

**Other:** While up to 100 million monarchs may gather to migrate each fall, their numbers are threatened by human activity throughout their range. In the north, the key issue is loss of the host plant, milkweed. Nectar plants are lost to development, pollution and herbicides.

#### Resources:

Plants— available at Hyla Brook Farm, Merrifield Garden Center, Nature By Design, DeBaggio Herbs and other local nurseries

Monarch Waystation Seed Kit—coordinated by the University of Kansas, [www.monarchwatch.org](http://www.monarchwatch.org)

#### Model Monarch Butterfly Habitats:

Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge—[www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=51611](http://www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=51611)

Meadowlark Gardens Regional Park—[www.nvrpa.org/meadowlark.html](http://www.nvrpa.org/meadowlark.html)

Long Branch Nature Center—<http://www.arlingtonva.us/Departments/ParksRecreation/scripts/nature/ParksRecreationScriptsNatureLongbranch.aspx>

### How You Can Help

- Recommended nectar plants include purple coneflower, blazingstar, sunflowers, asters, goldenrods, and annual Ageratum, Zinnia, Cosmos and Verbena. Select a mix that will provide blooms throughout butterfly season.
- Create a butterfly puddle. Put sand or clay soil in a large, shallow saucer and add water as needed.
- Plant butterflyweed, swamp, common and purple milkweed, and the annual tropical milkweed for larvae to feed and grow on.
- Plant thick shrubs like summersweet, Virginia sweetspire, southern bayberry, or rosebay rhododendron.
- Get a Monarch Waystation Seed Kit. Monarch Waystations are certified sites that contain a variety of milkweed and nectar plants to aid monarch conservation.

Visit [audubonva.org](http://audubonva.org) for more information and other fact sheets