



**Tales from a Sisters Naturalist**  
by Jim Anderson

**The great travelers**

Even if there's nothing but skepticism about what's causing our great old Earth to warm up, there is no question that a whole lot of people in the US-of-A are answering the call to help the signature butterfly of North America, the monarch.

As soon as the call went out that this rare, remarkable and vanishing butterfly might end up on the Endangered Species List, a suggestion was made to create monarch waystations. Schools, service clubs, conservation organizations, government municipalities and the good old general public went to work building them.

Milkweed is the key to monarch survival and reproduction. They cannot reproduce on any other plant species; milkweed is it and in this part of their range Showy Milkweed, *Asclepias speciosa* is the best.

An email went out the other day from MACO (Monarch Advocates of Central Oregon), with the news that 1,300 native

showy milkweed plants were planted over the last two weeks throughout the Ochoco National Forest.

Now, that may not sound like much, but when those plants grow to maturity, there can be up to 20 monarch caterpillars munching away on the leaves of each plant. Then, when the monarchs morph into adults, they will tank up on the rich nectar in the milkweed blossoms.

Thirteen-hundred milkweed plants in the ground means they had to have 1,300 holes to be placed in. That means that someone had to dig 1,300 holes, and for those who accomplished that feat you can bet your bottom dollar they felt it when they got home that night.

Susie Werts, a dedicated teacher at Sisters Middle School, has taken it upon herself and encouraged her students to join her to dig a lot of holes and plant native milkweed, plus native wildflower plants, creating a monarch waystation at the old greenhouse site at the middle school.

That all come into focus with the news that a brand-new adult monarch she kept safe in a screened enclosure in her waystation went on a record-breaking journey of 700 miles right after she tagged and released it from her hands (*see related story, page 1*).

That monarch not only went to its wintering location in Carpinteria, California, it set a record doing it: 700 miles in 56 days. Just the

math of that journey is mind-boggling; 12.5 miles per day, and in order to make such a journey in that short a time it meant the insect probably went straight-line Sisters-to-California.

That means that incredible insect—weighing less than an ounce—had to fly over (or through) the Sierra Nevada, after negotiating the Eastern Oregon mountains and high desert. What did it refuel on along the way?

How does that magnificent flyer know where to go? The larva (caterpillar) was reared in a private milkweed colony in Klamath Falls. Werts purchased it along with four others and placed them in her waystation's screened container, where they munched their way into the chrysalis phase.

They were protected from the ever-watchful paper wasps that capture butterfly larvae and take them to their nests to feed to their children. And there are other threats. Fewer than one out of every 10 eggs laid by the female will survive to become an adult butterfly.

Of the five larvae, Werts got only two adult monarchs. Three of the caterpillars had already been parasitized by tiny tachnid flies.

About four days after a momma monarch lays her eggs on the underside of the large milkweed leaf in spring, they hatch into baby caterpillars. The next two weeks are spent eating and growing (shedding their outer skin, a process known as an instar).



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Journey went on a very long one — 700 miles.

When that stage of growth is finalized, the caterpillars attach themselves to stems or leaves and transform into a silken chrysalis. Ten days later, a stunning orange-and-black butterfly emerges and flies away.

When the sun begins to rise from its southern bed of winter, the monarch becomes restless: time to move back to its summer haunts. That generation starts north, arrives at the first milkweed patch

(waystation?), lays eggs and dies. That new generation heads north (and how do they know which way is north?), arrives at another patch of milkweed, lays eggs and dies. And that can go out for as many as five times before the progeny of those wintering monarchs finally reaches "home."

Is it any wonder Kellen, Werts' elementary school-aged son, named that magnificent monarch, "Journey"?

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