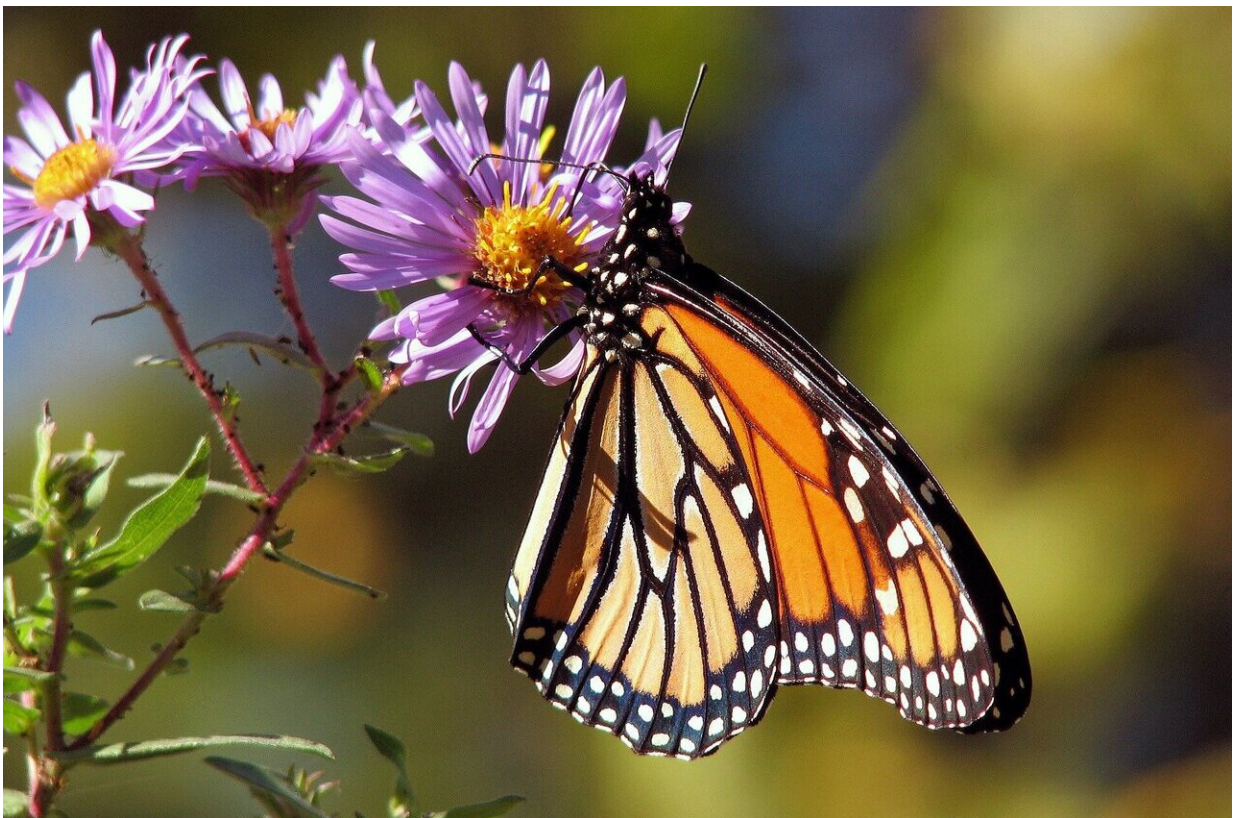


A Chicago woman's home-raised monarch butterfly makes it to central Mexico, 2,000 miles away

September 10 2021, by Nara Schoenberg



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An Orland Park, Illinois, woman who raises butterflies in her home hit the monarch migration jackpot: A tiny tag affixed to one of her 2020

butterflies was recovered in the mountainous region of central Mexico where Midwestern migratory monarchs spend the winter.

The female butterfly, listed as ACBM486, flew about 2,000 miles from Orland Park, in suburban Chicago, to the El Rosario nature reserve near Ocampo.

"I was super, super excited," said Debbie Kostolansky, 62, who grows butterfly and hummingbird gardens, and has raised monarchs for five years.

"I just kind of felt like I did something good."

The monarch population has been in decline in the last 20 years, spurring [conservation efforts](#), including large-scale tagging with tiny stickers. The nonprofit Monarch Watch education and research program, which provides stickers and compiles lists of those recovered, puts the odds of having a tag turn up in Mexico at about 1 in 100.

Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum chief curator Doug Taron, who has tagged hundreds of monarchs over the past eight years, said he has never had a monarch turn up on a list of recovered tags.

"It is very, very unusual to get tags retrieved," Taron said. "Only a tiny, tiny fraction of the released tagged monarchs get found."

Kostolansky, who works at a garden center, planted milkweed for monarchs before she started raising the butterflies in a mesh enclosure. She doesn't raise more than 30 at a time, in keeping with experts' warnings that raising large numbers can expose monarchs to health risks such as parasite transmission.

She gathers eggs she finds on milkweed plants, picks fresh milkweed for

the caterpillars to eat, cleans her [monarch](#) enclosure twice a day and transfers her caterpillars to an outdoor enclosure during the day, in the hope that they will benefit from exposure to natural conditions.

Kostolansky had been checking whether her monarchs had made it to Mexico for months when, one night in mid-August, she briefly checked her phone for news and the weather. A quick glance at Facebook revealed that a woman in Minnesota had found one of her monarchs on the Monarch Watch list of butterflies that had made it to Mexico in 2020.

"Oh, let me just check the list," Kostolansky said to herself. "What are the chances?"

She went down the Monarch Watch list, and the first four letters of her 2020 tags were there: ACBM. ACBM was followed by a familiar-sounding number, 486. She went to her own list of 2020 monarchs, and sure enough, ACBM486 was there.

"In the morning I double-checked, because I thought I was seeing things," Kostolansky said.

Most monarchs live for two to six weeks, but late summer and early fall bring a super-generation that migrates to Mexico or California. The migratory monarchs can live eight or nine months.

Kostolansky's commitment to butterflies includes raising swallowtails, and this year she helped count butterflies at Orland Grassland for the Illinois Butterfly Monitoring Network.

As for migratory monarchs, she plans to release 25 in the coming weeks, each with a tiny tag and the hope of a confirmed landing in Mexico.

"It may never happen for me again, but that's OK," she said with a chuckle. "I had it once."

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