

British Nature Guide

The Monarch Butterfly migration in North America

It is not just birds that fly long distances to migrate. Some butterflies do the same, including the most famous butterfly in North America, the Monarch. Monarchs winter in Mexico and California as adults. They use the same trees each winter. Sometimes hundreds of thousands of butterflies gather in small woodlands. When spring arrives they leave their winter roosts and head north.



They travel many hundreds of miles before stopping to breed. They lay their eggs only on Milkweed plants. The eggs hatch quickly into caterpillars. Within a few weeks the caterpillars are fully grown and they pupate.

The next generation of Monarch butterflies emerges from the pupa 30 days after the eggs were laid. These new butterflies migrate further north and then they also stop to breed. 30 days later the next generation continues the northbound migration all the way to Canada.

It is about 3000 miles from the winter roosts in Mexico to their summer breeding sites in Canada. As the summer comes to an end the Monarchs start to migrate south again, stopping to breed several times on the way before arriving back at their traditional winter roosts.

None of the butterflies that left the roosts in the spring return in the autumn. They have all died. It is their great great grandchildren.

No-one knows how Monarchs are able to return to the same trees each winter.