

Spring 2020 Nature Notes

On the first warm days of spring, you may see butterflies hurrying about. They're looking for early sources of food and pairing up in preparation for laying eggs. But where do the butterflies that we see in the spring come from? Here are three ways butterflies survive the winter to delight us in the spring.

Overwintering as adults

The Mourning Cloak, one of the first butterflies seen in the spring in Ohio, is one type of butterfly that spends the winter in its adult, or butterfly, life stage. Some adults will also migrate south in the fall. As adults they prefer to feed on tree sap, especially oak sap, and can sometimes be seen feeding on the trunks of trees. Adults live 11-12 months and may be the longest lived butterfly of North America.



Mourning Cloak Butterfly

Overwintering as a pupa

The Eastern Black Swallowtail and Tiger Swallowtail are two butterflies that overwinter in the pupa stage, as a chrysalis. They emerge in the spring to nectar on flowers, mate, and lay eggs on their respective host plants. These eggs hatch and the caterpillars feed on their host plants, then form a chrysalis from which they will emerge as a butterfly in 9-11 days. These butterflies will then mate and lay the eggs that will hatch and feed as caterpillars and then stay in the chrysalis stage to emerge as butterflies the next spring!



Eastern Black Swallowtail



Tiger Swallowtail



Swallowtail chrysalises

Migrating

The Monarch is probably the most well-known of the migratory butterflies. When you see a Monarch in the late summer/early fall in Ohio, it is probably one from the generation which will migrate all the way to the Sierra Madre Mountains of Mexico! What an amazing journey for an insect. These monarchs will then overwinter by roosting in dense clusters in fir forests. When temperatures begin to warm in March, the roosting butterflies become reproductive and lay eggs on their host plant, milkweed, which is necessary for their survival. This new generation will begin the journey north, and the 3rd and 4th generation butterflies will reach the northern United States and Canada. What an interesting life cycle.



Overwintering Monarchs clustered together



Male Monarch butterfly

Sources

entnemdept.ufl.edu

Butterfliesandmoths.org

MDC Discover Nature Mourning Cloak Image

Monarch image from Huron-Clinton Metroparks

nhpbs.org