

# MIRACLE OF THE MONARCHS

The annual migration of butterflies to remote Mexican mountaintops is one of Creation's most awe-inspiring mysteries

BY ANNE BOKMA

**H**ow often do you have the chance to witness a miracle? In just a couple of hours, I'm about to see one.

I've flown four hours from Hamilton to Mexico, rode three hours in a taxi from Mexico City, and am now on a 90-minute horseback ride up the 3,000-metre Cerro Pelon mountain to visit a sacred place. It has been roughly the same migratory path — minus the potential of surly seatmates — that tens of millions of monarch butterflies took just a few months before in the fall as they made their way from their summer breeding homes in Canada and the United States to their winter getaway in the mountains of Mexico. It took me less than 10 hours of travel time to make the 4,500-kilometre journey. It takes the butterflies two months.

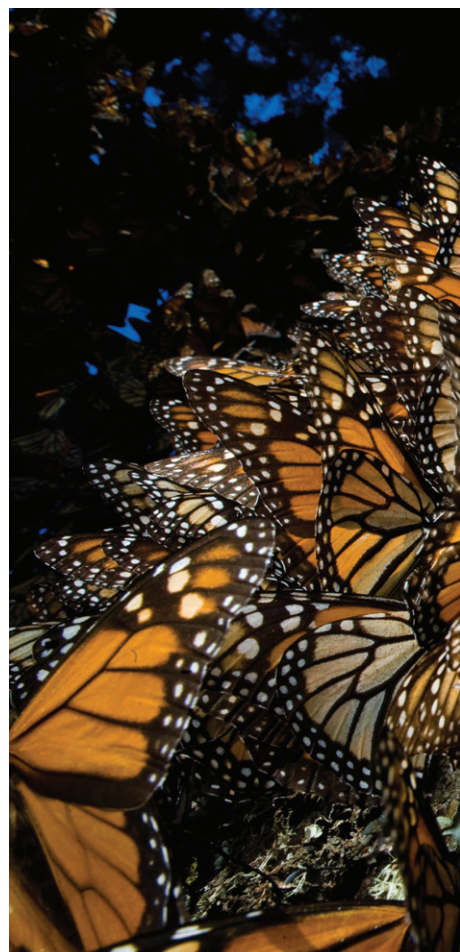
I am here to experience one of nature's finest magic shows: millions of delicate orange and black creatures congregating in heavy clusters on the soaring oyamel fir trees near the top of this mountain. It's nearing noon as I make my way up the steep and narrow stony path, my horse wheezing with the effort.

In their cross-continental migration, these fragile insects, weighing less than a gram each, have braved strong winds and predators like birds and mice. Even more remarkable, the monarchs, born the summer before, have flown to their mountaintop nesting branches without ever having been there before. Some still unexplained homing instinct has led them here to survive the cold-weather months; come spring, they will fly back to their North American birthplace, lay their eggs and die off. Then the cycle will begin again with

the next generation of monarchs finding their way to these very same mountains in Mexico.

I am on this journey with nine other Canadian women ranging in age from their early 40s to their late 70s. It's the final excursion of a 10-day trip to Mexico guided every year by Alison Wearing, an author, playwright and performer who lived in Mexico for 10 years before recently moving back to Canada. The day before, we travelled from Mexico City to Zitácuaro, a 45-minute drive from Cerro Pelon, which Wearing tells us is the least commercial of all the butterfly sanctuaries — there won't be any gift shops hawking monarch souvenirs. We spent the night in the elegant Rancho San Cayetano, where our friendly and knowledgeable host Pablo Span sent us off after breakfast with these words: "Leave your worries and problems behind. Find a place to lie down and just be in communion with the butterflies."

Wearing describes the butterfly adventure as "one of the most magical experiences a Canadian can have in Mexico — it's a beautiful connection between these two countries." The connection is strong, not just because Canada is the monarchs' birthplace, but also because we know so much about them thanks to the pioneering work of Canadian zoologist Fred Urquhart, who in 1937 was the first to develop tiny labels to attach to butterfly wings to track their migration. He enlisted the support of thousands of volunteers to help tag butterflies, and in 1975, one of those volunteers was the first to discover the millions of monarchs hibernating in the mountains of Mexico. Today, these areas are protected from logging through the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve, recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. There are four butterfly colonies open to the public within the reserve: El Rosario and Sierra Chincua in the state of Mexico, and Cerro Pelon and La Mesa in the state of Michoacán. Butterfly tourism provides an important source of revenue for the local indigenous communities.





Monarch butterflies cluster on a tree in Sierra Chincua, Mexico.

they are — gigantic clusters of monarchs forming a tapestry a foot thick over the tall firs. All is still as we just stand and stare. Then, in the quiet, as the sun's rays push through the trees, we witness a stirring as what looks like little bits of tissue paper are tossed about in the air. First one, then five, then 50, then hundreds. We stay standing, heads cocked back, mouths open in awe, as if ready to receive communion. For a moment, all that can be heard is the whir of high-powered camera clicks — nothing else — as though we are in the presence of a world-famous celebrity who has taken our breath away.

But these are nature's stars — fanciful winged beings spreading out above us in the heavens and occasionally coming down to earth to grace us with a blessing as they alight on a hand, a shoulder, a young girl's hair.

Some days, when the sun is especially bright, there will be

a river of millions of butterflies filling the sky. Today, they aren't as active. There's an intermittent cool breeze that sweeps through the air, causing them to scatter back to the safety of their tight colony on the branches, squeezing together for warmth. It goes this way for the next two hours. The stronger the sunshine, the braver the butterflies are to venture out. Warmed by the light, their rustling wings create a chorus that sounds like rainfall, a quiet murmuring in this cathedral of trees. Then the breeze stirs up again and they retreat.

I catch sight of Maus sitting alone on a log looking positively ethereal, her face glowing as it lifts toward the sky. I remember the words of Pablo Span and lie down on the damp earth, marvelling at the wonder of these luminous creatures who have made such an astonishing journey. I think about what there is to learn from the monarchs: the resilience required in reaching for our goals; the strength that can be found in fragility; the comfort of travelling in community; and the importance of listening to our inner voice to help us find the right path. Then, I force myself to stop thinking and just lie there in awe.

Isn't that what you're supposed to do when you witness a miracle? [UCO](#)

We pay 300 pesos (about \$25) for our entrance to the park, and this includes a guide who will lead each of us up the mountain on horseback. A group of men and boys gathers to help match horses with riders. My guide, Kevin, is a determined nine-year-old who practically skips up the mountain, turning back frequently to flash me a smile and occasionally tugging with surprising force on my horse, who is prone to stubborn stops along the way.

Kristina Maus, a 61-year-old retired elementary teacher who lives near Walkerton, Ont., rides with me, beaming with the excitement of a schoolgirl. A member of the Monarch Teacher Network of Canada, she raised monarchs for years in her classroom and witnessed first-hand the powerful effect the monarch's metamorphosis — from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis and, finally, butterfly — had on her students. "For those kids who have problems connecting or who struggle to build relationships, working as part of a group in the class to raise butterflies ends up being a great gift," she says. To this day, Maus still collects butterfly eggs from the leaves of milkweed plants on her farm in the summer and creates a habitat for them in her home. Each fall, she delivers the hatched caterpillars to one of her granddaughter's teachers, who raises them in the class before releasing the adult monarchs in the schoolyard for their flight to Mexico.

**N**earing the mountaintop, we come to a landing and dismount from our horses. I'm wobbly-legged as I make a further 15-minute climb on foot along with about 20 other people, half of us from the Canadian group and the other half Mexicans. We walk in silence until we reach another flat area and look up. And there