

A MONARCH WATCH VISIT TO THE
MONARCH PRESERVES IN MEXICO
MARCH 2009



Follow along with Monarch Watch as we visit the monarch preserves in the mountains of Mexico to buy tags collected by the local residents, ride horses or walk to the overwintering colonies, and visit towns, markets, pyramids and other interesting sites in the area.

Dennis P. Curtin

THE CAST

- Dr. Chip Taylor, Director, Monarch Watch
- Ann Ryan, Monarch Watch
- Dr. Christine Merlin, Post Doc at U Mass Medical School in Wooster
- Janis Lentz, high school teacher in Texas and Monarch Watch research assistant
- William Calvert and Bonnie, tour leaders and Bill is the one who found the monarchs when Fred Urquart tried to keep it secret from other scientists.
- Dennis Curtin (me), photography and monarch book author
- Loree Burns, children’s book author
- Ellen Harasimowicz, children’s book photographer

Ann, Denny, Janis, Chip and Christine (from left to right).



Loree, translator, and Ellen.



GET INVOLVED

As you read this journal you'll see how donations made to Monarch Watch for their tagging program is critically important to the people living near the preserves in Mexico. Also be sure to visit the Monarch Watch Web site at www.monarchwatch.com to learn more about monarch's and their migration.

If you would like to make a donation to keep the monarch tagging program going, and support the local families in Mexico protect them please write a check to Monarch Watch Tagging Program and mail it to :

Monarch Watch
University of Kansas
2021 Constant Avenue
Lawrence, KS 66047

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25—THE INVITATION

Two weeks ago I received an unexpected invitation to join a Monarch Watch scientific trip to the monarch preserves in Mexico. I unhesitatingly accepted recognizing that this was one of those once in a lifetime opportunities (at 68 there won't be many more of these, and perhaps almost everything to come is now once in a lifetime). Now, here I am, the day before the day before. Tomorrow it's a flight to Houston and then a layover until the next morning when I meet the rest of the team for a short flight into Toluca, Mexico. Being anal, my bags are all packed and now I'm trying to recall what's in them. Digital photography isn't like the old Leica days when you'd grab the camera and some rolls of film on the way out the door. Now you need a long checklist of things to bring. I have three different battery chargers, a small netbook computer for storing images, about 15 batteries of various kinds, two cameras (Canon 5D and 5D Mark II), two lenses (35-350mm and 17-35mm), a card reader, and a variety of cables. Oh yes and then a tripod, flash, card reader and on and on. If I think about it I'll unpack the bags and photograph their contents at some point on the trip. This pretrip phase is not something I'm good at. I get edgy, fidgety, and find it hard to relax. I've always envied people who travel freely, not letting the details affect them. I have a cousin who'll exclaim in the middle of a softball game "I better go I have to pack for a flight that leaves in an hour." I'd have been sitting on my bag at the airport for hours before he arrived. On a trip like this I start feeling back pressure two or more weeks ahead of time. Tomorrow I'll be up at 4AM and don't have to head to the airport until 11. It's not likely that it will be a useful day. I have hundreds of milkweed seedlings sprouting on the windowsill for the summer garden. Maybe I'll thin them. (It turns out that I didn't.)

I just got an email from Janis letting us know we don't have rooms for the last four days of the trip. She's unconcerned, apparently for no better reason than on a previous trip she spent one night sleeping in a shipping container. I'm not sure I'm that laid back.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26—THE DEPARTURE

I just got another e-mail from Janis asking all of us to send contact information to Chip—the next of kin kind of contact information. She says he may need it if one of us experienced some unspecified disaster. To illuminate the point, she mentions she has only fallen off a horse once on these trips and wasn't hurt. Should I fall off one I suspect the outcome would not be so entertaining to retell in the future. Peggy dropped me off at the airport two hours before the scheduled departure and left. Going through airport security, I took off my shoes to run them through the detector and realized I hadn't brought my hiking boots, the ones I had been intending to wear. Now I have a total lack of confidence that I brought any of the right things!

I ran into Christine in the waiting area. As P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster would put it, "I was "beetleing" it through the terminal with a large black backpack full of camera gear. I'd told her it should make me easy to spot and when I noticed this young woman noticing me, I didn't think it was because of my youthful and handsome looks. Christine does research on monarchs and circadian rhythms used for navigation. She's so curious about how they find the same trees. One guess is that it's olfactory, they leave a scent on the trees one year that they can detect from a distance the next. Her background is molecular biology, biochemistry and ecology.

This trip is her first vacation from the lab in 15 months. She tells me that she heard we could do this trip in sneakers, so my not having hiking boots may not be a problem after all.

When we arrived in Houston, we split up while Christine went off to change money, something Janis had already kindly done for me. I took a shuttle to my hotel, to discover on arrival that I had a two-room suite, much more than I needed. I had a Cliff bar for dinner and went to bed. Christine had also gotten herself a room instead of sleeping on the floor of the airport as she had said she'd do, and it only cost her \$50. She's used to sleeping on floors because she has to monitor experiments for 24 hours at a time so sleeps in the lab a lot.

In the morning we took our respective hotel shuttles to the airport. We then went through passport control in Terminal E before taking a train to Terminal B where we met Janis and sat down to await the arrival of Chip and Ann from Kansas City. They arrived at gate 72 in Terminal B and our flight to Toluca was from gate 73—either a good omen or good planning.

Christine on the train between terminals in Houston.



Janis and Christine in Houston.



The gathering in Houston with Christine, Ann and Chip waiting to board the flight to Toluca.



The Continental flight to Mexico took a long time to board so we left for Toluca a little late on a Embraer jet, a narrow plane with three seats across. It was a smooth and uneventful flight and I passed time reading Sue Halpern's book "Four Wings and a Prayer." The first part is about her drive down to the monarch preserves from Austin, Texas with Bill Calvert. Chip mentioned we will be seeing him on this trip and I'm looking forward to that.

Working hard on the flight down.



Deep into Mexico.

Passport control in Toluca.



The modern exterior of the Toluca airport.



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27—ARRIVAL IN MEXICO

The trip through immigration and customs in the very modern Toluca airport went well, although I left a trail of belongings behind me including my passport. It was returned to me by a kind immigration agent. The fruit sniffing dog also found a forgotten apple in my bag, making his day. After clearing customs we bumped into some Disney people down to shoot monarchs for a film on pollination. Chip knew them because he is a consultant on the project and will be spending four days with them on location. Our group joined theirs for a trip to rent cars and then to lunch at a Woolworth's.

On the way to rent a car.



Meeting in the airport.



Chip negotiating the car rental.



A pit stop for salty snacks.



One of the million small businesses in Toluca (above) and lunch at Woolworth's (right and below).



The lunch was a good buffet and when we finished the real adventure began as the two group split to make our separate ways to Angangueo. Toluca is a large sprawling city, wall to wall with automobile repair shops, with bad roads and apparently no way out—which may account for all of the repair shops. We drove for at least an hour trying various ways out of town until finally succeeding. The city reminds me of LA in one respect; mile after mile in all directions of one-story small businesses. It's a city of entrepreneurs.



Janis, our human GPS, guides us out of Toluca.

When we finally escaped the city, we encountered bad roads periodically hosting unmarked speed bumps called *topes*. We passed through San Jose del Rincon and it looks like an interesting market town, different from the other and smaller towns through which we'd passed.

After a three hour drive we arrived safely at our hotel in Angangueo, the La Margarita. On the way through town Chip asked me to check altitudes with the GPS because the descent was so steep and constant. It turned out we had a drop of 1000 feet to the hotel and there were perhaps another 400 feet to



One of the rooms in our hotel is devoted to religious statues.



The La Margarita in Angangueo.



One of the colorful buildings in Angangueo.



Monarchs, monarchs, everywhere.



Free range turkeys in the courtyard of the church next to our hotel.

Monarch souvenirs for sale on the street.



Web Site

Click to visit the McGuire Center for Lepidoptera and Biodiversity in Gainesville, Florida.

the true bottom of the town. The hotel was crawling with Federales armed with assault rifles. Chip says they are the ones trying to protect the monarch preserves from illegal loggers. They also protect themselves with heavily armed guards night and day. It's comforting to know we're also protected until you realize its because we're mixed in with the targets.

While the others napped I walked up to the town square where preparations were underway for a Monarch Festival. The town is laid out along a long straight Main street running down the valley at a steady slope, with narrow side roads leading up into the hills on either side. On the walk the sun was low and the old buildings, many painted in bright colors, looked beautiful with warm, rich colors. In most sections along the road, the buildings are one story, many with low hanging eaves, which I later wished I had paid more attention to. As I approached the square and its pair of facing churches, many of the buildings have two stories and a few have three. I took some pictures along the walk, and at the square where two artists were painting the back-drop and skirt around the stage.

On the way back to the hotel I ran into Grady and woke up Chip so the two of them could make dinner plans. The decision was made to go to Don Gambino, but it turned out it was closed so we ended up almost across the street at the Hotel Don Bruno. On the way into the hotel I was startled by the moon and Venus. Not only were they extremely close together, but both were so clear and crisp you felt like you could reach out and touch them. Chip said it looked like the crescent of the moon had been tipped and Venus had rolled out like a small drop of mercury. Despite all of the wood fires used for cooking, it seems like the air quality here is a better than in Boston. We passed through the main entrance of the hotel into a beautiful open courtyard, bordered on one side by a two-story row of rooms, their outside decorated with beautiful ceramic tiles and railings. A lemon tree, loaded with ripe fruit, graced the beautifully landscaped courtyard. Once in the restaurant—a cafeteria-like room with long communal tables—Chip ran into Tom Emmel, Director of the McGuire Center for Lepidoptera and Biodiversity in Gainesville, Florida the largest butterfly museum in the US. Emmel had a tour bus with 35 people and invited Chip to talk to the group at 8 PM tomorrow.



The stage being prepared for the festival.



At dinner we joined the Disney folks; Grady Chandler, field producer; Louie Schwartzberg, director; Sarah ??, a friend of Louie's; Francisco Torregrosa, the fixer; and Francisco's assistant Antonio (?). They are a great group of professionals; curious about everything and motivated to do the best they can under demanding circumstances. Louie has been doing time-lapse photography, particularly of plants, for over 30 years. It was a great meal and Chip was bombarded with questions from Grady and Louie about all aspects of monarchs and their migrations. I videoed the entire discussion with my new Canon 5D Mark II, but background noise, mostly clanging silverware in the kitchen, makes it hard to listen to, at least the parts I tried. The Disney people also showed Chip some of the rough footage they had shot of hummingbirds, captured at 1000 frames per second. It was really quite amazing.

Chip, Louie and Grady look at some footage.



Chip, Sarah, Grady, Ann and Louie (clockwise from left).



One of the few photos of me, proving I was actually along on the trip.



At bedtime I dressed in long johns and a pajama top and was still cold in bed, but the unheated room was not so cold I couldn't sleep well. Chip said it's much worse in January.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28—VISIT TO PELON

I woke up at 6am to roosters crowing, and when Chip asked what time it was I gave him a time from the unadjusted iPod that was an hour early. As a result we had an extra hour added to our day and since it was still dark I used the time to copy photo files from the camera to the computer, charge batteries, shower, and work on this journal. We again had breakfast with the Disney people at the Don Bruno and when it was time to head off to Pelon, we found our car blocked in by three parked Federale vehicles. Pelon was a long hard drive away. The topes are everywhere and hard to spot so we had some jarring experiences as we hit them at full speed. To avoid this, Ann riding shotgun, called out “TOPE” every time she spotted one, and she missed very few. Then there are the curves, around which always seems to loom a speeding bus or truck, hogging the road and scaring the daylights out of us. On the ride Chip was relating a story about a trip to Peru where households were raising Guinea pigs for food. This led to a discussion about whether rabbits were better than chickens as a food source to which Janis responded from the back of the car in her dry and witty way, “KFR.”

One of the few clearly marked topes.



We made it to Pelon despite the traffic and immediately were greeted by Vicente who had gone north to be a landscaper in the US where he accumulated enough money to start businesses back home. He owns a taxi that he hires others to drive and has something to do with renting games. His real claim to fame though is that he's part of the family that owns the restaurant serving Chip's favorite trout lunches—his mother Rosa and father Milquitez (sp??). More on this later, but for now we walk through a small parking lot to a free-standing brick building where we pay admission to the preserve. Then for Ann, Christine and me it's up on the horses and up the trail while Chip and Janis wait for us in the nearby town. It's a long and tiring hour and half ride, and by the end your butt hurts. But it all becomes worth the small price you pay as you approach the colony and encounter monarchs streaming by the hundreds or thousands down the trail to water. As you get closer to the colony the density of monarchs in the air increases until you are in a blizzard of them flying at you head-on. When they collide with you, it's like being

Chip with Vicente.*Ann and Christine heading up the trail.*

pelted with cotton balls, the softest of possible collisions. We finally emerge from the forest onto an open high mountain meadow. When we arrive there are already 10 or so other horses there so we are not the first to reach the site. We dismount and the guide leads us through the streaming monarchs to an open area within the woods that is full of them. The clusters in the trees and on the tree trunks are small because thousands of monarchs are in the air—speeding about like little orange bullets against a clear blue sky, flying up to 500 or more feet above us. Landing on the trees, your shirt or hat, or flying through the air are mating pairs finally completing the act that brought them here in the first place, creating the next generation. These mating pairs will separate and soon fly north where the females will lay their fertilized eggs in Texas, Oklahoma and other southern states. It's the generation that develops from those eggs that fly farther north to their summer breeding ranges.

Two mating pairs on a branch.

My lasting impressions of the mountaintop include the thousands upon thousands of monarchs in the air, and the uncountable number of mating pairs. We found one monarch that had been half eaten by a mouse, its abdomen and one pair of wings were entirely gone. It was still alive and crawling, but would soon die—one of the many that won't make it back. One other impression was how open the forest canopy was after hearing so much about how important it is. The same terrain in New England would be called open woodland, and there was no canopy to speak of that looks like the canopy in a deciduous forest.

Loree on Pelon.



As I wandered the area I was on the lookout for Loree, the author who's meeting Chip about her children's book on citizen science. I spotted her eventually and introduced myself, then introduced her to Christine and Ann. About the same time I also met Jonathan Barker from Imax, here trying to raise money for an Imax film on monarchs.

Thousands of monarchs in the air and covering the trees.





Monarchs on a tree trunk where they gather for warmth.

Some of our group resting before the descent.

In my quest to capture every possible shot I got out of bounds trying to get close to some monarchs on a tree trunk and a distinguished looking older man started shouting to me. Not understanding the language I smiled and waved back. It turned out later that he was Milquitez (sp??) the father in the family that owns the restaurant where we plan on having lunch. But he must also play some official role when it comes to the monarchs.

My shouting to Loree across a ravine sent a cloud of thousands of monarchs cascading off their trees and into the air. This was odd since I learned later on the car ride back that monarchs can't hear.

Before getting back on the horses for the return trip it's customary for those in need to pee in the bushes. I tried to confirm this with our guide using hand motions and gestures and finally, after being very explicit, got a smile from our guide and a finger pointing to where we could go. One of our party returned from her visit exclaiming "My finest pee ever! Great scenery, and monarchs everywhere."



Horses at the top of the mountain waiting for visitors to begin their descent.



*Monarchs filling the air
in all directions.*





The ride down was worse than the ride up because you are facing forward on some very steep slopes. When the horse stumbles slightly at times on the rocky trail it feels as if you could easily be pitched forward over its head. When the ride ended an hour or so later I was glad to dismount and hobble off to lunch. The hobbling came about because the stirrups on my horse were too short and couldn't be lengthened. My knees gradually developed pains and lost strength, causing me to list to the weakest side.

Ann, Christine, our guide and Vicente preparing to descend the mountain.



At lunch we were joined by Loree, Ellen and their interpreter. The trout was good but the canned beer “SuperBowl” was barely fit to drink. What I would have given for a Guinness after that horseback ride.

The crew enjoying their trout lunch.



The food couldn't have been better.



After lunch Chip assumed his role as tag buyer, paying for tags collected by the locals from the wings of dead butterflies. After carefully tallying the results at the end, he found he had purchased almost 300 tags, twice as many as last year, and he didn't take this as good news. If the locals' tag collecting techniques hadn't gotten better, it meant more monarchs had died on the mountain, many from freezing weather. Maquadez (sp??) told Chip about an area where there were dead monarchs a foot deep.



Chip examining, and buying tags.



One of the many payments made that day.

Buying 300 tags in such a small community gives a big boost to families. Chip pays 50 pesos for each tag, or \$3.57 at the current exchange rate. At this one site Chip puts over \$1000US dollars into the local economy and this is enough to make the difference between buying shoes or not for the children in some of the families. It's important enough to them that they work hard for it. Not only do they have to climb the mountain, they then have to go through the very time-consuming process of examining thousands of dead monarchs to find the few with tags.

Tags are usually brought in removed from the wings, but there are exceptions.



After lunch Ellen, the photographer accompanying Loree, and I climbed steep stairs in the church bell towers to see what photos we might be able to get from above. There were no railings on the stairs so it was a little scary climbing them, deciding if you were going to fall would it be better to fall down the open stair well or out one of the open windows. Despite the anxiety, the photos we were able to get made the climb worthwhile.

The church with its four-story bell towers and their open stairwell.



The restaurant where we'd had lunch seen from above.



Ellen in the warm light coming through the open windows in the bell tower.



Ellen's photo of me in the same corner.



The car ride home was a little hair-raising, so much so that when Chip is busy no one else wants to drive. I discovered as I passed through security at the beginning of the trip that my driver's license had expired! Otherwise, I'd be happy to give these roads a try. As it turned out later, Ann took over driving and proved not only fearless, but also extremely competent.

Following a lumber truck on a narrow mountain road.



As soon as we got back to Anganguero, I headed up to the Monarch Festival in the square to see if I could get some good shots. It turned out to be more of a school play than a dance review so I didn't get much. I did run into Ann and Christine, there but lost them as we went our separate ways. Shortly after I got back to the room Chip and Janis arrived. Janis' room was locked and loud knocking brought no response so we sat around for awhile worrying about Ann and Christine. While waiting, Chip recounted his evening speaking to the tour group from Florida. One of the highlights was his meeting Liddy, a monarch lover from Paris, who had previously sent him a few e-mails and pointed him to a Web site showing her body covered with monarch tattoos. After we'd worried long enough about Christine and Ann, Chip and Janis went looking for them, only to run into them in front of the hotel on their way back from dinner.

Anganguero's square at night during the monarch festival.



Ann and Christine in the square.



The town water fountain.



Off to bed and a well-earned night's rest.

SUNDAY, MARCH 1—VISIT TO CHINCUA

Again there was a little confusion about wakeup times and Chip went merrily off to breakfast only to find the restaurant had not yet opened. Eventually we gathered with the Disney people for a good breakfast and then were off to Chincua, a much shorter and easier drive than yesterdays.

Backing the car out of the hotel every morning was a team effort.



At one point in the drive, we approached an apparently well known spot to pee, popular because it has bushes for men on the left and for women on the right. As we approached it, Chip was explaining that this was a good stop for a pee break when Ann, in her best flight attendant tone announced “We prefer you first exit the vehicle.” On the drive Chip asked Janis if she could get reception on her iPhone. Janis said “For what, ball game scores?” to which Chip replied “Of course.” She was able to get a connection and announced Kansas 90, Missouri 65! Chip was thrilled as he is an avid Kansas basketball fan and attends every game he can.

Shacks arranged in a square around a central “cortyard.”



When we got to the preserve, the dusty parking lot was lined on one side by a long row of small wooden shacks, with their backside facing us. As we walked around the buildings we entered a large square, bordered on all four sides with small shacks selling food or monarch bric-a-brac to tourists.

The area is served by restrooms that cost 3 pesos to use. For that small sum, you get a receipt, a small packet of toilet paper, and access to a very clean restroom maintained by the staff collecting the money. It turned out this 3 peso payment is fairly standard in this area of Mexico, and if nothing else it does provide well maintained and clean restrooms.

The restrooms where 3 pesos gets you in.



Chip picked a bench in one of the few shady spots under a tree and set up shop to buy tags. A crowd soon gathered and Louie shot B-roll footage of Chip buying tags and interacting with the community. Diago ??, one of the guides who speaks English, coordinated the sellers and got them organized for Chip who ended up buying over 100 tags compared to 10 last year. The people were explaining that many of the tags they were finding were on monarchs partially eaten by birds. Chip's not sure how to interpret this information because it's so anecdotal.

Chip setting up shop to buy tags.



Two kids watch the crowd around the guy buying tags.



Some new people arriving.



Chip talking to Diago.





Kids and a young man at Chincua.



Chip buying tags.



The sunbaked and dusty square at the foot of the trail leading to the monarchs.



A baby curious about the American with a big camera.



Grady and Louie get footage of Chip talking about what else—monarchs.





More firewood for one of the restaurant shacks (above) and Janis with a young girl (top right).



The virgin Mary is everywhere in this part of Mexico, even on T-shirts.

Francisco gets signed releases from anyone who might have been caught on film, including our crew.



Two kids playing in the square.



Chip and Louie discuss the filming.



Louie and Sarah heading for the horses.



After buying tags we were soon on horseback riding “down” to the butterflies. The ride was shorter and easier than yesterdays because my stirrups were long enough so my knees were fine. However, this time Janis drew a horse with short stirrups and had knee problems on the ride, including hitting a tree with one knee, leaving quite a bruise. After an hour ride we dismounted and went the rest of the way on foot.

Christine on her way up the trail.



Horses being shuttled to the top of the trail.



Grady dismounts at the top of the trail.



Chip waits while others dismount.



Ann looks about as happy as one can look.



Chip and Janis lead us to the colony.

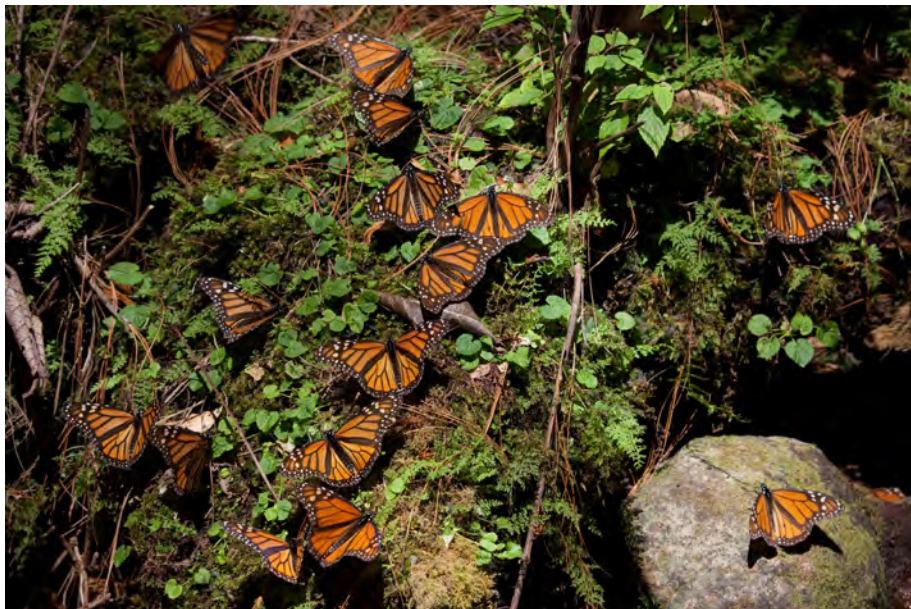


Chip discusses monarch mating while holding a mating pair.



As we approached the colony, I saw a puddling area covered in monarchs and split off from the group. Since you can't be alone in the preserve the guide and everyone else followed. It was an amazing site. High in the Oyamel trees overhead were giant clusters of monarchs and we were standing next to a small crystal clear stream that was their water source. The area was covered at any given time with hundreds of monarchs and we ended up staying at least an hour. Most took photos but Louie was especially relentless and must have taken a thousand. The monarchs were all shivering to generate heat for flight and this made it difficult to photograph them sharply. There was never a period when they would all slow down or pause at the same time. We took some photos of Chip sitting on a rock in the mist of all of this color and activity and I hope some of the shots turn out.

A small stream provides a drinking area for the monarchs high above, and they cover much of the ground.



Monarchs in the air high above the small stream. To the right are some of the clusters.



Monarchs bunched up as they crowd around the open water for a drink



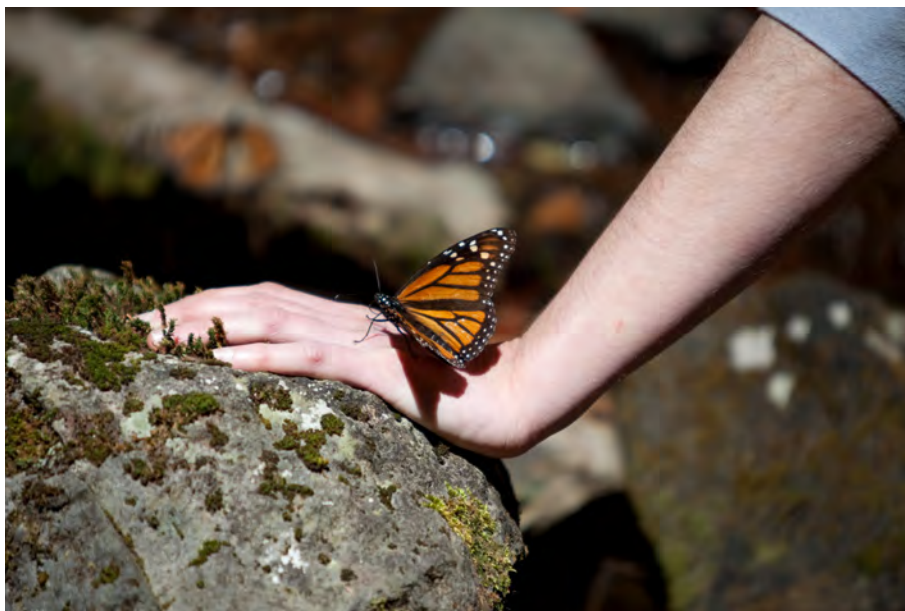
Louie shooting like crazy, trying to capture the moment in photos.



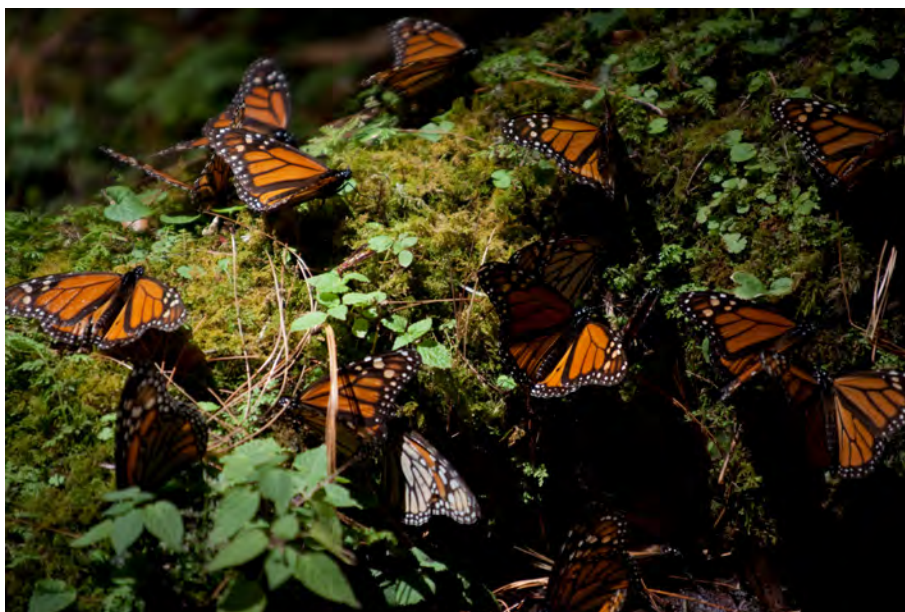
Chip sits on a rock from where he can watch the monarchs.



A monarch lands on Christine's hand.



Monarchs sunning themselves to warm up their flight muscles.



More monarchs in the sun.



Chip shows how to hold a monarch when giving a lecture and you need both hands free for some other task. At one lecture a woman cam up afterward and told him she found it disrespectful.



When finished at the puddling area the Disney crew headed back, leaving us with one guide. Chip and Janis rested in the forest while Christine, Ann and I were led up an uncleared and rarely used trail to the top of the ravine overlooking the monarch colony at almost eye level. The clusters were backlit, so appeared dark and massive. The tree's branches were bent under the weight of tens of thousands of monarchs. We sat on a level surface covered with a deep layer of brown Oyamel needles, making it as comfortable as a goose down mattress. There was total silence, the sun was out in a clear blue sky, and we had this spectacular colony to observe from only a hundred or so feet away. It was an amazing time to contemplate the nature and scale of this spectacle. After an hour or so we had to reluctantly tear ourselves away to head down to find Chip and Janis back at the puddling area.

Lying on your back you look up into the forest canopy and can see monarchs flying across the small patch of open sky.



The forest floor carpeted with oyamel needles.



Clusters of thousands of monarchs high in the oyamel trees.



One of the guides with his face mask pulled down over his chin. Many guides use these to protect themselves from the dust kicked up by the horses on the dray, dusty trails.



When we got back to where we'd left the horses, we found chaos. It was so busy the guides were shuttling horses up the hill, so you didn't ride back on the same horse you came in on. This set one woman into a screaming fit that delayed everyone for a good 15 minutes while the guides tried to calmly and patiently explain it all to her. She'd have none of it and continued her rant. In the midst of this Chip asked if anyone wanted to walk out to reduce the number of horses that would be needed. I jumped at the chance because it's so much easier to take photos on foot than from the back of a horse. What I had neglected to recall was that we had ridden down to the colony meaning the walk back was almost straight uphill. The expression "switchback" apparently isn't in the Mexican language.

A beautiful outlook on the climb out of the preserve.



After a long and hard walk we arrived back at the starting point. To celebrate making it out on foot, I bought a warm bottle of Victoria beer at one of the shacks, and it tasted very good. We looked at the bric-a-brac for sale in the stalls and sat in the warm sun while waiting for Chip and Janis who had wisely chosen horses for their ascent. When they arrived, we gathered our crew for lunch. An attractive woman with beautiful “diamond” crucifix earrings saw us discussing lunch options and invited us to her stand, one of the many shacks providing services to visitors. The meals were prepared on a wood stove and since everyone cooked this way there was a smoky haze hanging over the entire area. The tacos and salsa verde were delicious. As we ate, Chip spotted Ellen walking by and invited she and Loree to join us, but they had other plans. Ellen, who photographs any and every thing spent a few minutes photographing the sunlit pop bottles, arranged along the length of the table as a display and then zeroed in on the bottle caps. During lunch Ann took ill and went downhill in a hurry, apparently from dehydration. She went outside and was able to throw up and this provided much relief.

Christine looks for gifts in one of the many shacks catering to tourists.



Another shack full of trinkets.



Taunting Chip with a half empty bottle of Victoria.



Food being prepared in the shack we chose for lunch.



A closeup of some of the ingredients.



After lunch it was back in the van and down the mountain to home. On this drive came Ann's most memorable moment on the trip—Chip's near collision with a bus as we turned a corner. We missed by inches but everyone was grabbing door handles and each other preparing for impact.

That's our lunch order on the wood burning stove. It tasted as good as it looks.



Since everyone was so wiped out from the day's events, only Chip, Janis and I went across the street to Don Bruno for a quick dinner, then back to bed. On the walk back in the dark I was walking along when almost brought to my knees from a collision with an overhead beam in one of those low eaves, making quite a noise as I hit the beam and tin roof it supported. I was wearing a hat but still acquired a Gorbachev-birthmark shaped wound on my forehead to bring home. Back at the hotel, thanks to Janis and her iPhone I managed to get a call home to my daughter Cathy and Chip called his wife. The iPhone works in Mexico in all locations where it can receive TelCel and that includes a lot of small towns.



Janis and Chip sit at a table lined with sunlit pop bottles and my lunch (above).



A boy waits outside while we have our lunch.



Back at the hotel Ann covers herself to hide from the camea while Christine, Chip and Janis recall events of the day and make plans for tomorrow.



One of the pickup trucks used by the Federal Police. These speed about town with police in Kyvar vests and armed with assault weapons hanging on to the bars in back. I didn't take photos of the police themselves since they try to conceal their identities from the people that threaten them.



MONDAY, MARCH 2—VISIT TO EL ROSARIO



The old Fred Urquart tag turned in along with more current tags.

This morning we started slowly with breakfast at the Don Bruno and then a drive to El Rosario, one of the most commercialized of the sites. Vast parking lots, mostly empty on the day we arrived, are at the base of the trail. To get to the preserve you have to first walk a long uphill path between continuous strips of small shacks, cheaply and poorly built, with most selling the same monarch bric-a-brac. In places the alley is covered with bright fabric to shade the tourists, and this adds a lot of color to the walk. The whole scene is very colorful and must be a madhouse on weekends when those parking lots are full. Chip set up shop in the visitor's center to buy tags and a steady stream of locals came by to redeem theirs at 50 pesos per tag. Within a few hours Chip had purchased 617 tags, putting over \$2200US into the local economy. He also found one forgery, and amazingly one of Fred Urquart's original tags with the printed request to return it to the University of Toronto. That tag must have been in someone's drawer for a long time. The forged tag look much like a real one but since the forger had used a slightly different font it was easy to spot by the width of the letter "Os". At the end of the event Chip is way over budget and since it comes out of his own pocket, that is a concern. Ellen and I chipped in, but it wasn't enough to seriously lighten the financial load Chip carries. There must be a way to raise funds for this effort, it's so meaningful to the butterfly scientists, but perhaps even more so to the locals. Many bring in 20 or more tags and walk out with \$70 or more, an amount that would be hard to earn any other way. This small amount can mean school outfits for the kids, or food for a long time. Anyone donating to Monarch Watch isn't really donating to them, but to the poor locals making subsistence living in these isolated local villages. They obviously count heavily on the money that Chip distributes on each of these trips. Monies given to him for tagging are distributed with no overhead withheld. What people give is exactly what he spends, but even then he has to contribute out of his own pocket.

As the need arose, people would visit the restrooms where the standard charge of \$3 pesos gives you access to clean and modern restrooms. Again we ran into Loree and Ellen and Ellen took lots of photos of the tag buying. I lent her my flash when she discovered she hadn't brought hers and then a 4 Gigabyte card when she ran out of memory during the session.

On the way out we took photos of Loree's group and they took photos of ours. They are leaving tomorrow so we don't expect to see them again on this trip (although we did see them walking in Anganguero as we returned to our hotel). On the way back, we dropped Chip off at his new hotel, the Rancho Galvani, where he'll spend the next 4 days with the Disney group, and the rest of us returned to our hotel. Ann drove all day and is a great driver, and that's a relief. She's also good at multi-tasking, driving and spotting Topes simultaneously. On the drive we pass a community laundry looking much like a large cistern around which stood a dozen or so women doing laundry. When we got back to the hotel we took a short break and then headed off to the Don Bruno for dinner, most of us ordering their excellent chili verde. As we were splitting up the money to settle the bill, Ann handed me three pesos saying "Here's your pee money for tomorrow." It was gratefully accepted because I rarely have any change.

Chipe waits for the rest of the crew to gather.



Monarchs are everywhere, including Michoacan license plates.



As you approach the preserves they stop cars to collect an entrance fee by holding a robe across the road.



The path from the parking lot to the trailhead.



One of the many T-shirt displays along the path.



An old vintage sign.



One of the restaurants along the path.



Some of the shacks lining the path.

The main entrance with its hand-painted murals of the monarch life cycle and migration.



Shacks with an increasingly rare-to-see Kodak sign.

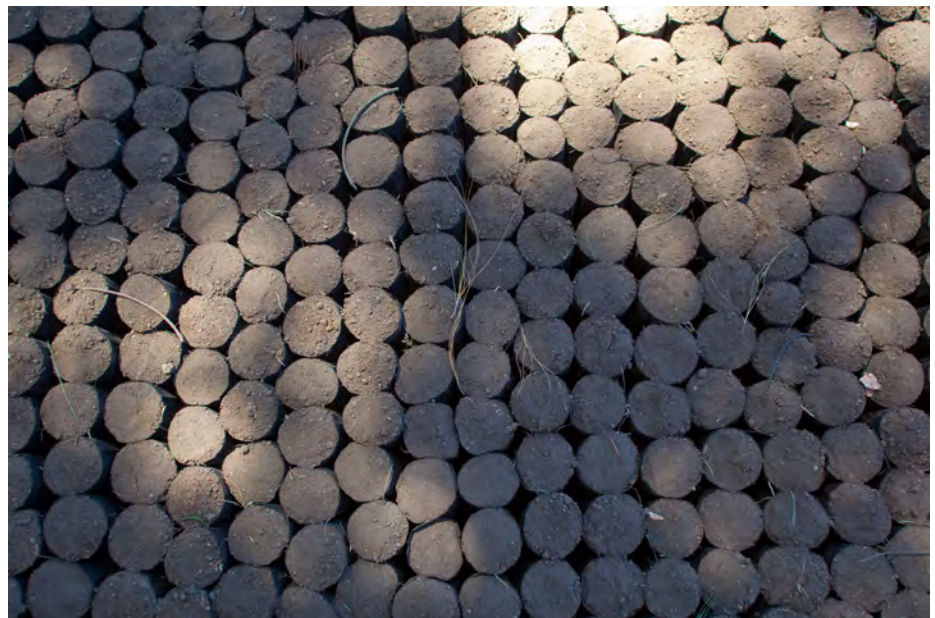


Some visiting school kids who struck up a long conversation with us in English and were taken by our colored eyes.





People preparing thousands of soil-filled containers used for oyamel seedlings in a major reforestation effort.



Ann, Christine and Cip set up in the visitor center to buy tags.



Some of the locals who stopped by to sell the tags they had collected.



More people selling tags.



A woman from North Carolina stopped by with her friend from Mexico to tell Chip about a pathway they had seen with monarchs flying north.



Chip examines tags to look for forgeries and to see what year they are from.





Tags come in and money goes out.



Two colorfully dressed women wait their turn.



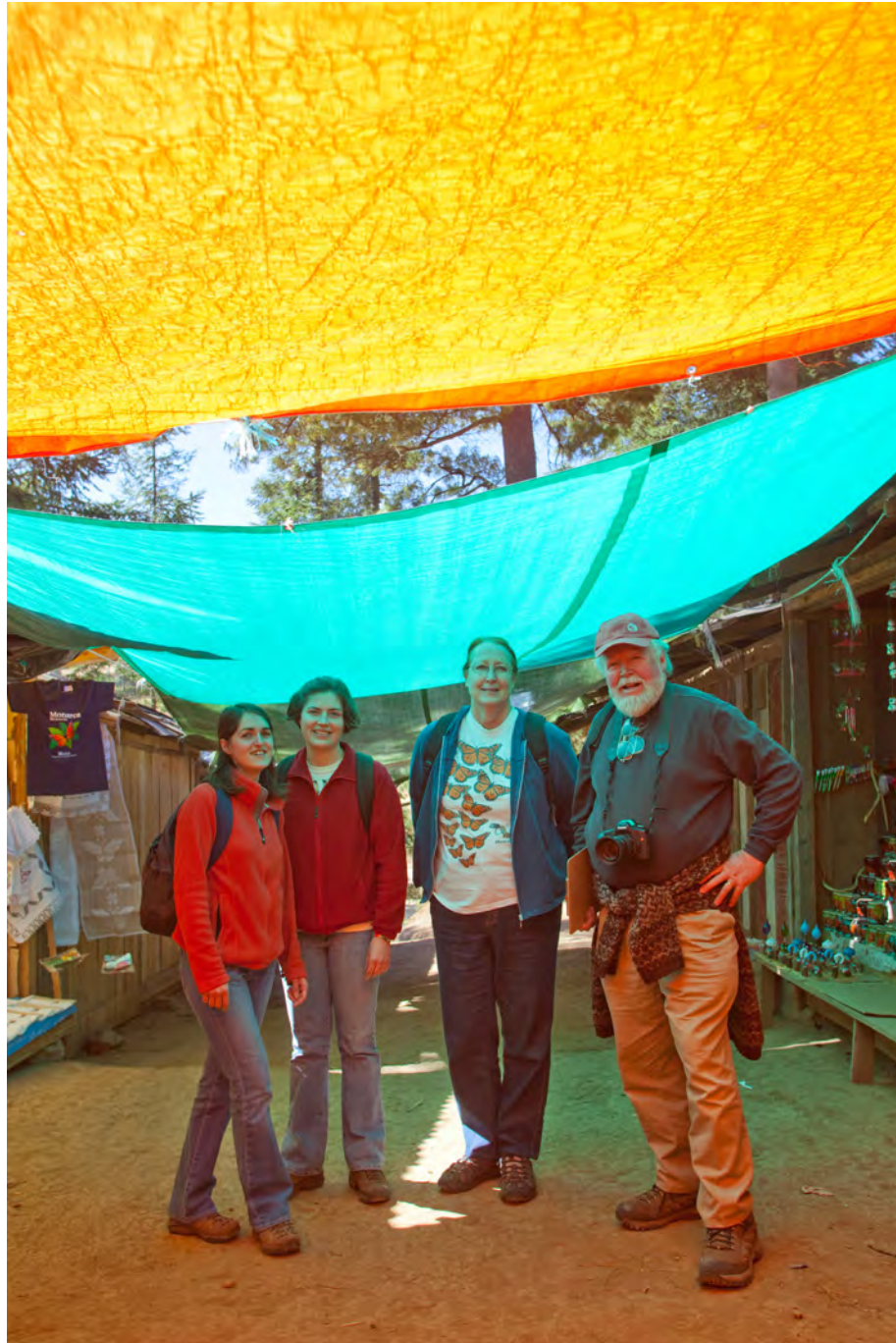
The visitor center has a wall of windows looking out on the countryside.



More people selling tags.



Christine, Ann, Janis and Chip under one of the many colorfull tarps covering the path.



Our consume being served up for lunch.



Christine enjoys her lunch, as we all did.



Part of our lunch on the wood-burning stove.



Our crew relaxing at one of the long communal tables in the restaurant shack.



Christine keeps looking for gifts.



On our way out Chip meets an old friend. This happened all of the time.



One of the local people who protect the monarchs.



Chip tries to explain to the hotel clerk that he has a room reserved in his name.



TUESDAY, MARCH 3—A DAY OFF

The first day on our own we took a break, hanging around town to do to catch up work. First thing Ann, Christine and I walked up to the market to buy fresh fruits and other edible. We were all shocked at the prices—4p for a bag of tangerines! When we got back from the market we moved a few doors down and across the street to the San Bruno, a beautiful hotel where we had already had many meals. In the course of the move I struck up a conversation with a woman I bumped into and it turned out to be Ina Warren, a good friend of Monarch Watch. She was delighted to meet Janis and Ann in person after many years of e-mail exchanges. For a few hours all we did was chat with Ian, her husband Tim and daughter-in-law Dawn.

Things moved so leisurely that I even managed to squeeze in some laundry. The sink had no stopper but earlier I had found a kept a disk-shaped metal prize in a bag of chips I'd eaten. This small round plate worked perfectly and I managed to wash and dry two shirts.

At one point Christine managed to go through all of the photos I'd taken, by then 1300 or so of them, and I showed her how we could adjust the exposure of hers, since she was concerned they were a little light.

I tried napping but it didn't work out so I joined the others in our group for a beer on the lawn. As we sat there in the warm sun, monarchs streamed through the courtyard. At around 4pm we started walking to a restaurant in the square where Janis had eaten before and raved about their guacamole, both it's quality and quantity. We weren't to be disappointed. On the walk up, I took lots of pictures of windows and doorways, which were painted in bright colors but appeared to be ancient. We stopped at an Internet place, one of the five or so we saw in town, so Christine and Ann could check their e-mail. As they did so Janis and I continued to the square and sat on benches in the park until they rejoined us. We then wandered around the square for awhile, looking for postcards and discovering a beautiful mural and an ancient alley beautifully illuminated with reflected light.

Dinner was all we had hoped for, including the guacamole. Christine told us the Internet place had charged her 2p! That's less than the 3p it costs to use a restroom.

When we got back to the hotel we went searching for the legendary Bill Calvert and found him in a cafeteria of La Margarita, the hotel we'd been staying at. He looked familiar and it was only later that I realized he bore some resemblance to Ted Turner. It may have been Bill's group that got us bumped from our first hotel, but more likely the Federales too the rooms. I took some picture of Calvert and the group, then Ann accepted some tags purchased at El Rosario by one of Bill's group along with a cash donation. As we left, Janis told Christine about how Bill thinks the monarchs may cross the mountains in three places. Christine wanted to talk to him about that so we returned to the room for maps and then back to the cafeteria. The two of them had a long conversation and then it was off to bed.

People don't just keep their houses clean, they also sweep the street in front.



Christine and Ann stride through town headed for the market.



Workman painting one of the buildings in town.



A very contemporary looking house with a two car garage below.



Painters hard at work painting a building in a single day.



There always seemed to be a lot of repair and construction work under way.



Ann climbs the stairs leading to the market area.



A customer being helped by a stand owner.



There is a broad selection of produce to choose from.



Peppers and beans are not forgotten.



A man carrying a case of bottled drinks up the hill.



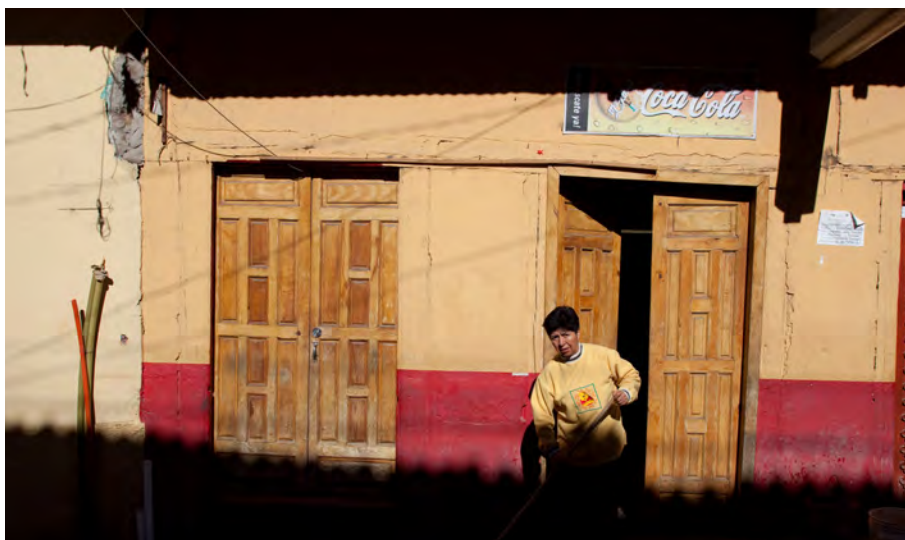
Freshly baked rolls and other baked goods for sale on the square.



Ann and Christine pass through a construction zone.



A woman cleans her home in the warm morning light.



One of the many attractive buildings in town.



Girls on their way to school.



The courtyard at the Don Bruno.



Ina Warren, her daughter-in-law Dawn, and Ann outside one of the rooms.



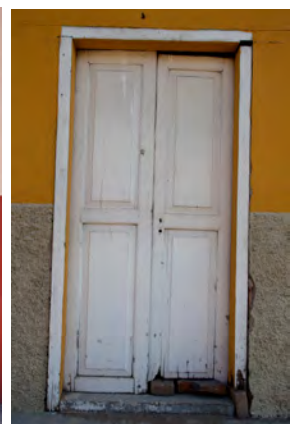
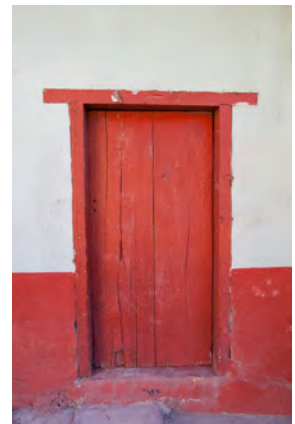
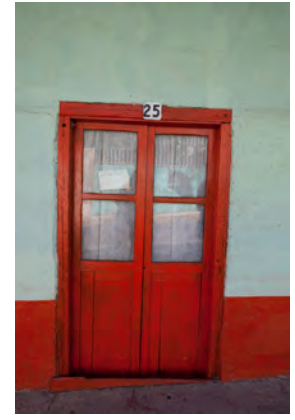
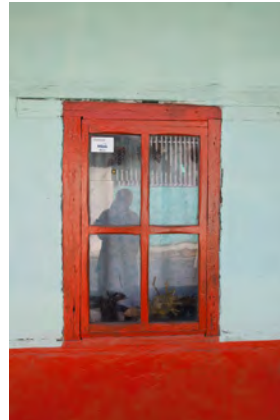
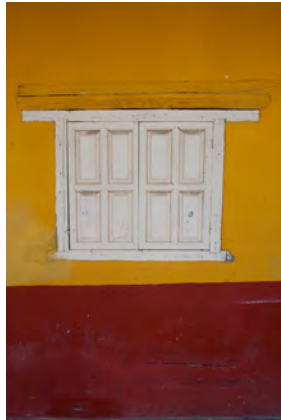
Ian Warren entertains us.



Me proudly showing off the shirt that I washed in the sink.



The doors and windows of Angangeuo.



More doors and windows on the main street through Angangueo.





A glowing, but graffiti scarred alley near the square.



The artist's self-portrait on the large mural off the square.



Sampling the guacamole at the Los Arcos on the square.



*Our dinner plates
halfway through the
evening.*



*Ann, Bill Calvert, Janis
and Christine pose at
the La Margarita.*



Bill Calvert.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4—RETURN TO EL ROSARIO

The first time we visited El Rosario, we didn't visit the monarch colonies because we spent our time buying tags. That was OK because we had time to squeeze in a second day at the preserve. The day began with a quick walk up to the square and public market. We loaded up on fruit for a ridiculously small sum. Then back down the hill to the Don Bruno and off to El Rosario. Ann drove fearlessly up the back way to a parking lot near the entrance, bypassing all of the shacks selling trinkets. The road was narrow and steep, and she had to back up at one point to let a truck pass in the other direction. We paid to enter and got a guide, a pleasant gentleman named Jose Luis Guzman Soto. Then we had a long, long walk up stairs to the monarch colony. On the way up we passed a closed off area where chip was filming with the Disney crew. As we got closer, the monarchs in the air increased, then we saw a huge puddling area with thousands of monarchs on the ground. Our guide smiled and motioned us on, conveying without words that better lie ahead. As we crested the hill there was a vast expanse of low lawn-like grass with a seep running through it. In areas of the grass hit by sunlight were thousands upon thousands of monarchs with more arriving in waves. The stream of arriving butterflies pulsed in numbers as clusters cascaded deeper in the forest. We spent over an hour photographing and filming the monarchs, both on the ground and in the air. The problem was that there were so many it's impossible to convey them all, and the energy in the air when tens of thousands of monarchs are involved. As the clusters cascaded above, the monarchs came down the trail or up and over an opening in the trees.

After an hour or so we broke free of the puddling area and walked higher up the mountain a short way. We met Bill Calvert and Bonnie there. We were all photographing the clusters high in the trees although they were again backlit so just appeared as dark blobs hanging from the trees. For some reason I changed lenses and put on the 17-35mm wide angle lens, and it was fortunate I did. As we talked, Bonnie, Ann and Christine had their backs to the forest and I was the only one facing it. Out of nowhere came a solid wall of monarchs. A huge cluster had just cascaded and its monarchs were headed right at us as they followed the trail down the mountain to the water. It was like an orange avalanche. I yelled something like "My god, look at what's coming!" We all started shooting like mad but there was no chance to check or change camera settings. You got it or you didn't. Because I had changed lenses I got it, some amazing photos of the air full of monarchs. One shows Bonnie with about 6 monarchs on her head and sleeves. Christine and Ann also had a number of them. It was literally a stream of butterflies and many of them crashed into us because they had no where else to go. An amazing experience.

When we descended, Christine and Ann went looking for T-shirts and I asked them to pick out one for my granddaughter Emily. While Janis and I waited one of the guides stopped by with four tags and I bought them from him for 200 pesos and donated them to Monarch Watch. After Ann took down all of the information on the tags she gave them back to me as a souvenir. I also took some photos of olymel trees in profile for use in the margin of the book and some of the reforestation project. Crews are busy preparing thousands of little soil-fill pots for the seedlings, all arranged on tiers of the hillside. Chip says they do a good job of planting but then abandon the trees. The surrounding vegetation overtops them and they die. More effort needs to be put into cutting the surrounding vegetation until the new trees are established.

Somewhere along the way I mentioned to Ann that the wrapper on one of the



Flash photography is prohibited because it disturbs the monarchs.

Cliff bars I had brought had expanded like a balloon. I thought it was decomposition but she says it was altitude. That particular bar must have been packed air-tight.

Back at the hotel everyone but me started to log tags and that went on so long we decided to bypass dinner. Instead I headed off in search of ice crème. I found a small grocery open that had some of the best ice cream bars I have ever had. I bought four of those, called *Magnums*, and four ice cream sandwiches and beetled it back to the hotel. As we ate the ice cream everyone savored the moment, then found ourselves in bed shortly after 8. Altitude, ice cream, and walking miles up hill tend to exhaust one. As we parted Janis suggested we tell Chip we'd spent Wednesday night bar hopping.



The countryside approach El Rosario.

Our guide, Christine and Ann start the long climb to the monarchs.



*The mountain meadow
you cross as you
approach the colonies.*



*A vast puddling area
with thousands of
monarchs.*



Vast numbers of monarchs, all drinking from the seep flowing through the grass.



*Some monarchs isolated
out of the thousands.*



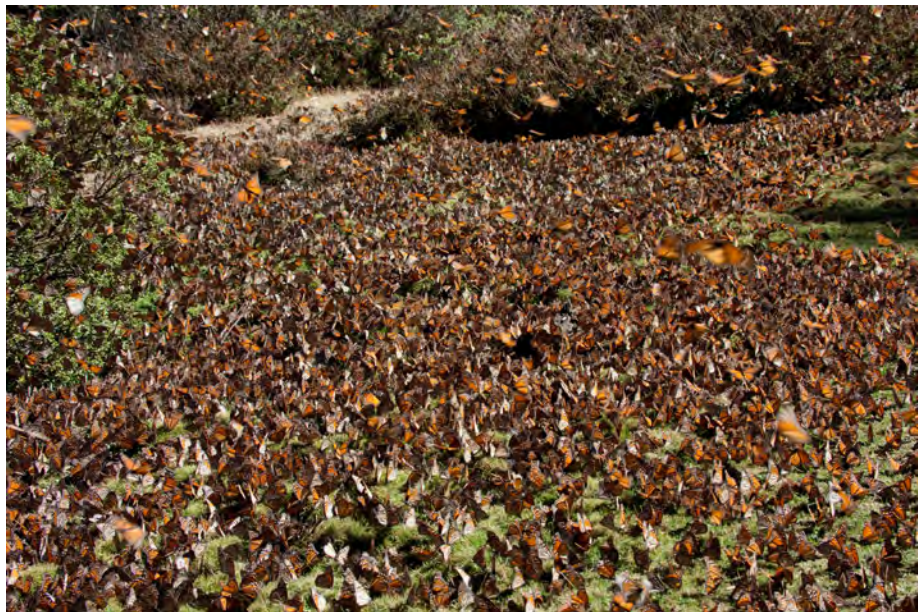
Wherever sunlight hits the ground, the monarchs mass in dense clusters.



Our guide with monarchs on the ground and in the air.



More monarchs, they are everywhere and impossible to convey the sheer numbers.



Monarchs from cascading clusters approach the puddling area over the trees.



Our guide with more monarchs and a closeup of a small patch of ground.



*I no longer know what
to say—just enjoy them.*

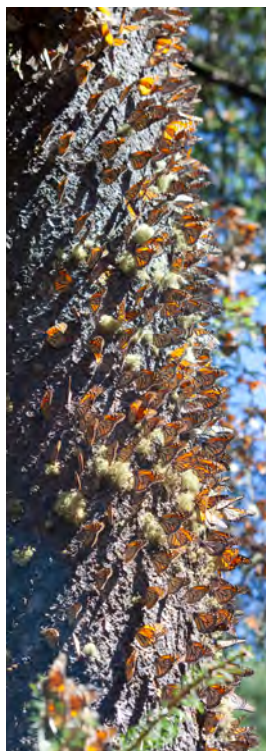




Monarchs on a tree trunk (above) and mating (above left).



A sign asking for silence.



*Amongst the monarchs
Christine shoots some
video.*





Monarchs overhead (above) and an avalanche of them after a cluster cascades (below).





Bonnies (above) and Ann (below) covered in monarchs.





Christine, All, Bill Calvert and Bonnie (above) and a visiting school group (below).





Monarchs line the edges of a puddle on the trail (above) and people working on reforestation (below).





Thousands of pots for seedlings on the terraced hillside (above) and Bill Calvert having lunch (bottom).



*Our lunch on the stove,
the kitchen and us.*



An oyamel tree.



THURSDAY, MARCH 5—VISIT TO AQUA BLANCA

*[http://www.
aguablancacanyonresort.
com/en/index.html](http://www.aguablancacanyonresort.com/en/index.html)*

Bill Calvert suggested we check out Aqua Blanca Canyon Resort, a place noted for its birds and butterflies. We decided to take his advice and got an early start. We stopped at a market on the way to refuel and then at a Premix station to get a stash of drinking water, salty snacks and other junk food. I also photographed a moth on a stall wall in the ladies room. When we got near Aqua Blanca the road really turned narrow, curvy and steep. A hundred foot drop-off on one side didn't help, but Ann navigated us down like a professional. We had to press a buzzer to get in and the door opened unto an expanse of lawn and swimming pools--this is definitely not a public space. We talked to the manager and they offered a package of swimming, lunch and access to the grounds for \$150 pesos. It turned out to be a bargain. We spend the first part of the day exploring the grounds, including a hike up a switch-back trail to a summit that had a huge tree and a longwinded zebra laying eggs on passion vine. The area was loaded with blooming jackaranda trees and many of their lavender flowers floated on the surface of the pools. We returned to the hotel for a great lunch in a cabana-like outbuilding that Janis says is called a palapa in Spanish. The fruit juice was spectacular--made from hibiscus leaves. After lunch we got a key to a gate that gained us access to the nice two hundred foot Tavertine waterfall. The travertine builds up on the falls, especially at the top as the water cascades over. On the hike to the falls we encountered many butterflies, including a spectacular malachite that appeared like green neon when backlit.

Turns out that a room in this resort costs on \$80US and includes three meals plus a Fresca (??). It would be a great base to explore the monarch colonies were it not for that last kilometer drive.

The drive back to the hotel was uneventful. Back at the hotel, we drove close to the square and walked to our favorite restaurant, Los Arcos. The big draw is the large bowl of guacamole, but the rest of their food is also excellent and cheap. After dinner it was back to the hotel and off to bed.

Ann and Christine shop for fruits for the day at an outdoor market.





A display of fruit in the market (top) and Christine at a Happy Go shop (bottom).



A butterfly on tropical milkweed.



The pools at Aqua Blanca.



Christine and Ann on the hammock.



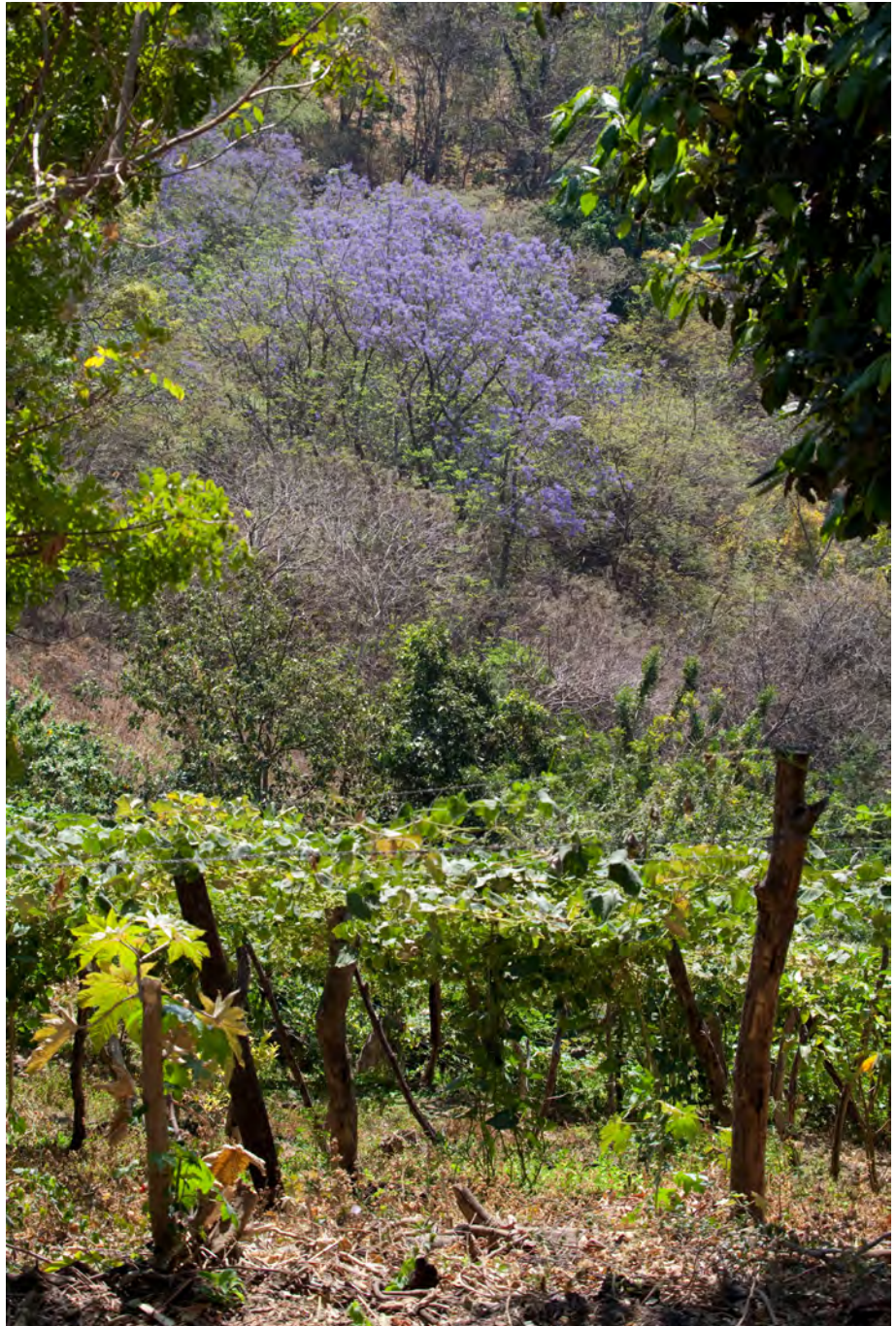
The group under a large tree, the name of which none of us knew.



A jackarunda tree in bloom over a patch of growing squash.



A squash hanging from a vine.



Bill Calvert taking a break.



Christine stalks a dragonfly.



Ann, Christine and Janis at lunch.



The Tavertine waterfall.



A long-winged zebra (Heliconius charithonia) laying eggs on passion vine in very close proximity to a waiting spider.



A malachite butterfly.

Jackarunda blossoms floating on the surface of the pool.



A stream flows behind some colorful flowers.



A roadside mural looks like a tunnel into another world.



Ann's been traveling with this group way too long and when she spots a machete, well....



Rooms at the Aqua Blanca look very inviting.



FRIDAY, MARCH 6—VISIT TO THE PYRAMIDS

This is the day Chip is to rejoin our group. We started the day working on this journal and logging tag information, then it was off to the pyramid San Felipe Los Alzatic Zona Arqueologica. On the way we stopped at a market in Ocampo to buy fruit and bread for a picnic lunch on the pyramid.

The pyramids were spectacular. We had a picnic lunch on the small one and then Christine and I climbed to the top of the tall one. The steps were narrow and the climb steep but you could lean into the pyramid and kind of crab-walk up and down very safely. On the drive to Chip's hotel I asked Ann what her most memorable moments were from the trip. I expected her to say the cascade of monarchs at El Rosario but instead she said the near collision with the bus because I hadn't asked her what her best moments were. It turns out it was Boing (a local uncarbonated fruit drink) and guava fruit. I tried some of the fruit since both Christine and Ann were both wild about it but found it bitter and full of bothersome small, hard seeds teeth-breaking seeds.

After lunch we went to Ocampo and hung around the square for an hour or two. The square was beautiful with the base of all of the trees painted white and a stage set up for the monarch festival. I saw a group of men installing the framework for a new sign pointing to the butterfly preserves and waited until they got the actual sign out of the truck. I was hoping to photograph it as they carried it to the square. Unfortunately it turned out to be the wrong sign but the men posed with it for me while standing in the truck.

We got to Chip's hotel, Ranch Gilvali, around 5PM, expecting to pick him up on at 6:30 when he returned from filming in El Rosario. As we waited we had drinks on the patio and Jorge, the chef, brought out a traditional Michoacan dessert, two slices of cheese used to sandwich a sweet gel. The only beer they had was some awful brew mixed with salt and lime. It was almost undrinkable. Jorge, a friend of the owner and architect, comes out from Mexico City on weekends to train the staff.

The Disney people ran late and when they did arrive we found we were invited to dinner. It was a nice breakup dinner for the crew and Louie gave a nice toast to the crew while Chip gave one to the kitchen staff that had taken care of them the past four days. Jorge came over later to tell us how much Chip's toast had meant to the staff—they were glowing.

Finally it was time to head home and Ann did a great job driving the roads at night. As soon as we reached the hotel Chip and I fell into bed.

The visitor center at the pyramids.



Ann and Christine read about what we are about to see.



On top of the small pyramid Ann enjoys the vista.



A lunch break on a plateau of the small pyramid.



Ann on top of the large pyramid.



The small pyramid seen from the top of the large pyramid.



Shopping first for junk food (right) and then fruit (below).



Men installing a new sign pointing to the monarch preserves.



A woman we met on the street selling bread.



The Ocampo stage set for their monarch festival with a very interesting cloud as a background.



Janis, Ann and Christine take a break and enjoy the town park.



A detail of the monarch festival stage.



The beautiful Ocampo town park.



A new sign displayed by the workmen planning to install it—except it's the wrong sign for this spot.



Foosball tables under a colorful canopy in the park.



Vintage signs in the Ocampo square point to the monarch preserves and Chip's hotel.



Checking out a sign advertising our favorite ice cream bars.



On the lawn at the hotel waiting for Chip to return from filming.



Which one is the stuffed dummy?



The cheese and sweets dessert.



Jorge, the chef, with some of the food prepared for the Disney crew.



Attacking the buffet after a long day on the mountain.



Louie toasting the film crew.



Chip toasting the kitchen staff.



The guys who run the pinhole camera.



Ann enjoying the evening.



Not much left except a tamale which arrived late and is yet to be eaten.



SATURDAY, MARCH 7—TRAVEL BACK TO HOUSTON

Today begins the journey home and on the way we're going to try and find two places for monarch pathways heading north. Chip and I discussed the book at breakfast and he noticed the menu had a drawing of a monarch with six legs, all the same size. We stopped at two possible pathways on the way to the airport, but saw no monarchs flying north. Chip and Janis had seen them at one of the places in other years, and two visitors to the tag buying activities in Chincua reported seeing them flying at the other.

We got to the hotel early, and Christine and Ann immediately headed off to explore the shopping mall next to us. We all met up for dinner and then returned to the hotel for a good night's sleep. I got an upset stomach during the night but it soon passed and I was fine again.

Firewood coming into Angangueo as we are going out.



One of the places we stopped hoping to see monarchs streaming north. It was not to be.



Christine and Ann after a wild shopping spree.



Our last meal in Mexico.



Waiting to board our flight to Houston.





Chip and Christine (above) and Ann (below) as we wait to take off.



Deep in Mexico and heading north.



SUNDAY, MARCH 8—BREAKUP

We met at 8:30 or so and had breakfast at the hotel. Then we packed the car and Ann drove us to the airport where she dropped off everyone but Chip. The two of them headed for the car rental agency to return the van and then rejoined us at the airport. We passed through passport control very quickly so sat around and talked for an hour or so before boarding our flight. The flight back to Houston was uneventful, but we found ourselves mixed in with hundreds of others passing through immigration and customs. The system was very efficient so we had time for a beer and some nachos at a restaurant before saying our final good-byes for the year with lots of hugs and thank yous as we each headed off our separate way. It was sad to part from such a great group of people and realize that a real 9-day adventure had ended in an instant or two.

The entire group taken by the waiter.



Ann and Chip as we say goodbye.



Till next year!

