

## Monarch 2017



### ***Wind Child***

*They have just found where the monarch butterflies go in autumn*

*Those red gold drifters edged in black*

*That blow like leaves but never coming to rest*

*Always fluttering out of reach and disappearing...*

*Speed 14 miles an hour on a 3000 mile course to Mexico...*

*What a way to go; you make it or you don't*

*Or the winds snatch you away....*

*(Loren Easley, 1975)*

*"Now I wonder, am I a man dreaming I was a butterfly,*

*Or, whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I was a man..."*

*(Zhuangzu, 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.)*

On November 1<sup>st</sup>, when Mexicans celebrate their Day of the Dead, some also celebrate the return of the monarch butterflies, which they believe also carry returning souls of their deceased loved ones. In 2013, however, for the first time in recent memory, they didn't arrive and some experts fear that their epic migration, during which they can travel from 50 to 100 miles in a single day, is near to collapse. A week or so later they began to slowly straggle in, in record low numbers into their

Central Mexican sanctuary in highland oyamel fir forests from November until mid-March. In spring, they begin their northward return while breeding along the way and many die, within a cycle that takes three or four generations to complete. No individual butterfly completes a round trip and only their great-grandchildren return to their colony's starting point. Known as **El Rosario Mexican Butterfly Sanctuary**, 3 hours NW of Mexico City, in the state of Michoacan, near the town of Angangueo, it has now become an UNESCO World Heritage Site. The monarch's ability to navigate an extraordinary and perilous journey, with pinpoint accuracy, to such a secluded place where they have never been remains a mystery.

The path of their unknown homing instinct was beautifully filmed in 3D in a Canadian IMAX documentary: **Flight of the Butterflies**, (2012).

The mystery of their wintering habitat was solved by the University of Toronto's Fred Urquhart, who studied them for over forty years. He knew that they migrated because he didn't see them after a certain time of year. His plan was to put a label on each monarch that he found containing his name, address and a request to return each one that was found. And indeed, people from all over North America began returning the butterflies and since the southernmost area from which they came was Mexico, he traveled there through jungles and forests. In talking with people along the way, he was told of a place west of Mexico City where many had been spotted. Eventually he found millions gathered within their seasonal habitat. (Urquhart, Fred A., "Found At Last: the monarch's winter home", National Geographic, August 1976).

For filmmaker Ali Alvarez, returning to Mexico long after her mother's death, the monarchs inspired her documentary about bereavement: **Meurte Es Vida**, which took top honors during the 2016 Annual International Wildlife Film Festival held in Missoula, Montana. While she initially set out to make a film about butterflies, her project evolved into a documentary about death in a beautiful and gentle way and that beauty can arise from loss. Her family left Mexico for Los Angeles when she was six and her mother died while she was still a child. During a rare sabbatical from art school, Alvarez climbed a mountain in Central Mexico, and in a sunlit glade discovered thousands of brilliant orange monarchs...migrants like her. As she began researching this phenomenon and discovered stories of people seeing monarchs when a loved one passed away - as well as ancient and contemporary beliefs that butterflies represent the human soul and spirit set free. Late-medieval butterfly fanciers saw a Christian morality tale in their life cycle from greedy, industrious caterpillars, doomed to toil on this Earth but each has a chance to transform itself into a butterfly soul, ascending up into heaven. In 17th century Ireland butterflies were seen as souls of children.

In 20th century China, butterflies were discovered in the cells of executed convicts who had recently converted to Buddhism.

Alvarez's film features people who found solace through their encounters with butterflies, including two young sisters who were given a monarch caterpillar, by their kindergarten teacher, shortly before their older brother died. The children enjoyed watching their caterpillar banded with yellow, black and white stripes, grow and create a beautiful blue-green chrysalis. Their brother died and the day of his funeral, they watched as their monarch flew free of its chrysalis (UK Guardian, October, 2016). Perhaps you may also remember the touching scene from the 1998 **Patch Adams** film starring Robin Williams, when he is out in a wilderness, standing on a cliff, agonizing in grief and despair over the loss of a dear friend recently and brutally murdered. Seemingly out of nowhere, a single monarch glides into view, gently alights on his briefcase and then allows him to hold it for a brief moment as his sense of hope and purpose returns.

Scientists speculate that recent deforestation, and illegal logging operations within the monarch's overwintering habitat, has led to a drastic reduction in their population since these oyamel trees serve both as blankets and umbrellas for protection. Illegal logging continues to remain an ongoing threat. Just recently, authorities detained a truck driver carrying a load of huge tree trunks out of the butterfly reserve, while presenting falsified papers asserting that these trees were diseased and needed to be removed to reduce risk. Investigators soon discovered that all of the harvested trees had been quite healthy.

While there was a time when monarch wings covered over 50 acres of fir forest, with as many as 15 million on a single branch, these delicate creatures now occupy an area of less than 29.6 acres (12 hectares). Climate change, as well as changes in agricultural practice and land use in the USA, and Mexico involving GMO corn and soy crops that have proven deadly using glyphosate herbicide (Monsanto's **Roundup**); are believed to be contributing factors to disturbingly dwindling numbers. While there has been no mention of ongoing and increasing levels of ionizing radiation now streaming throughout our entire northern hemisphere, this presents a likely and ultimately lethal factor, as well. Omar Vidal, head of the Mexican Office of The World Wildlife Fund calls for close collaboration of the three countries, Canada, USA and Mexico to ensure the safety and protection the monarch's, breeding, feeding and migratory routes. (Jim Robbins, "The Year the Monarchs Didn't Appear", **NY Times**, November 22, 2013 and U.K.Guardian, February, 2017).

Some hold that the monarch was so named because of its size and the fact that it exists over a large domain. Another theory suggests that since this name was first published as such in 1874, in

honor of English King William III, these butterflies were also called “King Billies”. Well known by their scientific name *Danaus plexippus* in the family *Nymphalidae*; the migration pattern of the monarch provides a leitmotif for Barbara Kingsolver’s 7<sup>th</sup> novel **Conducta migratoria** (2012). Here we find that the primary focus is on climate change, which the author, who is also a biologist, refers to as “global weirding”. Her novel is set deep within the rural mountains of Appalachia, in a conservative, evangelical, emotionally stifling and depressed town in her native state of Tennessee. Locals and farming folk in particular have noticed a shift in their weather which she describes as “Summer heat never really arrived, nor the cold in turn, and everything living now seemed to yearn for sun with the anguish of the unloved”. This beautifully written story about Nature, as well as human nature, unfolds with an unexpected arrival of 15 million shimmering orange monarchs, in a silent forest area, which creates an illusion of a seemingly Biblical “valley of fire”. The monarch’s atypical flight behavior serves as cause for concern for visiting entomologists, as well as a powerful catalyst for social change within individual lives, families and the community at large.

On a recent visit to Mexico City’s Museum of Archeology, I discovered that the beauty of their country’s iconic monarch butterflies is celebrated by the design team of art historian Cristine Pineda and textile engineer Ricardo Covalin; who founded their studio in 1996. As a onetime, now retired, art historian myself, I can appreciate the enormous energy, quality and depth that has contributed to their research. Considered by many as the “Hermes of Mexico”, the stated mission of **Pineda Covalin’s** designs, is to preserve a collective memory of Mexico’s pre-Columbian, modern folkloric and country-wide abundance of natural beauty. Within their preferred medium of highest quality silk, these innovative designers have beautifully captured the exquisite, stained glass, shimmering luminosity of the monarch’s tawny reddish-gold colors outlined with tracery patterns in black with delicate points of white. Among many others concerned with preserving both the beauty and survival of our magnificent monarchs we have [monarchwatch.org](http://monarchwatch.org) which can serve as a useful entry point for those willing to share both resources and concerns. If you have a yard or land anywhere between Mexico and Canada, you can help. Monarchs seek to lay their eggs on common milkweed, a summer blooming perennial so named for a toxic sticky white sap which renders butterflies toxic to predators. Simply Google “free milkweed seeds” and plant a few to provide a resting place for them to lay their eggs during their migrations.