



Monarch Larva Monitoring Project

Spring 2026

MARCH IS HERE

It's March, which means that monarchs are beginning to head north! Monarch Larva Monitoring Project volunteers will play an important role in documenting their return to their spring and summer breeding grounds. So pull out your data sheets, consider refreshing your memory of MLMP monitoring protocols with a quick peek at the [get started](#) link on our website, and check out your local milkweed patch (or patches) to see if milkweed is up yet. Please try to start monitoring as soon as milkweed appears (but anytime you jump in will still provide useful data), and remember, one of the first steps of the year is updating your site description! You can log in to the portal [here](#).

We still have one live online training course ahead, and another self-paced option if you'd like a thorough review or introduction to the program. See the upcoming trainings section below for more details. And we're always here to answer questions at info@mlmp.org.

MIGRATION UPDATE FROM JOURNEY NORTH

Estela Romero writes that the departure of monarchs from overwintering sites is continuing, bringing both amazement and melancholy for the end of the season:

The season slowly closes for Sierra Chincua Sanctuary, where monarchs seem to be cascading down into the deep, low forest canyon to then fly around the mountain hillsides to head north. Many still remain, enjoying the rich patches of nectar everywhere in their forest before departing. The final spot they can still be seen now is 19.6730 -100.2973.



Photo: Estela Romero/Journey North, El Rosario Sanctuary

Towards El Rosario Sanctuary, a spectacular departure north can be observed as monarchs cascade down in important numbers. The colony, however, still keeps a considerable population, now very possibly less than half of its original massive concentration, having moved slightly northwards only some meters, to 19.5974 -100.100.2629.

Low mortality and low mating activity can be observed in both colonies. Warm weather, clear, blue, bright sky, with gentle wind waves seem to favor the massive departure, which has been taking place for nearly three weeks now.

The season, indeed, points to its ending chapter very soon now.

Estela Romero
Journey North
Angangueo, Michoacán, México.

MIGRATION UPDATE, CONT.

Southwest Monarch Study Coordinator Gail Morris writes about monarch sightings in California and Arizona.

As March opens, few monarchs are lingering at the California coastal overwintering sites as the spring migration urges them on their way to the summer breeding areas. The initial portion of their journey and the success of their mating and egg-laying on early emerging milkweeds will lay the foundation of next winter's population.

Much about monarch activity in this time period is still unknown, but citizen scientists are working tirelessly to fill data gaps to clarify the overall picture. With the breeding season now in progress, we look forward to your reports to track their movements.



Photo: Leslie in Gold Canyon, Arizona/Journey North

Journey North's first sighting and adult monarch observations paint a recent map of monarch sightings in the highest density in southern California and the deserts of Arizona. They are also moving across the central coastal California regions, shown by recent detection sightings on the [Project Monarch app](#), both overwintering and spring radio-tagged monarchs that haven't been reported.

This winter was warm across the southwestern region. Some locations, such as Phoenix, Arizona, had the warmest meteorological winter ever with a record-shattering number of 80+ degree days. The warm temperature periods with little precipitation in the Southwest created an ideal environment for winter monarchs in pockets to thrive. Now they are appearing and on the move. The official overwintering population in California was the third-lowest ever. The role monarchs play in southern California and in the deserts of Arizona in the future breeding population is still unknown.

In southern California, monarchs were seen the last week of February in Los Angeles, [visiting Theresa's narrowleaf milkweed](#), and in Long Beach, where Allene reported a male feeding on a lush redclaw plant filled with flowers.

Further east, in the desert region of California, in Palm Desert, Bob spotted two monarchs flying and mating as well.

In Arizona, there has been a notable string of monarch observations recently in the desert's highest population areas. During the last ten days, monarchs were reported in [Phoenix](#) and [Gold Canyon](#) visiting Desert (Rush) Milkweed, (*Asclepias subulata*).

Reports have been scattered through Superior and Tucson as well. A male monarch that had eclosed several days earlier, which I later tagged, returned to our yard yesterday, sunning between nectaring on a sweet almond tree in flower. Later in the day, a female appeared laying eggs on new *A. subulata* stems shooting up from old growth, but not yet in flower. Remember that females lay eggs on milkweed not yet in bloom, so nearby available nectar can help fuel their way to a successful migration journey through your area.

WESTERN MONARCH COUNT RESULTS

Results from the 29th annual [Western Monarch Count](#), led by [The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation](#), have arrived.

Each year, volunteers and conservation organizations conduct surveys at overwintering sites along the California coast from Mendocino County to Northern Baja, Mexico, as well as known inland sites in California and Arizona. From late November through early December 2025, hundreds of volunteers and partners participated in the effort, surveying 249 overwintering sites and recording a peak population of just 12,260 monarchs. While this is an increase from last season's 9,119, it is the third-lowest tally since the count began in 1997.

Habitat availability, habitat quality, temperature, and rainfall patterns can affect the number of overwintering monarchs.

Researchers believe that in the 1980s, more than 4.5 million monarch butterflies spent the winter in California ([Schultz et al. 2017](#)). While we don't know the precise threshold to ensure the western migration survives, Schultz et al. (2017) suggest that at least 30,000 butterflies are needed to sustain the migration.

Continuing population declines underscore the need for conservation efforts that support monarchs throughout their life cycle. Key conservation strategies include:

- [Create habitat](#)- The Xerces Society [recommends](#) against planting milkweed within a mile of monarch overwintering grounds and in areas where milkweed did not historically occur, like high-elevation forests, but everyone can help create habitat by planting flowers that grow throughout the year. Find more information on where to locate native milkweeds and other native wildflowers to support monarchs and other pollinators on our [Milkweed Vendor Map](#).
- [Participate in Community Science Programs](#)- Learn more about [community science programs](#) in your area. Please note that the states of California and Washington require that you have a scientific collection permit to handle monarchs in these states.
 - In Canada, California, and Washington, special regulations may restrict monarch handling. Always check local and federal laws before collecting or rearing monarchs. In Washington, "it is unlawful to collect ... wildlife or their nests and/or eggs for the purpose of research or display without first obtaining a Washington state scientific collection permit." California requires "permits for the take or possession of wildlife, including ... invertebrates for scientific, educational, and propagation purposes."
- [Educate others](#) about monarchs and pollinators, and how they can help. Share information with others through social media and in person to raise awareness for habitat and pollinator conservation. One action can lead to another, and the more knowledgeable and passionate people are about these species' conservation, the better.
- [Limit or eliminate pesticide use](#) that may cause unintended harm to monarchs and other beneficial insects.
- [Learn more about Monarch Joint Venture's California Programs](#)- MJV staff are advancing research, educating communities, and building relationships and partnerships to protect the western monarch population and to restore biodiversity and ecological resilience across the western landscape.

DR. KAREN OBERHAUSER HIGHLIGHTS CONSERVATION AND EDUCATION PROJECTS FROM RECENT TRIP TO MEXICO

Since early November, most monarchs in the eastern North American migratory population have been overwintering in Central Mexico, waiting for the environmental cues that will signal that it's time to move back north. Even before the monarchs leave, mating will begin, and they'll continue to mate, and the females will lay eggs as they head north, through northern Mexico and into Texas, before spreading into approximately the southeastern quarter of the U.S.

A team from CONANP (Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas – the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas) and the World Wildlife Fund-Mexico measures the area occupied by monarchs throughout the winter, and we'll soon learn what they've found for the winter of 2025-2026. Until then, I don't have a detailed population update, but I will share reflections and photos from my recent trip to the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve (MBBR) (Reserva de Biosfera de la Mariposa Monarca, RBMM).



From left: Alberto Ayala (from the Calimaya community), Ek del Val de Gortari (Monarch Butterfly Fund board member), Cuauhtemoc Saenz Romero, Isabel Ramirez (MBF board member), Karen Oberhauser, Micah Freedman (monarch researcher)

Because climate change may affect long-term survival of the forests used by monarchs, Cuauhtemoc Saenz-Romero is studying assisted migration of oyamel fir trees (key trees used by wintering monarchs). This photo shows a planted three-year old oyamel, taken at a site at 4000 meters (over 13,000 feet) above sea level on the eastern slope of Nevado de Toluca, above the current range of the species.

Most of the land on which monarchs overwinter is owned by Ejidos (community groups that collectively own and maintain agricultural and forested land) and indigenous communities. Conservation of the wintering sites, key to the long-term survival of the phenomenon of monarch migration, depends on working closely with these communities. Mexican non-profit Alternare works with Ejidos and Indigenous communities within the MBBR, supporting sustainable development and forest conservation. We met with women from the community of Zirahuato to learn about the many ways that Alternare is supporting sustainable living and development in their community.

PROJECTS IN MEXICO, CONT.

We also visited a middle school right next to El Rosario, one of the largest monarch sanctuaries, where Estela Romero taught a lesson and distributed paper butterflies made by schoolchildren from the U.S., part of the Symbolic Migration Project.

Estela's lesson included a summary of monarch biology and the importance of pollinators in general, and students asked me some great questions about monarchs in the spring, summer, and autumn. One of my favorite questions was how winter monarchs can live so much longer than summer monarchs. They can do this because it's relatively cool (but not freezing) for most of the winter, slowing their metabolism; they've stored up a lot of energy in the fat they made from food they consumed as larvae and sugars from nectar they consumed during the fall migration; and they aren't putting energy (yet) into mating and producing eggs. All three of these factors help them reserve energy for a longer life.

Eight of the students have parents or siblings working as guides in the monarch sanctuary. Alternare is also working with this school on land conservation activities.



PROJECTS IN MEXICO, CONT.

We also visited a tree nursery at the high school in the Francisco Serrato Community, as well as a cistern that captures water used at the school, were created in partnership with Alternare. Unfortunately, the students were not in class the day we visited, but principal Jazmin Elizabeth Garfias Gomez, who is also the English and social studies teacher) told us a lot about the curriculum and their work with Alternare.



We spent a day at Sierra Chincua with an amazing group of young conservationists who are part of Red CATA (Comuniaria de Aprendizaje en Turismo Alternativo/Community Learning in Alternative Tourism Network), starting at a statue of a monarch honoring monarch researcher Lincoln Brower. Red CATA is a project of FOCEN, the Fondo de Conservación del Eje Neovolcánico (the Neovolcanic Axis Conservation Fund).

And of course, we saw monarchs! Perhaps one that started in your yard was one of them I saw from El Rosario Sanctuary!

All the projects described here are supported by the Monarch Butterfly Fund.



VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: MEAGAN FASTUCA

I am an environmental specialist with the town of North Hempstead in Long Island, New York. Our town has taken the Mayors' Monarch Pledge with National Wildlife Federation, so I have been involved with pollinator and monarch butterfly conservation since 2018.

I can't remember exactly how I found out about MLMP, but I'm sure it had something to do with outreach by the Monarch Joint Venture, as I am always watching their very informative webinar series. The first year I volunteered with MLMP was for the International Monarch Monitoring Blitz in 2019. I really didn't know what to expect, but I was excited and surprised to find a bunch of monarch eggs and larvae on the common milkweed plants in the pollinator garden at Clark Botanic Garden, which the town owns. From then on, I was hooked and began monitoring every year.

Clark Garden is a 12-acre site that contains a variety of gardens, including native perennials and trees, ponds, and a rain garden. This site has an abundance of wildlife, including birds, small mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and a wealth of insects and invertebrates. It is a designated Monarch Waystation with Monarch Watch, which means it has all the resources needed for monarchs to complete their lifecycle and sustain their migration. Clark Garden is also a historic site, which was the home of Grenville Clark, a Wall Street lawyer, and his wife, Fanny Clark, from the 1920s to the 1960s, when it was donated to Brooklyn Botanic Garden. The town of North Hempstead acquired it in 1989.

I monitor the pollinator garden, which contains 90% of the milkweed at the site, as well as a few patches where milkweed has spread throughout the property. A couple of years ago, we renovated this garden to contain only native plants, including adding two more species of milkweed (swamp and butterfly weed) to not only provide for the larvae, but for the adults visiting the garden and the many other pollinators that use these resources. When monitoring, I often see curious visitors who may be a little confused as to what I am doing. It is really great to explain the importance of MLMP and the plight of the migratory monarch population. Many people don't know that monarchs are in decline, and I hope sharing this knowledge will lead to others helping in some way.

My work on the Mayors' Monarch Pledge involves a lot of outreach, which includes public workshops, creation of press releases, social media posts, and more. To further spread the message, I hosted an MLMP training at Clark in 2024 with NY Sea Grant's Community Science series to get Long Island residents involved in the project.

Monitoring over the past six years has always been unpredictable, but this keeps it fun! When I go out to monitor, I never know if I'm going to see a lot of monarchs or none at all. Even if I don't see monarchs, I am amazed at the milkweed ecosystem and all the other insects and invertebrates I see as I check under every leaf of each plant. I try to photograph as much as I can and use iNaturalist to identify them. MLMP has taught me so much about the little creatures that are living with us that you may not see until you really look for them. I can't wait to see what's in store when monitoring again this year!



The Clark pollinator garden in 2025

UPCOMING TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

If you're looking to get involved with MLMP for the first time, we have [one more live training opportunity](#) coming up on May 12.

If you can't join us on May 12, complete the training on your own time with our [self-paced option](#), and you'll be on your way to monitoring monarchs in the field this year.

If you're looking to purchase gear or equipment before the season starts, such as a hand lens or clipboard, check out the [Monarch Joint Venture store](#).

SUPPORT MLMP

Please consider supporting our collective conservation efforts with a donation that supports training, materials, and maintenance of the data you collect.

Have a story from your site or art to share? We'd love to hear from you! Email us at info@mlmp.org



Photo: Meagan Fastuca