

A fascinating tale of two migrating butterflies

By Grazyna Tonkiel

Each garden has its own story; sometimes a story of neglect and other times a story of tender loving care and glory days to be reminisced.

All passionate gardeners can recall detailed chronicles of past seasons.

I was once overcome by the existential question: what really is my garden's purpose? I later realized that its purpose was to be a kitchen garden, or said another way, a cook's garden. Of course, flowers are included, but they are all edible like Zinnias, Nasturtiums, Marigolds and an abundance of flowering herbs. My garden, unspoiled by harmful chemicals, became a haven for all pollinators including a variety of butterflies.

Occasionally, I have had other residents like the shy groundhog, Mr. Parsley, who often makes an appearance due to his love affair with parsley. He devours the herb so rapidly that there is often nothing left for Black swallowtail caterpillars. This year's unexpected visitor was my very own, sweet Peter Rabbit, who came with a great appetite for cabbages. Fortunately, I had plenty for him, as well as for the always hungry White Butterfly caterpillars: Checkered Whites, Cabbage Whites, and Mustard Whites.

One year, I discovered that Painted Lady caterpillars not only like Thistles, but also enjoy Curry herb I grow in pots. It was fascinating to observe how the Curry leaves disappeared. Interest-

ingly, frass (caterpillar poop) quickly nourished the leafless plants and they grew back in a few weeks.

The Painted Lady is a remarkable Canadian migrant butterfly. Entomologists call them the most cosmopolitan butterflies, as they are present on four continents: Europe, Africa, Asia and North America. The North American population of Painted Ladies (*Vanessa cardui*) migrates during the winter to West Texas and the northern Mexico desert.

As caterpillars, they feed on annual desert plants. Their favorites are the family of Mallows, Borages, Thistles and their relatives. Ladies can live only up to six weeks.

There is a two-step spring migration from Texas and Mexico. The first generation goes to northern California, they breed and then the next generation makes trips north as far as Alaska or Canadian North Territories, including Bakers Lake in Nunavut. They travel as fast as 25 miles per hour and are capable of generating body heat through muscle contraction, which allows them to fly at lower temperature and high elevation. The highest observed altitude record for all butterflies belongs to the Painted Lady at 22,000 feet (7 kilometers) up in the sky.

According to the University of California – College of Biological Science, seasons with large wildflower blooms are connected to Painted Lady population movement. The last exodus happened in 2005, with billions of Painted



Ladies migrating.

Next spring, please plant Borage, an edible herb with beautiful blue flowers, which could potentially attract Painted Ladies to your garden. You may already have Forget-Me-Nots, which could also do the trick as it belongs to the same borage family.

My butterfly sanctuary is definitely a Painted Lady breeding ground. Sporadically, I rescue a caterpillar, or chrysalis, if it seems destined to perish if not assisted. Two weeks ago, I found a Monarch chrysalis buried under heavy, wet and wilted Hosta leaves.

The Monarch hatched in front of my webinar audience during my Butterflies Talk for the King Township Public Library. The next morning on a glorious, warm fall day with temperature way above 20 degrees Celsius, I released her. The female Monarch basked in the sun for half an hour; then flew away on her journey to Mexico. Her prospects of completing the trip are not that great, but at least I gave her a chance.

The first wave of migrating Monarchs ended their 5,000-kilometre trip from Canada to the south Mexico hills of Angangueo Nov. 1 and 2. November 2 was the Mexican holiday, the Day of Dead (elsewhere associated with the Catholic Celebration of All Saints and All Souls Day). In Mexico, families and friends gather at cemeteries to pray for and remember loved ones who have passed away. An abundance of fresh flowers, especially Marigolds, decorate graves, and attract the arriving, hungry and exhausted Monarchs. They fly

down to feed on the nectar of the freshly gathered flowers. Local residents call them the Souls of Lost Children.

On the way South, some Monarchs travel through Pelee Island where they stop for brief rest. Every year volunteers conduct a fall count. This year, again, the numbers were devastatingly low. In the last 20 years, the population of the iconic butterflies has plummeted by 90%, their migration was listed as an endangered phenomenon by the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 1983. Despite a collective effort to save the most recognizable butterfly, the number of North American Monarchs (*Danaus plexippus*) is plummeting towards extinction.

Let us all remember that next spring we should keep our Milkweed plants intact. Please, plant some if you don't have them in your garden. Let's help them survive and find a safe haven in Canada.

Grazyna Tonkiel is an accomplished opera singer, visual artist and a conservationist. She was a soloist of the National Polish Opera and Ballet Theatre in Warsaw and has won national and international vocal competitions. She is a member of the Toronto Entomologist Association. Her Butterfly Portraits are in private collections in over 10 countries. Her current exhibit "flight 2" in the Aurora Town Hall can be viewed online at <https://auroraculturalcentre.ca/flight2/>. She can be reached at her Gallery Solo Studio in King City – www.gtonkiel.com



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