RED SUN FARMS

Monarch Butterfly Life Cycle

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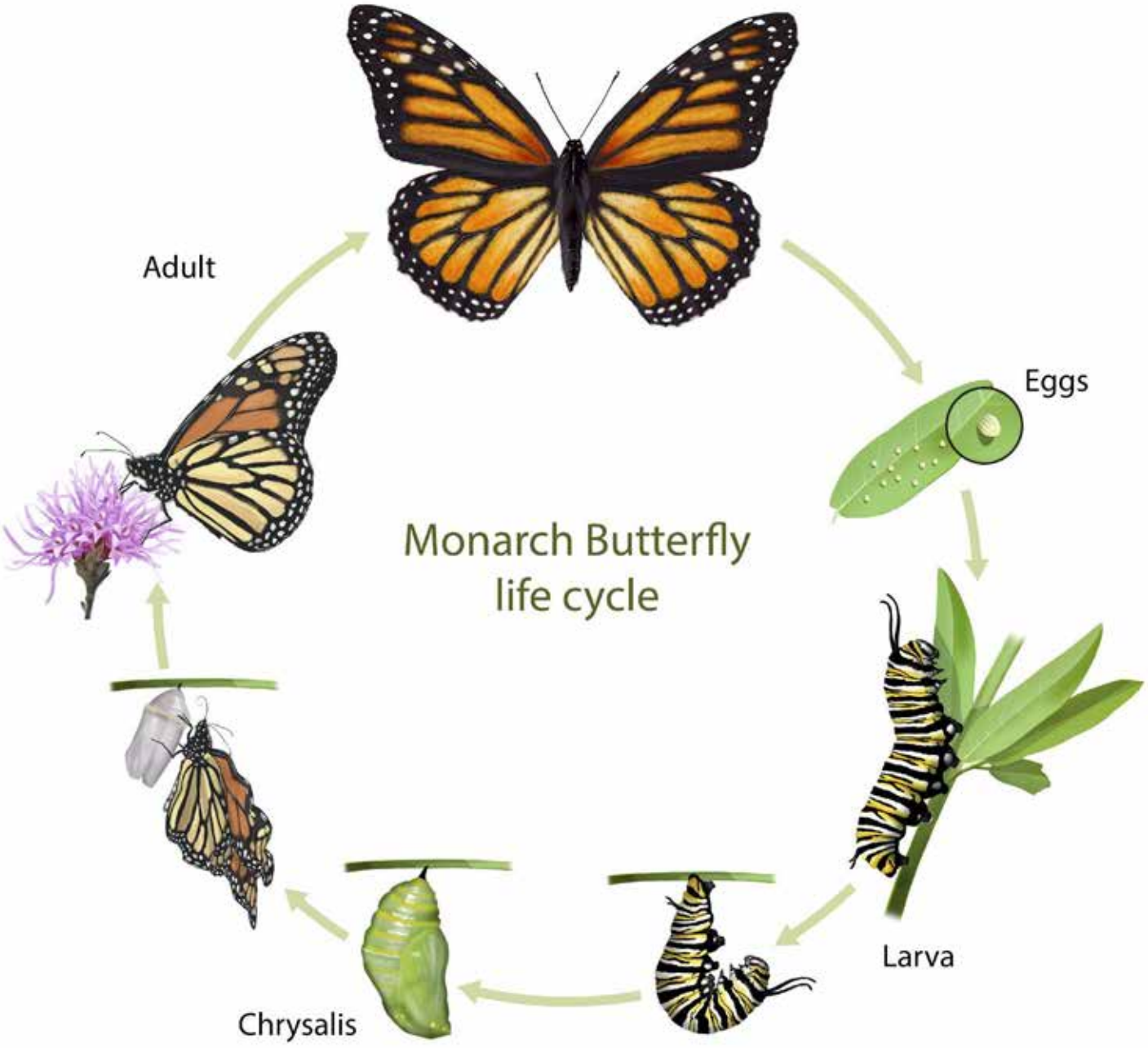

Save the Monarchs

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EGG

The egg is the first stage of the Monarch Butterfly's life.

A female Monarch can lay 300-400 eggs in the span of a few weeks! They usually lay one egg per milkweed plant, but sometimes you can find multiple eggs on the same plant or even the same leaf.

The eggs are tiny, about the size of a pin head or the tip of a pencil. They are a cream color and have ridges

that cover it length-wise. You can usually find the eggs on the underside of leaves near the top of the plant.

CATERPILLAR

3 to 5 days after an egg is laid, it hatches into a caterpillar, also known as the butterfly larva.

The caterpillar will spend nearly it's entire life as a caterpillar eating! Its first meal after hatching is the egg case it just came out of because it has vital nutrients in it. Then, it moves on to milkweed.

Monarch caterpillars feed exclusively on milkweed. This is why it is so important to make sure that milkweed is protected. One caterpillar can eat anywhere from 175 to 200 milkweed leaves from the time it hatches until it's time to start the transformation into a butterfly.

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With the amount that a caterpillar eats, it grows very quickly! To keep up with the growth, the caterpillar's body has to adapt. It will undergo at least 5 moults, or instars - also called larval stages. Each moult gives the caterpillar a slightly larger exoskeleton to accommodate the rapid growth. It is preparing for the next stage of growth: the pupa or chrysalis.

PUPA (CHRYSALIS)

The Monarch caterpillar will usually leave the milkweed plant in search of a well-camouflaged spot high off the ground to pupate. It will weave a tiny silk pad as an anchor and then inserts the hooks at the tip of its abdomen into the anchor and assumes a "J" shape.

It stays in this position for 12 to 48 hours until it extracts itself from its caterpillar skeleton and becomes a pupa!

In the pupal stage, the Monarchs are well camouflaged! In order to survive, they need a good disguise. They are unable to move for several days while they undergo transformation, so the small, green colored pupa needs to be difficult to spot for predators.

The pupa, or chrysalis, will gradually change from green to a bluish color, to transparent where you can see the adult monarch forming inside.

After 8 to 15 days, the adult butterfly will finally emerge!

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ADULT

It is called "emergence" when the adult butterfly comes out of its pupa case. A few hours before this happens, the pigments appear and the adult butterfly can be seen through the walls of the transparent case, ready to break out.

Finally, the pupa splits open and the adult butterfly wriggles out. Clinging on to its pupa case, its insect blood (called hemolymph) through the vessels in its wet wings.

In about 4 to 5 hours, the wings will unfold and stiffen and the butterfly can take its first flight! First stop: flowers that have lots of nectar. This new butterfly needs energy. Adult monarchs, unlike their larva or caterpillars, can eat from any flowers as long as they have lot of nectar.

What is next for these beautiful butterflies? In 3 to 5 days after emergence, their primary job is to start reproducing. They will start to look for milkweed in order to start laying eggs and starting the whole life cycle process all over again!

A VERY SPECIAL GENERATION

Later in the summer, late August and early September, the caterpillars that hatch and become adult butterflies don't immediately start looking to reproduce. This is a very special generation of Monarch: the migratory generation. To conserve as much energy as possible, this generation of butterfly doesn't have fully developed reproductive systems. These butterflies will head off on amazing journey that takes them all the way to Mexico for the winter. When the daylight increases during the next spring, these butterflies will develop their reproductive systems.

While most adult monarchs usually live for 3 to 5 weeks, this special generation will survive for up to 8 months to make the trip back and start the whole life cycle process over again for the next generation.

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