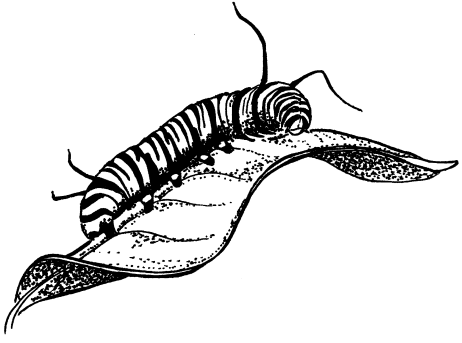
A Field Guide to Monarch Caterpillars (*Danaus plexippus)*



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Illustrations by Kristen Kuda

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INTRODUCTION

This guide will aid in recognizing eggs and distinguishing larval (caterpillar) instars of monarch butterflies (*Danaus plexippus*) in the field. We assume that readers have some familiarity with monarch larvae already, and will recognize their bold yellow, white and black stripes on or near their host plants.

Several clues will help you find monarch eggs and larvae. Look for them on plants in the genus *Asclepias* (milkweeds), or on the closely-related *Cynanchum laeve* (Sand Vine) found in the central U.S. Females usually lay eggs on the underside of young milkweed plants, and this is often a productive location to search. A characteristic sign of a new larva is a minute hole in the middle of a leaf, while older larvae tend to eat on the margins of leaves. Learning to recognize "monarch-eaten" leaves will increase your success at finding larvae. They can also be located by the presence of their frass, or fecal matter. If you see adult monarchs (butterflies) in an area with milkweed, there is a good chance you'll find eggs or larvae as well.

Before going into the field to look at monarchs, we recommend reading the anatomy, molting, and distinguishing instars sections of this field guide. After these sections, there are detailed descriptions and drawings of eggs and each of the five instars.

Happy monarch hunting!

ANATOMY

The diagram below shows a generic butterfly larva, with three parts to its body—the *head, thorax* and *abdomen*. The thorax and abdomen each have several segments, which are numbered in the diagram. Many of these segments contain small holes called *spiracles*. The spiracles are connected to a network of airtubes called *tracheae*, which carry oxygen throughout the larva's body. Monarch larvae have two sets of *tentacles* or *filaments* (front and back); these are not antennae, and are not found on all butterfly larvae. They function as sense organs. The thoracic segments each have a pair of jointed *true legs*, and there are five pairs of false legs, or *prolegs*, on the abdomen.

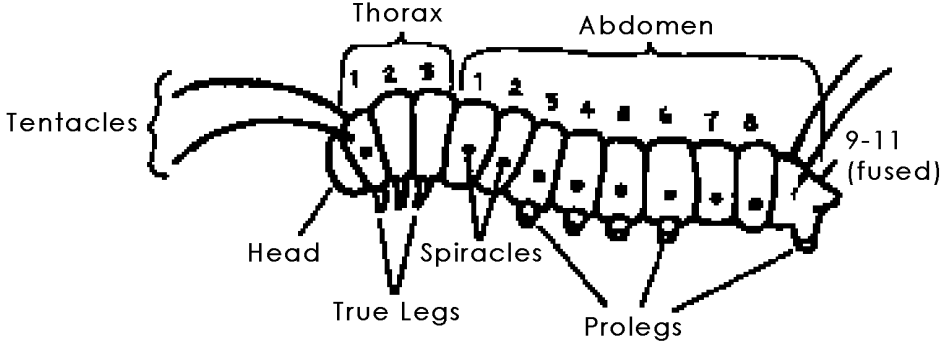

Figure 1. Larva anatomy

The head has a pair of short *antennae*, mouthparts, and six pairs of very simple eyes, called *ocelli*. The *spinneret* produces silk that small larvae use when they drop off a leaf and hang suspended in the air. Larvae in all instars use the silk to anchor themselves during molting, and fifth instar larvae make a "silk button" to which the pupa is attached. The *maxillary palps* are sensory, and also help direct food into the jaws. These features can be seen with the aid of a hand lens, but are difficult to see with the naked eye.

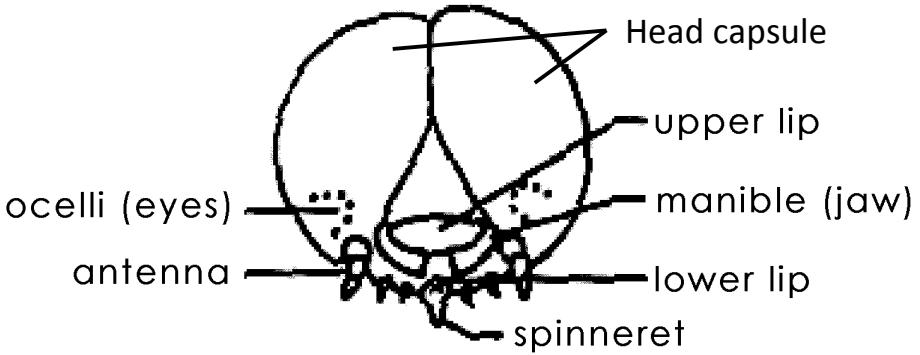

Figure 2. Butterfly Larva head

MOLTING

Monarchs have five larval *instars*, or stages between shedding their *cuticle* (outer layer of skin). The cuticle is made of long protein chains and chitin. It is rigid and hard, and serves to support and protect monarchs and other arthropods. It also restricts water loss. However, the cuticle limits growth and must thus be replaced periodically. The process of replacing the old cuticle is called *molting*. Molting is controlled by a hormone called *ecdysone* produced in glands in the thorax. It actually involves a whole sequence of events, beginning with the separation of the old cuticle from the epidermal (skin) cells that underlie it, a process called *apolysis*, and ending with the shedding of the old cuticle, a process called *ecdysis*. The old cuticle is partially broken down by enzymes, and some of its constituents recycled. When it is first secreted, the new cuticle is protected from these enzymes by a layer of wax. The new cuticle is soft and flexible, thus permitting expansion before it undergoes *sclerotization*, or hardening.

Table 1. Sequence of events in molting

1. apolysis (separation of old cuticle)
2. new cuticle production
3. wax secretion (protects new cuticle)
4. activation of molting enzymes
5. ecdysis (shedding of old cuticle)
6. expansion of the new cuticle
7. sclerotization (hardening of new cuticle)

Monarch larvae remain very still during all the steps of molting, the older instars often move off the milkweed at this time. The first thing that you will notice, besides their motionlessness, is the separation of the part of the cuticle that covers their head from the rest of the cuticle. This *head capsule* is the first part of the old cuticle to be shed, and the larva then crawls out of the rest of the skin. The shed skin is called the *exuvia.* After molting, monarch larvae (and the larvae of many other insects) usually eat the exuvia, thus recycling useful nutrients that it still contains.

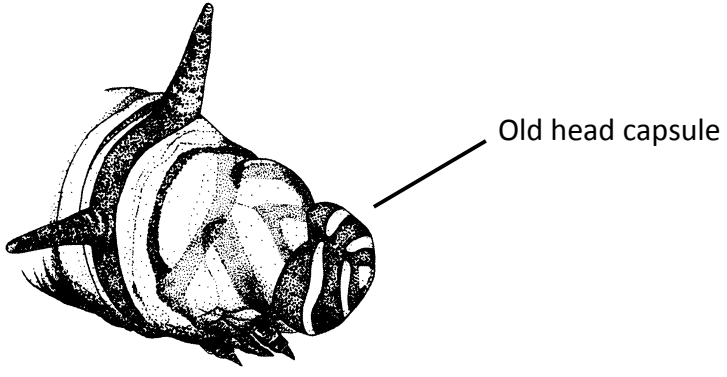

Figure 3. Third instar larva about to shed its head capsule.

DISTINGUISHING INSTARS

While most of the cuticle is quite hard, larvae still grow quite a bit within each instar. This is possible because of the flexibility of the new cuticle, and because parts of the cuticle contain a rubber-like protein which permits it to stretch. Therefore, distinguishing instars by size is not very accurate. Look at the drawings of a first instar larva, all drawn to the same scale, to see how much it changed in size within an instar!

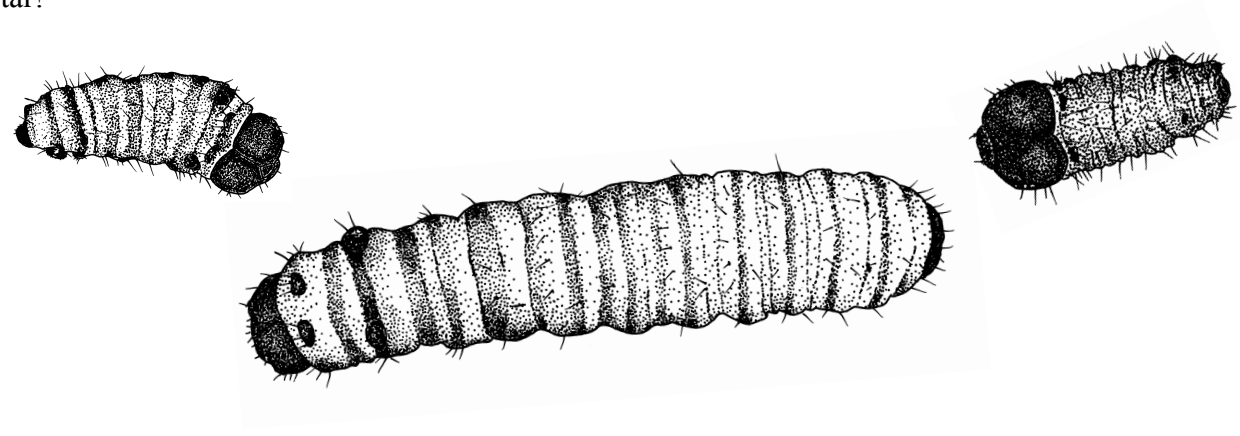

Figure 4. Three drawings of the same first instar larva over a period of 2 days (x25).

The easiest way to distinguish larval instars is by head capsule and tentacle size, since these do not grow during an instar. For example, the front tentacles on a fourth instar larva are about half the length of those on a fifth instar. Also, the size of the tentacles relative to the head capsule and the rest of the body increases with later instars. We have included estimates of the sizes of head capsules and tentacles for each instar in the table on the next page. However, individual monarchs vary in size just like humans do, so the larvae you find may not be exactly the sizes given.

The drawings below compare head capsule sizes in the five instars. Of course, real larvae have much smaller heads! The lines above each drawing give the actual measurement of the real heads. We measured several larvae with a calipers accurate to 0.1 mm, then took the average size, to get these measurements. Note that the head capsules increase in size by a factor of from 1.3 to 1.6 between each instar.

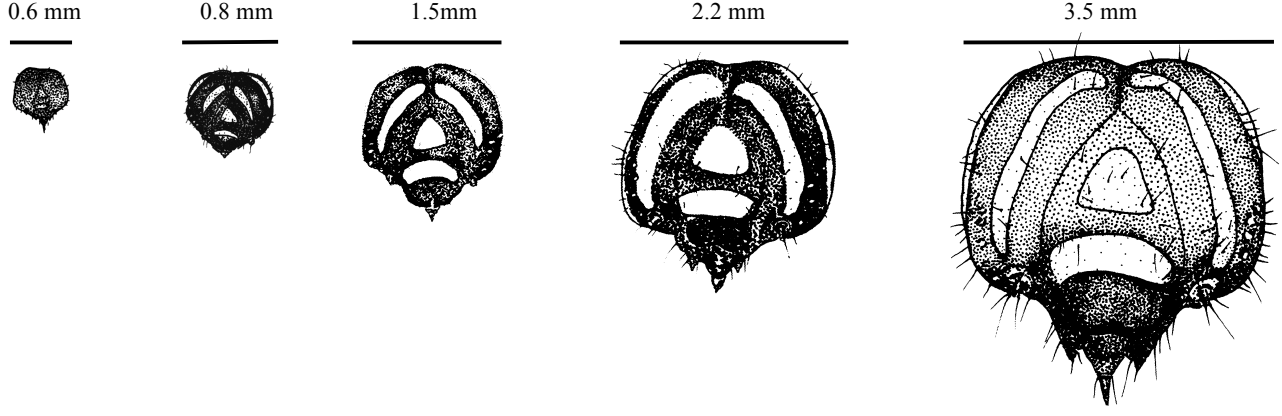

Figure 5. Head capsules, of the five larval instars (all drawn to the same scale, x12.5).

A note on measurement. We report the sizes of monarch eggs and larvae in millimeters (mm). There are 10 mm in a centimeter, so when something is 13 mm long, it is also 1.3 cm long. Sizes of body parts are most useful in distinguishing third and higher instars, since it is difficult to distinguish 0.6 from 0.8 mm (the sizes of head capsules on first and second instars) with the naked eye. It is best to use other characteristics described in the guide for the younger instars. The lines on the table below show the actual head widths and tentacle lengths for each instar. Whenever we show a drawing of a larva, we tell you how many times it has been magnified. For example, the heads shown on the previous page are 12.5 times larger than actual heads; we noted this by putting x12.5 in the figure caption.

Table 2. Comparison of head and tentacle sizes from the five instars. Lines show the actual length of these body parts, and numbers show how long the lines are (in mm). Starred spaces for the tentacles mean that these are too short to measure accurately.

	Instar				
	1	2	3	4	5
Head	(0.6)	(0.8)	(1.5)	(2.2)	(3.5)
Front tentacle	*	(0.3)	(1.7)	(5.0)	(11.0)
Back tentacle	*	*	(0.9)	(2.0)	(4.0)

EGG

Height: 1.2 mm

Width: 0.9 mm

Appearance: Monarch eggs are usually attached to the underside of young milkweed leaves. They are laid singly, and it is uncommon (though not unheard of) to find more than one on a single plant. The eggs look off-white or yellow, and are marked with a series of longitudinal ridges. The hard outer shell, or *chorion*, protects the developing larva.

Figure 6. Scanning electron microscope (SEM) image of a monarch egg

FIRST INSTAR

Body Length: 2 to 6 mm

Body Width: 0.5 to 1.5 mm

Front Tentacles: Small bumps

Back Tentacles: Barely visible

Head Capsule: 0.6 mm in diameter

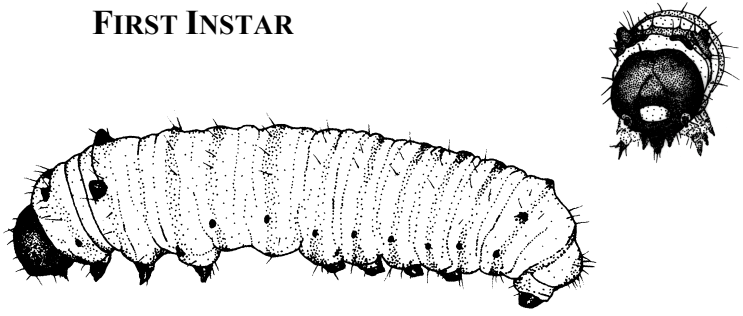

Figure 7. Body and head of first instar (x20)

Appearance: A newly-hatched monarch larva is pale green or grayish-white, shiny and almost translucent. It has no stripes or other markings. The head looks black, with lighter spots around the antennae and below the mouthparts, and may be wider than the body. There is a pair of dark triangular patches between the head and front tentacles which contain setae, or hairs. The body is covered with sparse setae. Older first instar larvae have dark stripes on a greenish background.

After hatching, the larva eats its eggshell (chorion). It then eats clusters of fine hairs on the bottom of the milkweed leaf before starting in on the leaf itself. It feeds in a circular motion, often leaving a characteristic, arc-shaped hole in the leaf. First (and second) instar larvae often respond to disturbance by dropping off the leaf on a silk thread, and hang suspended in the air.

SECOND INSTAR

Body Length: 6 mm to 9 mm

Body Width: 1 to 2 mm

Front Tentacles: 0.3 mm

Back Tentacles: Small knobs

Head Capsule: 0.8 mm diameter

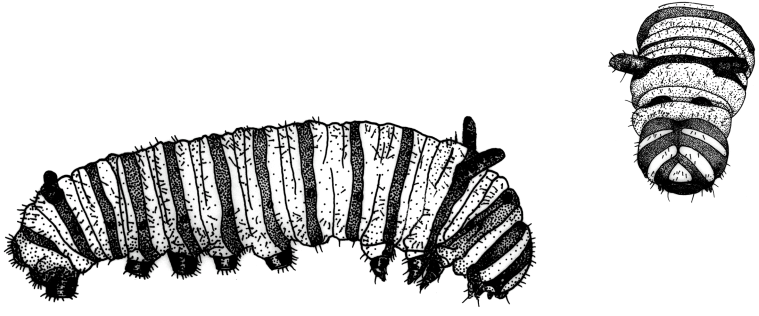

Figure 8. Body and head of second instar (x12.5)

Appearance: Second instar larvae have a clear pattern of black (or dark brown), yellow and white bands, and the body no longer looks transparent and shiny. An excellent characteristic to use in distinguishing first and second instar larvae is a yellow triangle on the head and two sets of yellow bands around this central triangle. The triangular spots behind the head do not have the long setae present in the spots on the first instar larvae. The setae on the body are more abundant, and look shorter and more stubble-like than those on first instar larvae.

THIRD INSTAR

Body Length: 10 to 14 mm

Body Width: 2 to 3.5 mm

Front Tentacles: 1.7 mm

Back tentacles: 0.9 mm

Head Capsule: 1.5 mm in diameter

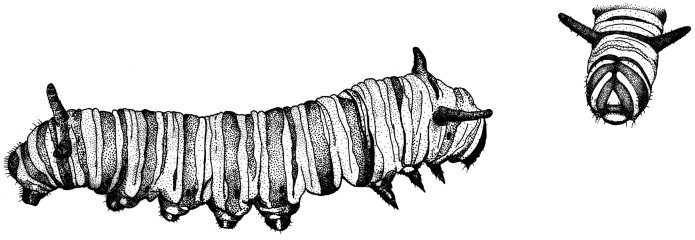

Figure 9. Body and head of third instar (x6)

Appearance: The black and yellow bands on the abdomen of a third instar larva are darker and more distinct than those of the second instar, but the bands on the thorax are still indistinct. The triangular patches behind the head are gone, and have become thin lines that extend below the spiracle. The yellow triangle on the head is larger, and the yellow stripes are more visible. The first set of thoracic legs are smaller than the other two, and are closer to the head.

Third instar larvae usually feed using a distinct cutting motion on leaf edges. Unlike first and second instar larvae, third (and later) instars respond to disturbance by dropping off the leaf and curling into a tight ball. Monarch biologist Fred Urquhart called this behavior "playing possum."

FOURTH INSTAR

Body Length: 13 to 25 mm

Body Width: 2.5 to 5 mm

Front Tentacles: 5 mm

Back Tentacles: 2 mm

Head Capsule: 2.2 mm in diameter

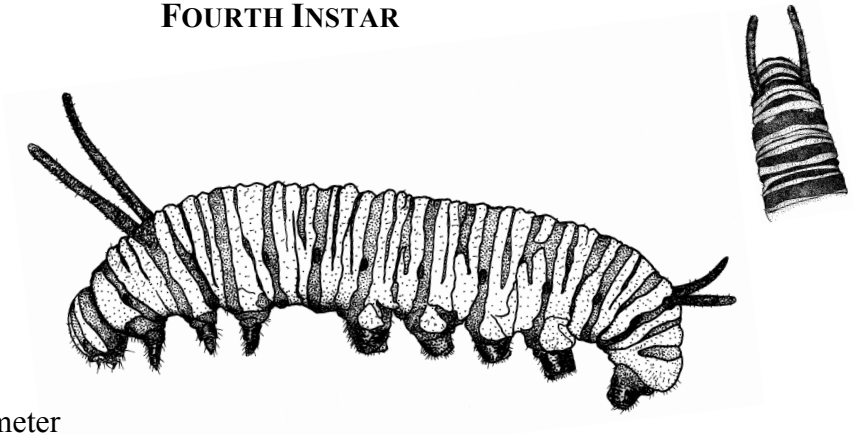

Figure 10. Body and head of fourth instar (x5)

Appearance: There is a distinct banding pattern on the thorax which is not present in the third instar larvae. The first pair of legs is even closer to the head, and there are white spots on the prolegs that were less conspicuous in the third instar.

FIFTH INSTAR

Body Length: 25 to 45 mm

Body Width: 5 to 8 mm

Front Tentacles: 11 mm

Back Tentacles: 4 mm

Head Capsule: 3.5 mm in diameter

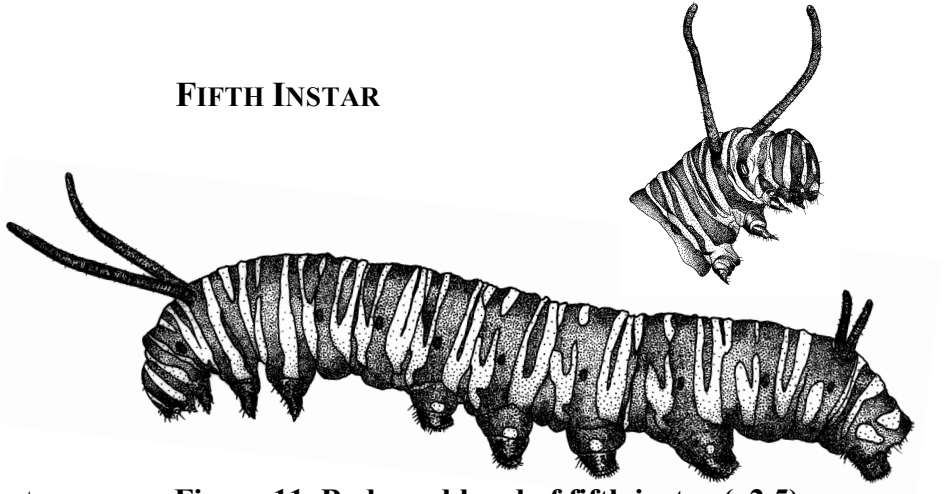

Figure 11. Body and head of fifth instar (x2.5)

Appearance: The body pattern and colors are even more vivid that they were in the fourth instar, and the black bands look wider and almost velvety. The front legs look much smaller than the other two pairs, and are even closer to the head. There are distinct white dots on the prolegs, and the body looks quite plump, especially just prior to pupating.

Fifth instar monarch larvae often chew a shallow notch in the petiole of the leaf they are eating, which causes the leaf to fall into a vertical position. They move much farther and faster than other instars, and are often found far from milkweed plants as they seek a site for pupating.