The butterfly life cycle for kids: egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, butterfly

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The butterfly life cycle for kids, with the monarch: four stages, how long each takes, why the caterpillar eats only milkweed, and the generation that flies to Mexico.

A butterfly's life has four stages: egg, caterpillar, chrysalis and butterfly. Scientists call the caterpillar a larva and the chrysalis a pupa, and they call the whole change complete metamorphosis. The monarch, the orange-and-black butterfly most American children know, is the best one to follow, and the USDA Forest Service has a page on its life that I used for this post, read on 31 October 2026.

Peabody's monarch butterfly page has the monarch's numbers with their sources, and the life cycles lesson walks through the butterfly and the frog step by step, read aloud, with a three-box quiz at the end.

The four stages

1. The egg

A female monarch lays her eggs one at a time on milkweed leaves. She can tell the right plant by tasting it with her feet: the National Park Service says butterflies have taste sensors there. The eggs hatch about four days after they're laid, says the Forest Service.

2. The caterpillar (larva)

A new caterpillar is tiny, less than 1 centimeter long. It does one thing: eat. It eats only milkweed leaves, and it grows to about 5 centimeters. A caterpillar's skin can't stretch forever, so it sheds its skin as it grows. The stages between those sheds are called instars.

Milkweed has a secret. Its leaves have a bitter, poisonous chemical in them, and the caterpillar keeps it in its body. It makes the caterpillar, and later the butterfly, taste bad to the birds and mice that might eat it. That's why a monarch's bright orange is a warning: I taste bad!

3. The chrysalis (pupa)

When it's fully grown, the caterpillar turns into a chrysalis, a case where its body is rebuilt into a butterfly. The Forest Service says that can happen in as few as five days.

4. The butterfly

Then the butterfly comes out. A grown monarch drinks nectar from flowers through a tongue shaped like a straw, which the Park Service calls a proboscis. Its wings are 7 to 10 cm across (2.8 to 3.9 in), says the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Forest Service says it weighs less than a gram.

How long does it live?

Most monarchs born in summer live only 2 to 5 weeks as butterflies, says the Forest Service. In that time they find a mate and lay the eggs of the next generation. There are up to four generations each summer, each one flying a little farther north.

The last generation of the year is different. It doesn't lay eggs straight away. Instead it flies 2,000 to 3,000 miles south to spend the winter in Mexico, and some of these butterflies live as long as 9 months. In spring they head north, laying eggs on milkweed as they go, and the cycle starts again.

Things to do

- Watch one. If milkweed grows near you, look under the leaves in summer for tiny eggs and striped caterpillars. Look, don't touch, and leave them where they are.
- Draw the cycle. Fold a sheet into four and draw one stage in each square, with arrows going round in a circle. The arrows are the point: a life cycle has no end.
- Color it. The monarch coloring page prints on one sheet, and the insect label sheet asks a child to name the parts.
- Compare it. The frog has a life cycle with big changes too: from the egg comes a tadpole with a tail and gills, which grows legs, loses its tail and hops onto land. The life cycles lesson puts the two side by side.

Questions grown-ups ask

Why do monarchs go to Mexico?

To get away from the cold. The Park Service calls the trip a journey to escape cold winters, and in the mild forests where they spend the winter, the butterflies cluster together for warmth and shelter from wind and snow.

How do I tell a butterfly from a moth?

The Park Service gives a simple clue: a butterfly's antennae usually end in a little round club, while a moth's are thin like threads or feathery.

Why are monarchs a worry?

Their caterpillars need milkweed, and nothing else will do: the Park Service says milkweed leaves are the only food of their young. The Red List puts the monarch at "doing fine" for now, and people who care about monarchs watch the milkweed. Peabody's what does endangered mean? post explains the ladder.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026 and has no ads. The library has stories at every reading level.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/butterfly-life-cycle-for-kids