

# The annual 3,000-mile monarch migration is heading toward Chicago: 'It's like a Disney movie, except better'

September 3 2021, by Nara Schoenberg

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Breanna Seibel was riding a four-wheeler alongside her alfalfa field in northern Wisconsin when she started seeing monarch butterflies. The

bright orange visitors were swooping, fluttering and dancing in pairs, quartets and trios. They were landing in the trees that line the field, with up to 100 clustered on a single branch.

Seibel called her parents out to see the butterflies: thousands, by her count.

She posted videos on Facebook, and strangers started showing up at her doorstep, asking for a tour.

"It's like nothing you've ever seen before," said Seibel, 28, of New Richmond, Wisconsin. "It's like a Disney movie, except better."

The fall [monarch](#) migration, in which millions of butterflies travel up to 3,000 miles south to California and Mexico, is already underway in Wisconsin and Canada, with reports of the intrepid insects gathering in large groups to rest in trees or refuel in nectar-rich fields. And the spectacle will likely reach Chicago next week, according to Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum chief curator Doug Taron.

Expect more monarchs in gardens, parks, forests and fields. And if you're exploring [green areas](#) along Lake Michigan, keep an eye out for "roosts" where dozens—or even hundreds—of monarchs spend the night in a single tree.

Those who prefer monarchs-on-demand can attend butterfly festivals such as Flutter Into Fall on Sept. 12 at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, which will include a chance to see monarch tagging, in which tiny stickers are attached to the insects' wings before release.

Local monarch fests include the Forest Preserves of Cook County's Migrating Monarchs Celebration in River Forest on Sept. 12, and Oak Lawn Park District's Monarch Festival on Sept. 18.

The monarch population has been in decline for the past 20 years, spurring [conservation efforts](#) by both scientists and everyday people, who grow milkweed in gardens, fields and parkways. The butterflies, while not yet officially recognized as an endangered or threatened species, meet the criteria for inclusion, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

But millions of monarchs still make the annual trip south across the U.S. and Canada to California and Mexico, with thousands flying from Illinois to Michoacán, Mexico, a journey of about 2,000 miles.

Scientists know the butterflies navigate south using their internal circadian clocks and the sun's position in the sky, Taron said, but that doesn't explain how the tiny travelers wind up year after year in the same small reserves northwest of Mexico City.

"This is really one of the big mysteries of the world," he said. "The most recent butterflies that have been in the areas where they're going are their great-great-great-grandparents."

The monarchs winter on trees high up in the mountains of the Transvolcanic Belt mountain range. Temperatures often dip below freezing at night, and it's not unusual to see snow on the butterflies, Taron said. The same butterflies start flying north again in spring, reaching the Rio Grande Valley in Texas before laying eggs and dying.

Subsequent generations fly north, making their way through the United States, and into Canada, before the next generation of long-distance flyers emerge in late summer and early fall.

While the nonmigratory generations of monarchs are in the Chicago area all summer, the monarchs of the fall migration are only beginning to emerge. The monarchs from the north will likely start arriving next

week, Taron said, at about the same time that local migrating monarchs are emerging.

The peak of monarch migration in the Chicago area typically occurs around the second week of September, Taron said.

Among those who are getting an early taste of the migration are the growing number of monarch fans who are raising the butterflies from wild eggs in their homes. Scientists discourage raising large numbers of monarchs in your home—a practice promoted on some social media pages. But experts say that raising a small number of the butterflies can be rewarding and educational.

Samantha Goodman, a former science teacher living in Chicago's Ukrainian Village, raises small numbers of monarchs under carefully controlled conditions. Earlier this week, she was preparing to release 10 monarchs that were still in their chrysalises. The date of their expected emergence makes it likely that they will join the migration to Mexico, she said.

She planned to tag her butterflies with little lightweight stickers that are sometimes recovered at the end of the migration route, providing evidence that a specific monarch has reached Mexico.

"The chance of the tag being found is pretty low," said Goodman, 40. "But I'm definitely going to watch the lists next year, to see if any of my tags made it."

Those who want to see migratory monarchs for themselves may want to check out the grounds of the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, where Taron expects to see many butterflies early next week.

Monarchs, which tend to migrate along the shores of Lake Michigan,

clustered on trees at the Shedd Aquarium last year, but there's no way to know whether they will make a return appearance.

Seibel, who owns farmland in an area where her father has spent his entire life, said that monarchs never gathered on her property before. She suspects the influx, which began about two weeks ago and lasted until late August, may have been due in part to the alfalfa field, which had been allowed to bloom and emanated a strong, honey-sweet scent.

The butterflies would feed on the alfalfa nectar by day and huddle in the nearby trees at night.

The experience was particularly meaningful, Seibel said, because her mother's beloved oldest sister, Karen M. Nelson, who died of breast cancer in 2010, said she would come back as a butterfly.

Seibel was also touched that people responded so strongly to her social media posts, with some even using her monarch photos as their profile pictures.

"Some people reached out and they're like, 'There is so much discrepancy, hate, arguing, left versus right—just anything that people can argue about, it seems we're arguing about it today, (and) this is so refreshing,'" she said.

"So many people have said, 'This just gives me hope that the world isn't entirely falling apart.'"

2021 Chicago Tribune.

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: The annual 3,000-mile monarch migration is heading toward Chicago: 'It's like a Disney movie, except better' (2021, September 3) retrieved 28 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2021-09-annual-mile-monarch-migration-chicago.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.