

FLUTTERING DOWN TO MEXICO

Read the article about butterflies. Six paragraphs have been removed from the article. Choose from paragraph A-G the one which fits each gap. Write the letter.

Sara Evans is enthralled by the millions of butterflies that migrate to the Sierra Madre mountains for the winter.

As golden light filters through the trees, slumbering butterflies begin to wake. Amber wings unfold and lift delicate bodies into the warm Mexican air. Gentle as wood smoke rising, butterfly after butterfly leaves the safety of oaks and fir trees.

(1) _____.

They are just some of the nearly 250 million or so Monarch butterflies that overwinter here in the Sierra Madre mountains, in the highlands of central Mexico. Every November, this particular patch of mountainside forest in Mexico State, 130 miles north of Mexico city, becomes a temporary retreat for Monarchs escaping the colder faraway climes of Eastern Canada and the US. Their journey here is nothing short of fabulous.

(2) _____.

Our journey here has been less epic. On horseback, it has taken half an hour or so to reach the butterflies. As 12,000 ft, their roosting site lines a steep, tree-filled gully. We pause by the side of it to get a closer view. There are butterflies everywhere. From trunk bottom to the highest branch, the trees are coated in them. Boughs bend under their weight and sway softly in the breeze. The purple petals of wild lupins turn orange as butterflies smother them in search of nectar. Around pools on the ground, huge clusters of thirsty Monarchs make a fluttering carpet of wings as they drink.

(3) _____.

The Aztecs once believed that Monarchs were the souls of warrior ancestors migrating through the forests on their way to the land of the dead. For centuries, local people have welcomed the arrival of the butterflies in early winter, holding special celebrations in their honour.

(4) _____.

En route, generations of Monarchs mate, hatch and die. The ones that reach the US and Canada are fourth generation - the great grandchildren of those that left Mexico. These fourth-generation Monarchs then fly back to Mexico in one go, somehow finding their way here and tripling their lifespan as they do so. How and why this happens remains a mystery. What is known, though, is that this unique migration is not invincible. While the Monarch butterfly itself is not endangered (populations thrive elsewhere around the world), this migration route is.

(5) _____.

This is why this pocket of forest was given UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 2008. Logging is banned here and the butterflies are officially protected. Comprised of more than 58,000 hectares, the Reserve - known as the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve - is divided into five main areas, four of which are open to the public.

(6) _____.

Stretching out their evergreen branches to the millions of butterflies that flutter around them, these trees are butterfly guardians, keeping the Monarchs warm and safe until they fly north on the start of one of the Earth's most complex and beautiful migrations - a journey that continues to mystify scientists and bewitch those of us fortunate enough to witness it.



A Much of this is down to deforestation. Quite simply, as trees tumble, so does the number of Monarchs. Without the warmth and protection of the trees, butterflies that have flown thousands of miles to avoid the ravages of northern winters find themselves folding cold wings, like icy shrouds, over their tiny bodies."

B It is also possible to walk or hike up to see the butterflies. Paths are well-defined, but the hour-long journey can be arduous and is at altitude, so a reasonable level of fitness is required. The best time to visit is in February, when the butterflies are at their most active.

C Fed and watered, they sky dance. Tangerine bright, they fly through the gully riding the thermals, flitting between branches and sunbeams. Moving through dappled sunlight in their millions, the Monarchs cast a nectar-fuelled spell that turns the forest into a bedazzling butterfly kingdom.

D Moving closer to the sun, these creatures - a deep orange filigreed with bold black markings - look like vast stained-glass windows and block out the blue of the sky. As the butterflies dip and soar, the sound of this mass of insects in motion rumbles like distant waterfall.

E I'm in the newest of these, El Capulin, which is the least visited and the least affected by illegal tree-cutting. The forest here thrives. Fir trees in their thousands stand tall and solid against a bright sky.

F But it was only in the 1970s that scientists discovered that it was to this remote mountainside that the Monarchs leaving North America were headed each autumn. Later research also revealed that the Monarchs arriving back in North America, in March, are not the ones that overwinter here.

G Fluttering, dipping and soaring for over 3,000 miles at around seven and a half miles an hour, the butterflies span a continent - passing over the Great Lakes, prairies, deserts, mountain ranges, cities and motorways to get to this place. Surviving storms and burning sunshine, these fragile creatures are the stars of one of the world's most dazzling migration spectacles.

