

MONARCHS OFFSHORE IN THE GULF OF MEXICO

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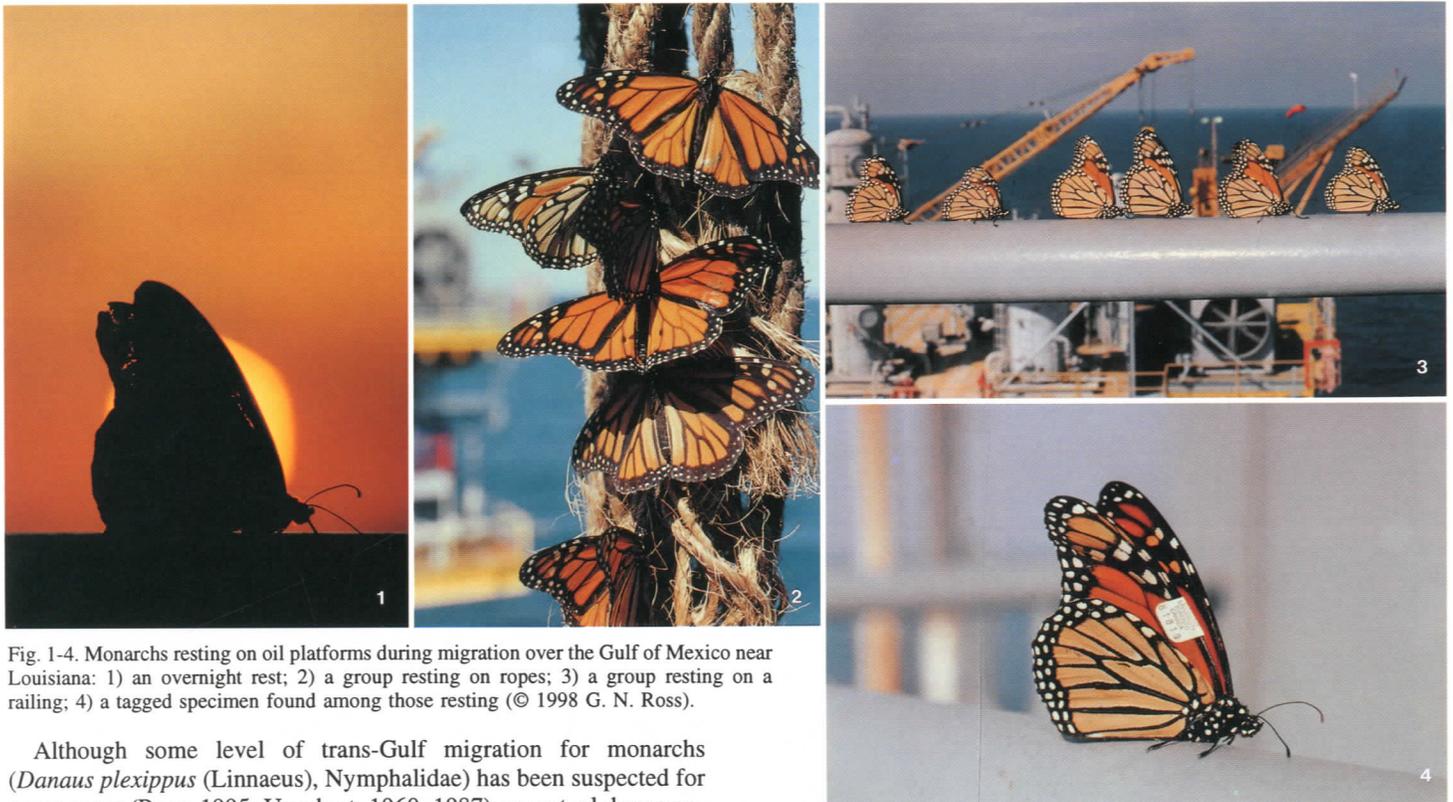


Fig. 1-4. Monarchs resting on oil platforms during migration over the Gulf of Mexico near Louisiana: 1) an overnight rest; 2) a group resting on ropes; 3) a group resting on a railing; 4) a tagged specimen found among those resting (© 1998 G. N. Ross).

Although some level of trans-Gulf migration for monarchs (*Danaus plexippus* (Linnaeus), Nymphalidae) has been suspected for many years (Ross, 1995; Urquhart, 1960, 1987), no actual documentation existed until my work in 1991. With the generous cooperation of the offshore petroleum industry, I was able to collect data on monarchs in an area that had not been accessible to most entomologists (Ross, 1994). Between 1991 and 1995 I spent each October aboard a gas production platform (UNOCAL Petroleum Co.) in the Gulf of Mexico, 72 miles south of the Louisiana coastline. During these October visits each year, I documented large numbers of monarch butterflies moving from southwest Louisiana out over the open waters of the Gulf as they migrated to their overwintering grounds in the volcanic highlands of central Mexico.

While in flight across the Gulf, monarchs bear to their south-southwest heading but often descend at dusk to temporarily alight on the petroleum platforms that are now scattered over a wide area near the coasts of Louisiana and Texas. The monarchs rest on virtually anything they can grasp: ropes, chains, railings, machinery, or anything else on the platforms offering a safe temporary haven. Although many of the butterflies were seen to remain throughout the night, some even remaining more than one day, many take off again after only a short stop, even after dark. The man-made structures in the Gulf offer migrating insects and birds a new advantage: by providing rest stops that make the Gulf crossing less perilous. The platforms in the Gulf may reinforce a route already begun by monarchs as only a chance wandering by aberrant individuals, or

perhaps an occasional mass flight accidentally blown offshore. Urquhart (1960) noted that most monarchs avoid large bodies of water during their migratory flights. But, with the new man-made platforms in the Gulf, it appears that numbers of individuals have learned of safe havens near to shore in the Gulf and have followed this dangerous route to Mexico. Now that many presumably may survive the Gulf crossing to Mexico, this new direct route may become standard for many Gulf Coast monarchs. However, it still remains unproven that monarchs found migrating southwesterly over the Gulf, hundreds of miles from the Gulf shore of Mexico, actually survive to reach Mexico. Future tagging should provide the evidence for this.

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