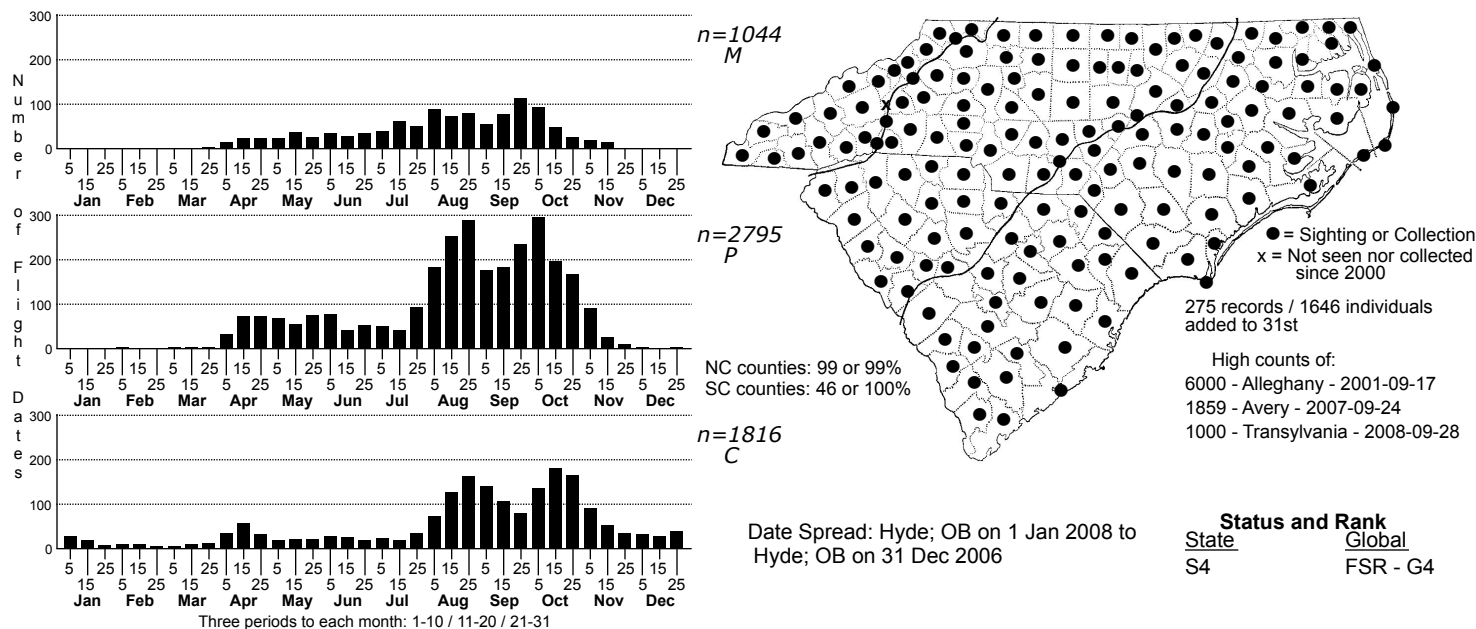


# Monarch *Danaus plexippus*



**DISTRIBUTION:** Statewide, occurring at some time during the year in all counties. As this is a highly migratory species, it is likely absent from some of these counties during portions of the flight period.

**ABUNDANCE:** Varied, depending on the time of the year. The species has a noticeable fall migration, as individuals are seen flying in a southwesterly direction, if the winds will allow them to do so. From August to October, they are common to at times very common or abundant in the Mountains and along the coast, and often fairly common to common elsewhere. At other times (mainly from mid-April through July) it tends to be uncommon. At any rate, it is generally not commonly seen in the state until August. In 2004, the species seemed to have "crashed" in the Eastern United States, and it was shockingly scarce, with some veteran observers nearly missing the species completely. Another major crash in the Eastern states took place in 2013; there were very few counts of more than five individuals in a day in NC, even in the Mountains.

**FLIGHT PERIOD:** Several broods across the state, but the species has a complex life history. Generally found from early April, rarely early March, through most of November, and sparingly into early January. Many of the individuals seen in September and October are actively migrating toward their wintering grounds (mainly in Mexico?). Individuals seen in spring are those that have overwintered much farther to the south, such as Mexico and perhaps near the Gulf Coast or FL. These Monarchs, on their northward migration, mate and lay eggs, producing a summer (non-migratory) brood, according to most references. This progeny supposedly produces a brood by the fall season, whereby the adults migrate south.

**HABITAT:** In migration, Monarchs can be seen in (or more correctly, over) any habitat, such as mountain ridges, coastlines, fields, gardens, etc. When not in migration, they are usually found near milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.) -- woodland borders, old fields, savannas, powerline clearings, and other places where these plants grow -- including in yards and gardens.

**FOOD AND NECTAR PLANTS:** The foodplants are strictly milkweeds and some other species in the milkweed family (Apocynaceae), especially Butterfly Milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) and Common Milkweed (*A. syriaca*). It commonly visits flowers. Adults nectar on milkweeds, especially, but also on asters and many other species.

**COMMENTS:** This is the most celebrated butterfly in North America because of its spectacular migration, as well as its distastefulness to predators (for which it is mimicked by the Viceroy). However, I suspect that most North Carolinians would probably consider the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail as the butterfly that they see or recognize most often, as the Monarch is often not seen by most people except during the fall.

There has been considerable concern in recent winters about severe weather and logging causing mass deaths of millions of Monarchs at their main wintering site high in the mountains of central Mexico. It is almost certain that the scarcity of Monarchs as seen in the East in 2004 and in 2013 can be traced to their winter mortality. Sure, butterfly populations of most species, especially migratory ones, oscillate yearly, but Monarchs are clearly on the decline in the 21st Century. Loss of field habitats, with the foodplants such as Common Milkweed, are also a problem in the United States, particularly in the Central states, where pesticide and herbicide use on crops is impacting Monarchs. In 2014, several conservation organizations petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the Monarch as a Threatened species. As a result, the Service has issued a Status Review of the species, in December 2014, soliciting information from the public on population trends, threats, and other factors that document the decline and the reasons for the decline. As of the end of 2023, no such Federal designation has occurred, nor it is likely to happen owing to the widespread continental range of the species.