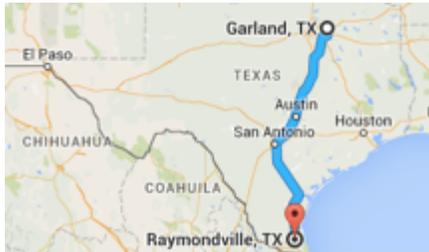


# The Remarkable Story of the Monarch from Garland

Texas – *a story of survival, transition and hope* - Elizabeth Berry



*Garland, Texas to Raymondville—a journey of 515.8 miles—perhaps the longest taxi ride for a Monarch Butterfly in the history of the world. Perhaps we should make a play out of this story and title it “Driving Miss Monarch.” Charlie said that we probably shouldn’t tell too many people this story because they will think we are nuts.*

It is amazing how much I have learned in the span of one short month—all because of one tiny insect—albeit it an important insect: the Monarch which also happens to be the Texas state insect.

## ***In the Beginning there was a Caterpillar***

The story began on December 5, 2015 in the Garland Community Garden (a place that is somewhat of a miracle in and of itself). Although it’s not been quite two years since we dug the first garden plot there, our community garden has given and continues to give much back to the people in our urban area.

It was a Saturday and members of Loving Garland Green (a local nonprofit devoted to promoting urban agriculture) were down at the garden for our monthly garden cleanup day as a group. When we were just about halfway through our morning of work, Cheryl Andres came to me with a Monarch caterpillar in her hand. The caterpillar was gnawing on a dead, totally withered, milkweed leaf. Since it was already near the end of first week in December, we were surprised. Monarchs are usually all wintered down in the Mexican highlands by this time.

Cheryl was perhaps the most appropriate Loving Garland Green member to have been the first in the line of rescuers of this creature. Among other things, Cheryl has rescued animals for a number of years. As a matter of fact, Cheryl is busy now taking care of animals that have, along with their owners, lost their homes in the recent tornado that struck Garland and our surrounding area.



*December 8, 2015 – Garland Texas*

***Then the Caterpillar ate and ate. . .***

We took the caterpillar back to the Loving Garland Green headquarters (my home) and provided her with a Monarch condo (nylon mesh laundry basket) and some milkweed that I have growing inside my home for next spring. It's true what they say about the hungry caterpillar. This caterpillar ate almost an entire milkweed plant before making its pupa.

***And then it made a jewel. . .***



Five days after we found the caterpillar, it made its pupa on December 10, 2015. The teardrop-shaped pupa (chrysalis) of the Monarch is a lovely bright green color. It looks like a jewel. The caterpillar attached it to the “ceiling” of the Monarch condo. The

ceiling of this condo was a bath towel over the opening of the top of the laundry basket.

We calculated the Monarch would eclose (emerge) perhaps on Christmas Day and thus we prematurely dubbed the Monarch as “The Christmas Monarch.” However, Christmas came and went and we still had no Monarch. I began to have my doubts as we had rescued three Monarchs on November 14 that made pupas, none of which opened.



***And the jewel at last became a queen: Happy 2016***

Then, when I was least expecting it, I peeked in on her on New Year’s Eve (December 31, 2015). To tell the truth, I was cleaning up my house and thought it was time to remove the pupa from my guest bedroom and clean out the condo for next year. I had given up. Low and behold! There was a healthy female Monarch Butterfly!

***First of All: a new Name for this special Monarch.***

“Happy 2016” was the name I chose for her.

This Monarch is special. She is a fourth generation Monarch. Each year there are four generations of Monarchs. The first three generations have a life span of two to eight weeks (depending in part upon their luck). The fourth generation, which usually comes from eggs deposited from late September through October, is special. These Monarchs have a life span of four to six months. They migrate to the Mexican highlands where they hang out in a state of semi-hibernation until late March or the first week in April. Then they awaken and begin their migration north to the USA and Canada. These fourth-generation Monarchs mate and lay eggs on milkweed across Texas. Most of the fourth generation Monarchs are dead by the

end of April. The butterflies that hatch from their eggs become the first generation of the new year.

### ***What to Feed Her?***

I knew it had been at least several hours since she eclosed because she was flying about the Monarch condo so I quickly mixed up a concoction of sugar and water to soak cotton balls in (four parts water to one part organic sugar). Later she dined on two marigolds, some lavender flowers and slices of watermelon. A butterfly will eat just about anything that is sweet and water-soluble. It does not absolutely require nectar from flowers.



Happy 2016 appreciated the cotton ball candy I made for her. Soon she had her proboscis slurping up the sugar water. Butterflies drink through a straw-like appendage called the proboscis. This appendage is long and can reach down into tubular-shaped flowers to get the nectar they use for food (fuel to fly). When they are not eating, the proboscis curls up like a cowboy's rope on the saddle so it does not get in the way or create an imbalance in their flight.

### **A worrisome few days: How/where can we release Happy 2016?**

We are not new to releasing Monarchs. However, late October is the latest we have any experience with releasing them—when the weather is usually still warm here in Garland, Texas and there are still plenty of flowers. We don't usually get our first killing frost until the middle of November.

However, this was January! Most of the flowers in our community are gone. We read the weather forecasts and they were not encouraging throughout the first week of January—with highs ranging in the 40's and 50's. Monarchs are not able to fly well in temperatures below 60 degrees F. If it's raining or too windy—forget it. In those kinds of conditions one is likely to find them hiding in bushes.

We decided to drive her down to south Texas sometime midweek of the first week in January. We would have left sooner, but even the weather in south Texas was wet and cold for the first part of the week.

### ***Do Monarchs Imprint?***

I don't think they do, but I wonder. Like all insects, Monarch butterflies do have brains. From December 31, 2015 until January 7, 2016 when we released *Happy 2016*, she spent most of the time with two people. Charlie and I had her condo on the table when we ate our meals. She sat with us as we watched TV and sat by us when we read. She even went to work with me and helped me to complete an RFP as I had her sitting by my desk. At the time to release her, she seemed reluctant to go and hung around us for a while—but I'm getting ahead of the story here.

### ***The Trip to South Texas with Happy 2016***

Our trip to south Texas was not without a few moments of fear. She was in her condo in the back seat. When we left Garland at 9 AM, she was sitting on top of a watermelon slice drinking through her extended proboscis. I looked back at her from time to time. About noon it occurred to us that she had been in that position since we started the trip. In a panic I wondered if she was dead. It was only about half an hour before we were stopping in Austin. The last thing I wanted to show the folks at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department was a dead Monarch.

Four hours seemed to be a long time to be eating. With dread I reached back into her condo and made her climb onto my finger. She was reluctant but she climbed on and I put her on the flowering milkweed plant that was also in her condo. A short while later she went back to the watermelon slice.

### ***A short visit in Austin with Grace Barnett from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department***

Grace is a friend of ours who came up to help us celebrate the installation of a butterfly garden at North Garland High School this past October. The North Garland High School Key

Club built this garden with the assistance of members of Loving Garland Green. Grace is also working with our Mayor Athas and members of his staff to share information with members of our community about the Monarch and what we can do to help them. Grace showed us around her office and gave us many Monarch Joint Venture pamphlets to take home. You can find this information at [www.monarchjointventure.org](http://www.monarchjointventure.org). We took Grace out to the car where mercifully, she was able to see a live Monarch.

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### **On to Kingsville, Texas for the night.**

Happy 2016 is perhaps the only monarch in history who has spent the night in a motel—if not “the only”, certainly she is among the very few. *Happy* ate the whole time we were in Kingsville. Of course, she probably was just following the example that Charlie and I set for her. We were eating a lot too. That night we had some great barbeque in Kingsville. Before we left, we showed off Happy 2016 to the motel staff and told them a little of Happy’s story.



***Showing off Happy 2016 at the Motel before heading south again.***

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## **Last stop: Raymondville, Texas!**



*Elma Chavez, Executive Director of the Raymondville Chamber of Commerce*

It is about an hour's drive from Kingsville to Raymondville, Texas. When we arrived, we stopped at City Hall where a staff member from the City Manager's office referred us to Elma Chavez, Executive Director of the Raymondville Chamber of Commerce. What a fortunate connection for Happy 2016! Elma is a great representative for her community. We told her the story of Happy 2016 and explained that we were looking for a place with flowers to release the Monarch.

Elma got right on the phone. She called contacts working on a new project for their community—the La Jarra Ranch\*.

Today, this 500-acre site, located along Redfish Road (SH186), just outside Raymondville is being developed into a Visitor and Heritage Center in memory Winifred Wetegrove, a descendant of Edward Burleson Raymond who founded Raymondville, Texas.

This area is part of an eco-region known as "Wild Horse Desert." It contains a natural wildlife wetland pond and is home to many types of migratory birds and other Texas wildlife. The center will be called "La Jarra Ranch"\*, a senior living community—an interesting combination of a nature reserve with senior living. La Jarra Ranch will be an oasis of nature, peace and solitude where people can choose to live in housing facilities; bring their RV and stay a day, month or lifetime; hike or bike in the area; sit by the pond in

one of the bird and butterfly blinds to capture images with a camera; stay in the original ranch quarter and engage in many planned activities. These developers have thought of everything. There is even a dog park. Visit [www.lajarra.com](http://www.lajarra.com) for more information.

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### **\*La Jarra Ranch**

Raymond and Jo Wetegrove are pursuing this project in memory of their mother, Winifred (Winnie) Wetegrove. Winnie and her children are descendants of Edward Bureson Raymond, founder of Raymondville circa 1907 and also owner of Las Majadas Ranch.

*“La Jarra” translates “the pitcher”. This name that has been chosen for this beautiful, natural spot has special significance. [I’m not certain if the name of the original ranch, Las Majadas, will be entirely replaced, or if it will remain and only part of this area will come to be known as “La Jarra Ranch.” However, I do know the original home of E.B. Raymond located on the Las Majadas Ranch will be developed into the Visitor and Heritage Center for the La Jarra Ranch.]*

Edward Raymond registered this as his cattle brand in 1882. According to legend, the brand originated on a hot dusty day when Raymond and his men were working cattle and had nothing to drink but hot and brackish water. Raymond said, “I would give anything for a big pitcher of water from Barton Springs in Austin.”

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***Gate to Las Majadas Ranch – January 7, 2016 –just beyond this gate a few feet is where we released Happy 2016 to make the last leg of her journey to the Mexican highlands. Las Majadas Ranch was the name of Mr. Raymond’s original homestead that will become the La Jarra nature center in 2016.***

Thanks to Elma’s great directions we made it to the gate of the Las Majadas Ranch with *Happy 2016*. About one day and 520 miles later we were about to launch the next chapter for this story of transition for the Monarch. How appropriate that it would take place on property that was soon to be transitioned itself into a nature center to be shared with others. Was it mere chance that we stumbled onto this location? Was it perhaps a case of serendipity? I must admit that I did have a lump in my throat, as part of me didn’t want to let go *Happy 2016*. Everything about this one Monarch butterfly was so special. If ever a survivor, she was one. Perhaps we should have named her “*Lucky 2016*.”



These yellow wildflowers bordered the roadway in abundance as far as the eye could see. It was 72 degrees and partly cloudy with almost no wind—almost perfect conditions for releasing a Monarch.

## The Release



The lump in my throat grew larger as I watched Charlie carry Happy 2016 and her condo onto the Las Majadas ranch. This was it—that awful time of letting go. Happy 2016 didn't seem all that eager to leave either.



When I took the towel (ceiling) off her condo, there she was: busily eating away. She really liked those sugar cotton balls. We watched her chowing down for a while and then Charlie reached in to lift her onto his finger.



In the first photo above Charlie has lifted the monarch out of the condo. In the second photo above she is crawling around Charlie's fingertips. We had expected her to be long-gone in a few seconds, but she continued to linger.



Here she is, still playing around on Charlie's fingertips. He even tried to give her a kiss and she still did not fly away.



Finally, Charlie put her on the cuff of my jean jacket and still she remained. Then I picked a small bunch of the yellow wildflowers and put them near her. It was then that she soared away.

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### ***Are we there yet, Daddy?***



*Happy 2016* still had 684.7 miles to go on January 7, 2016 when we released her. Will she make it and join millions of other Monarchs in the oyamel fir tree forests situated in the eastern perimeter of the Mexican state of Michoacán? We don't know, but considering her luck thus far, I'm betting that she will.

To date, she has survived against all odds. Her flight to Mexico will be made in the daytime, as Monarch butterflies are diurnal—not nocturnal. They remain still at night on bushes and trees. We don't know for sure how far a Monarch can fly in one day. However, one tagged monarch was recaptured 265 miles away from where it had been released the previous day.

*(This was the record flight from the Urquhart tagging program. The butterfly was tagged in Waterford, Pennsylvania and recaptures at a site in Virginia.)* I predict that Happy 2016 will be with her other Monarch friends no later than Monday January 11, 2016.

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## Why all this fuss over one Butterfly? The Monarch is a flagship species for conservation.

Happy 2016 and other Monarch butterflies are lovely symbols to represent all pollinators and call attention to their importance to human beings. Pollinators are responsible for at least 1/3 of all the food we consume and one half of the fats and oils we eat. In addition to that, we use their fibers for our clothing. Populations of the Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) have dropped an astonishing 96.5 percent over the past few decades, from an estimated 1 billion in the mid-1990s to just 35 million in early 2014. Conservation groups have been worrying about this decline for several years

It is no surprise that communities are waking up to the importance of pollinators and are taking serious steps to protect them and increase the existence of their habitats. The I-35 corridor from Texas to Minnesota is known as the pollinator highway. A program is now in place and supported by several federal agencies as well as local and state communities along the way to plant 100 miles to either side of this roadway with pollinator-friendly plants including the milkweed in particular.

Rescuing Monarchs is a deviation from a natural process. However, what hundreds of people like Charlie and I doing is a temporary intervention to correct and restore a natural process that has already been seriously tampered with and altered--primarily through the overuse of herbicides that have practically eliminated milkweed all along the migration corridors of the Monarch.

The milkweed is the only plant that Monarchs and 300 other species of butterflies (called "the milkweed butterflies") will deposit their eggs on. Due to the indiscriminate use of both pesticides and herbicides, the Monarch population as well as the population of many of our other pollinators is dangerously threatened. It is estimated that less than 5% of Monarchs

are able to complete their lifecycle. Most die as eggs or caterpillars. Monarchs that are rescued have a 95% probability of survival to adulthood.

**What can you do?**

- Plant a few milkweed plants in your yard this spring.
- Encourage your mayor to take the National Wildlife Federation's Mayors' Monarch Pledge. <https://www.nwf.org/How-to-Help/Garden-for-Wildlife/Community-Habitats/Mayors-Monarch-Pledge.aspx>

Through the National Wildlife Federation's Mayors' Monarch Pledge, cities and municipalities are committing to create habitat and educate citizens about how they can make a difference at home.