

Monarch butterflies soar at the height of summer

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Correspondent

Perhaps one of the most enchanting winged creatures we encounter outdoors at this season of the year is the butterfly. A delicate creation of variegated color, a shimmering example of intricate design. If the hummingbirds are known as the jewels of the birdworld, the butterflies could well be called the cathedral windows of the insect kingdom. Some common species such as the monarch even have heavy vein marks in the wings suggestive of the leaded dividers in these religious stained glass casements.

With nearly 700 species of butterflies occurring in North America, the casual observer certainly will never tire of repetition. However, a most important factor in identifying the more conspicuous of these various sun-loving soarers is to know the difference between them and their nocturnal counterparts, the moths. Apart from the fact that moths are active for the most part at night, there are other visual differences that separate them from butterflies. As an example, the antennae protruding from the head of a moth are feathered, whereas those same feelers on a butterfly's head are wire-like and have an elongated knob on the outer end. The bodies of moths are also plump and furry in contrast to the generally slender thorax and abdomen of the butterflies.

Because butterflies are members of the insect family it's worthy to note that they preceded our most ancient forebears by some 350 million years. While some have adapted their forms to new earthy conditions, others have not altered a whit in those millions of intervening years. Their adaptability makes them the dominant life form anywhere on this planet. The areas where the more noticeable insects like butterflies are absent are the places where man has discouraged their presence by removing the desirable habitat. Insects, however, like flies, mosquitoes, cockroaches, and wasps still persist even in these concrete jungles. Although butterflies have no means to repulse attack, they do possess a whole bag of tricks for concealment and escape. Many have protective color patterns that appear to be a leaf, a piece of bark, or a patch of lichen on which they alight. Still

others have imitation eye spots that either frighten their enemies or lure them into thinking they are a much larger creature such as an owl. Even the caterpillars of butterflies have camouflaged coats, spiny bristles, or a repulsive taste to predators. In the case of the familiar orange and black monarch butterfly, this awful taste is derived from the larva feeding on the milkweed plant.

But if the monarch butterfly is known as an undesirable food source by birds, most of the others fall prey to a whole host of hungry predators. Frogs, toads, snakes, birds, and mice are constant visible enemies of butterflies and their larvae, while web spiders take an annual toll. Parasitic flies and wasps lay their eggs on butterfly larvae that when hatched live on the doomed host caterpillar. It is only their tremendous reproductive

ability that allows us to witness any of these spectacular feather-light flyers each summer.

When you notice a large butterfly swooping and soaring gracefully above the nearby groundcover, take note of its color pattern. If it's orange and black with heavy, vein-like wing markings, you can be almost certain it's a monarch. The same butterfly that each autumn travels over 2,000 miles to the mountains of Mexico to spend the winter. Just another truly remarkable example of the power and ability of a small insect to survive.

Tips & Clips: Two good books on butterflies are The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Butterflies and Petersen Field Guide to the Butterflies of North America. An evening grosbeak brought three young to our feeder this week. Moose validation tags have been drawn and sent out...

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