

New Long Distance Champion

The story of the monarch butterfly is well known. They can migrate up to 3000 miles to a small region in Mexico every fall. A “super generation” of the monarch makes the journey to the south, and in the spring it takes 3-4 generations to make it back north. On the way north they mate, produce eggs that hatch into larva that feed mostly on milkweed, and in late summer produce the super generation that will make the trip back.

While the monarch migration is spectacular and amazing, there is now a new distance champ in town! The painted lady butterfly is smaller but quite colorful on the top side of its wings. As opposed to the monarch, which is exclusively North American to South American, the painted lady inhabits all the continents except Antarctica. There is a European population which migrates to Africa including the Sahara Desert. In addition there is an American population which migrates from North America to South America. The painted ladies can migrate as far as 7000 miles from North to South America over 4-6 generations, beginning every fall. Likewise they migrate back to the north every spring.....and that “North” includes the Arctic Circle.....amazing.



As opposed to the monarch, the painted lady breeds multiple times on the southern trip as well as the northern trip with each successive generation completing part of the trip. While I often see multiple monarchs when they are migrating in fall and early summer, the painted lady flies much higher, up to 1600 feet. Therefore their migration pattern was not noticed until more recently. They take advantage of air currents while migrating. While migrating they will breed about 3-4 times, and it can take as little as 3-4 weeks from fertilization to an adult butterfly. The adult butterfly typically lives only 2-4 weeks. Like all butterflies the caterpillar molts into a chrysalis before hatching as an adult. This week I have had the joy of seeing several of the painted ladies flying around Forest Lake. They are less conspicuous than a monarch. They are exquisitely colored on the top side, but when their wings are folded they appear quite camouflaged. They are smaller than the monarch butterfly with a wingspan of about 2-2.5 inches. They are often seen feeding on local flowers. The caterpillars most often feed on thistle plants. When I see painted lady butterflies they often have somewhat tattered wings. I realize now that this is because of the arduous journey that they have to take seasonally.

In summary, there is a new long distance champ in town, but if you see one, don't expect it to stick around for long!