

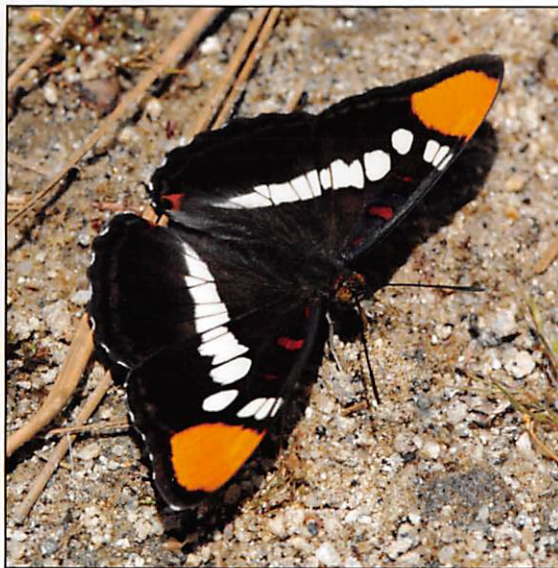
Tiger Swallowtail on Milkweed



Hoary Comma on Aster



Buckeye on Goldenrod



California Sister

Photos by Shelley Ellis



Butterflies of the Sierra Nevadas



Fritillary



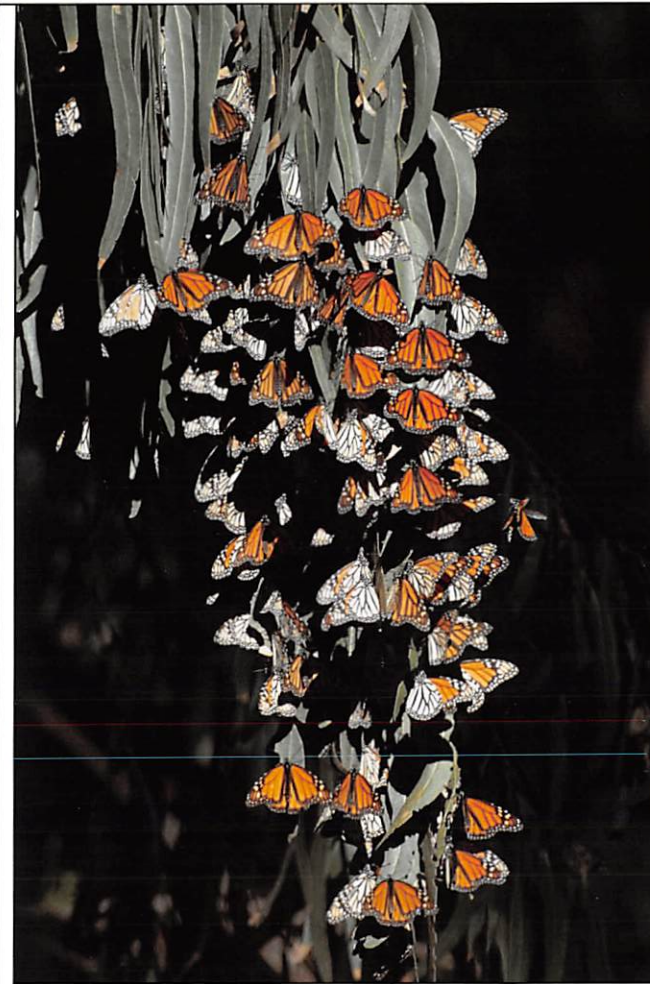
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The life cycle of butterflies is one of the most amazing processes in nature. The cycle begins when a butterfly lays her eggs on a specific plant that her newly-hatched caterpillar requires as food. In less than a week, a tiny caterpillar emerges from the egg. It eats constantly and soon outgrows its skin. The old skin splits, and the caterpillar has new, saggy skin underneath. It sheds its skin 3 or 4 times before it is full grown. At that time, the caterpillar becomes encased in a chrysalis. Inside of this hard outer shell, the caterpillar metamorphoses into a butterfly. When the chrysalis splits open, an adult butterfly emerges. The wings unfurl as fluid pumps through the wing veins. At this stage, the butterfly is vulnerable to predation since it cannot yet fly.



Monarch caterpillar on milkweed, its required food plant.

Adult Monarch butterfly on rabbitbrush, an excellent source of nectar.

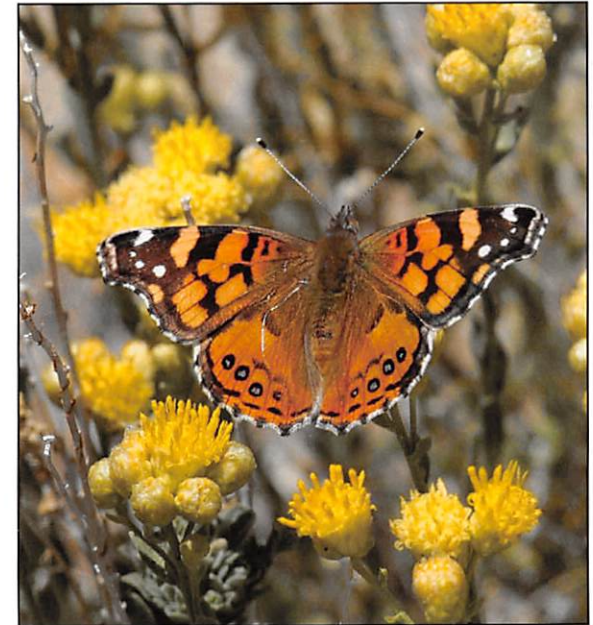


Monarch Butterflies wintering on a Eucalyptus tree in Pismo Beach, California.

Most butterflies live only 2-4 weeks, but some species migrate to over-wintering grounds. It is a mystery how they navigate to these sites. Pismo Beach is the closest place to Ridgecrest to see masses of wintering Monarchs. It is one of the largest over-wintering colonies in the nation, with about 25,000 butterflies. These butterflies live about 6 months.

A butterfly has a long tongue, or proboscis, which it inserts into flowers to sip nectar. This proboscis uncoils while feeding and then coils up again into a spiral when the butterfly finishes sipping. Butterflies also land on mud to suck up various minerals that they need. Most of the food a butterfly needs was obtained during its early life as a caterpillar when it fed on its required food plant.

Butterflies are most abundant in sunny, open areas with native plants that are good nectar sources. Openings adjacent to woods, hill tops, and moist canyons are ideal places to see butterflies.



West Coast Lady