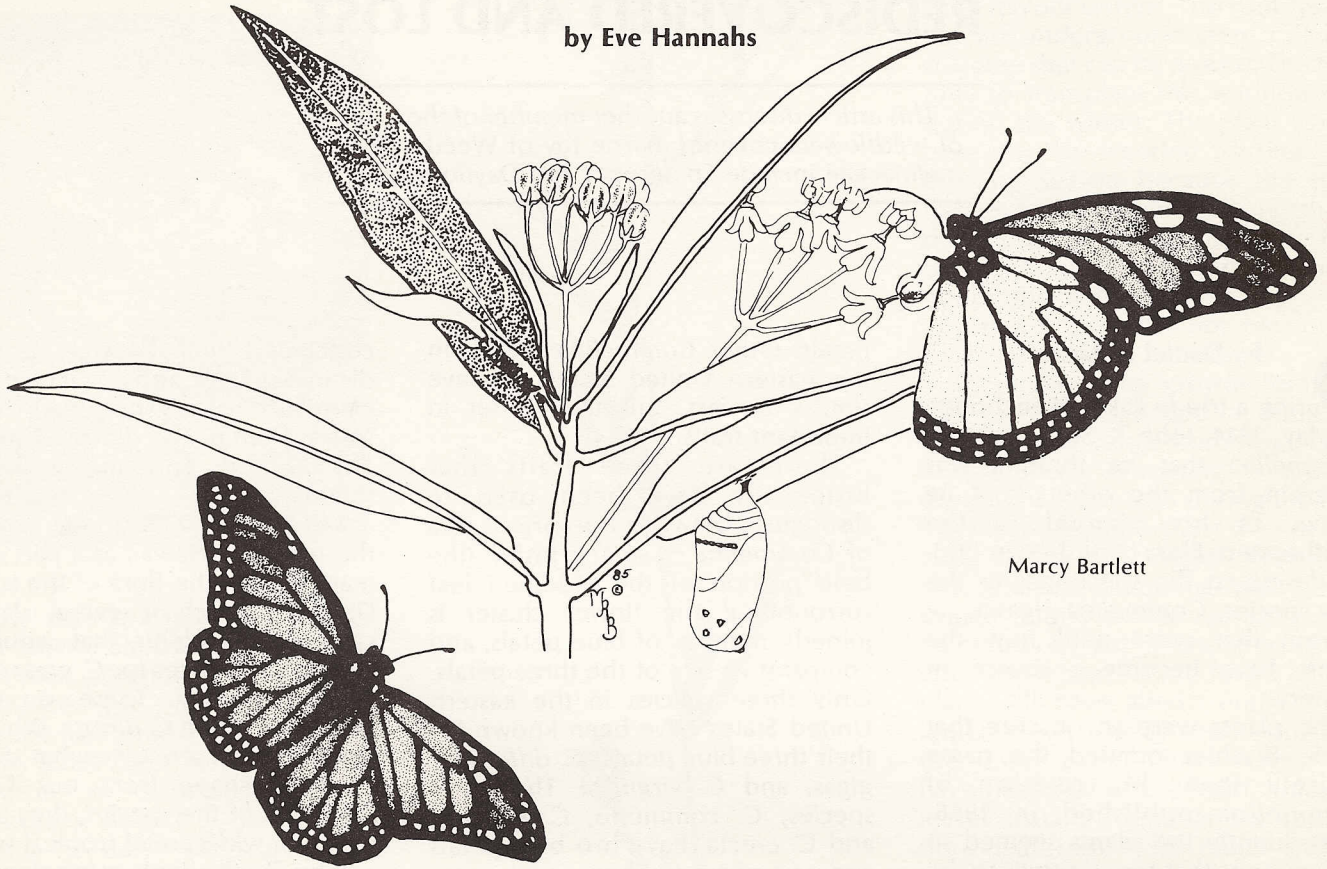


Butterflies and Native Plants

THE MONARCH BUTTERFLY

Danaus plexippus

by Eve Hannahs



Marcy Bartlett

While we were experiencing what is locally known as the “dog days of summer,” cooler temperatures and shorter days north of us were triggering the great mystery — migration. Joining the migrations were the Monarch butterfly. The Monarch is specially equipped for his lengthy travels by having an unusually large thorax where his flying muscles are found.

A few begin their flight southward, others join them, until they number in the thousands, to make their fall journey. They stop along the way to feed on energy-giving nectar, and in early evening roost in trees, sometimes in such great numbers they give the appearance of autumn leaves.

How far can they travel in a day? One tagged specimen is known to have covered a distance of 80 miles. How far can they fly? They regularly fly some 2,000 miles to central Mexico. A few tagged specimens have been known to have made the round trip. The populations west of

the Rockies winter on the Monterey Peninsula where they arrive in late October and remain until early spring. Populations east of the Rockies funnel down the central and northeastern states into Mexico, with the greatest concentration crossing over Texas. Some fly over the northeastern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. It has been reported that Monarchs pass through the Pensacola area around Columbus Day. Large populations gather during November at Cedar Key where they are found resting on shrubs near the water before continuing their incredible journey across the Gulf. Other populations are found in late fall and early winter throughout Florida. When milkweeds are found, eggs will be laid. As temperatures become cooler, they go farther south to spend the remaining winter and early spring in our most southern counties.

The Monarch is handsome in all stages; the transverse stripes of yellow, black, and green on the body

of the caterpillar and antennae at both ends make identification easy. The translucent chrysalis case is adorned with metallic gold markings. Early color is apple green. As the butterfly matures, darker colors show through, and in the last days of development, orange stripes may be seen. The chrysalis stage lasts from one to two weeks.

The 3.5 to 3.9 inch adult can be confused with the Viceroy (which is smaller, 2.6 to 2.8 inches, more heavily veined, and has a black post median stripe), or the Queen (almost cinnamon brown with less prominent veins). Closer observation easily separates the species. Unlike many butterflies, Monarchs are easily sexed as the male has a black spot on each hind wing.

(Eve Hannahs has prepared a paper on butterfly gardening for Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. If you'd like a copy, order from GFC, Nongame Wildlife Program, 620 S. Meridian, Tallahassee 32301. Free.)