

A close-up photograph of two monarch butterflies perched on a yellow flower. The butterflies have vibrant orange wings with black veins and white spots along the edges. The background is a soft-focus green field with some purple flowers.

How a Monarch is Born

By: Jessica Womack

Although she will sip nectar from other plants, a female butterfly will fly around until she finds a milkweed plant when she is ready to lay eggs. She knows it is milkweed because she can taste it with her feet!



It is unusual for her to lay more than one egg on a milkweed plant, but it does happen. An egg will sit for about four days before it hatches.



The tiny caterpillar that emerges is called a larva. When it is about to come out, the egg darkens. As soon as it breaks free from the football-shaped casing, the larva will eat the shell.



When it has finished eating the casing, or chorion, the larva begins to eat the plant it is on. Milkweed is the only type of plant the monarch caterpillar will eat.



The little larva is so small that it is almost impossible to see without a magnifying glass. It is even smaller than a grain of rice.



The larva eats so much that its skin gets tight, then it sheds the skin and turns around and eats it. That shedding of the skin, called molting, happens five times, and each time the caterpillar grows bigger.



The next time the larva changes, it will become a pupa. It starts by finding a good place to spin a silk pad. Then, it attaches itself to that spot and hangs in a J-shape.



Within about fifteen hours, the J-shaped caterpillar will stretch itself out until its skin breaks open. It will wiggle and wriggle around until the old black skin falls off. The caterpillar transforms into a pupa.



After it pupates, it is called a chrysalis. It will hang for a week or so and start to turn black. The pretty orange and black butterfly is visible inside.



When the time is right, the chrysalis breaks open and a butterfly is born. She will have to pump the fluid from her big abdomen into her shriveled wings.



She will hang from the empty chrysalis until she is ready to fly. When she takes off, she will look for some nectar, a male monarch and a milkweed plant on which to lay her eggs.

