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see how we live

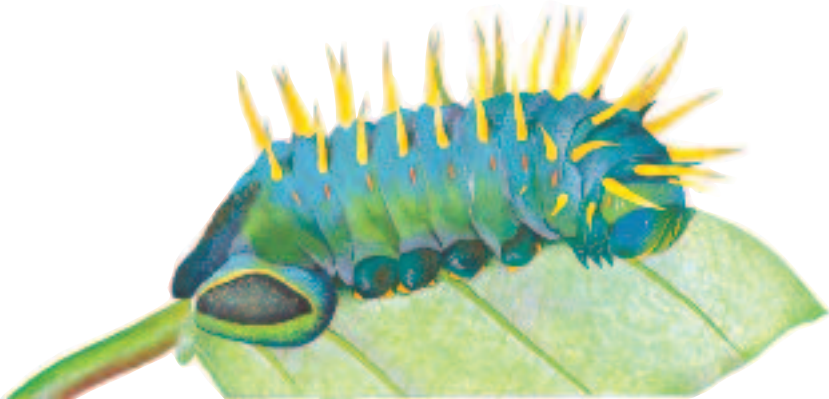
Butterflies and moths



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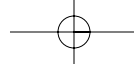
Butterflies and moths

You must be fascinated by us—without doubt, the most beautiful of insects! Want to know how we come to have those amazing, colourful patterns on our wings—and why they can help us survive? Or how we undergo that miraculous change from caterpillars into our magnificent selves? Then read on ...

How does a caterpillar become a butterfly?

I am a blue morpho butterfly and I live in the rainforests of Central and South America. It's difficult to imagine, I know, but I began my life as something completely different: a hairy, wingless caterpillar. I was very colourful—but not at all blue. Let me tell you my story ...

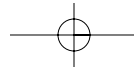




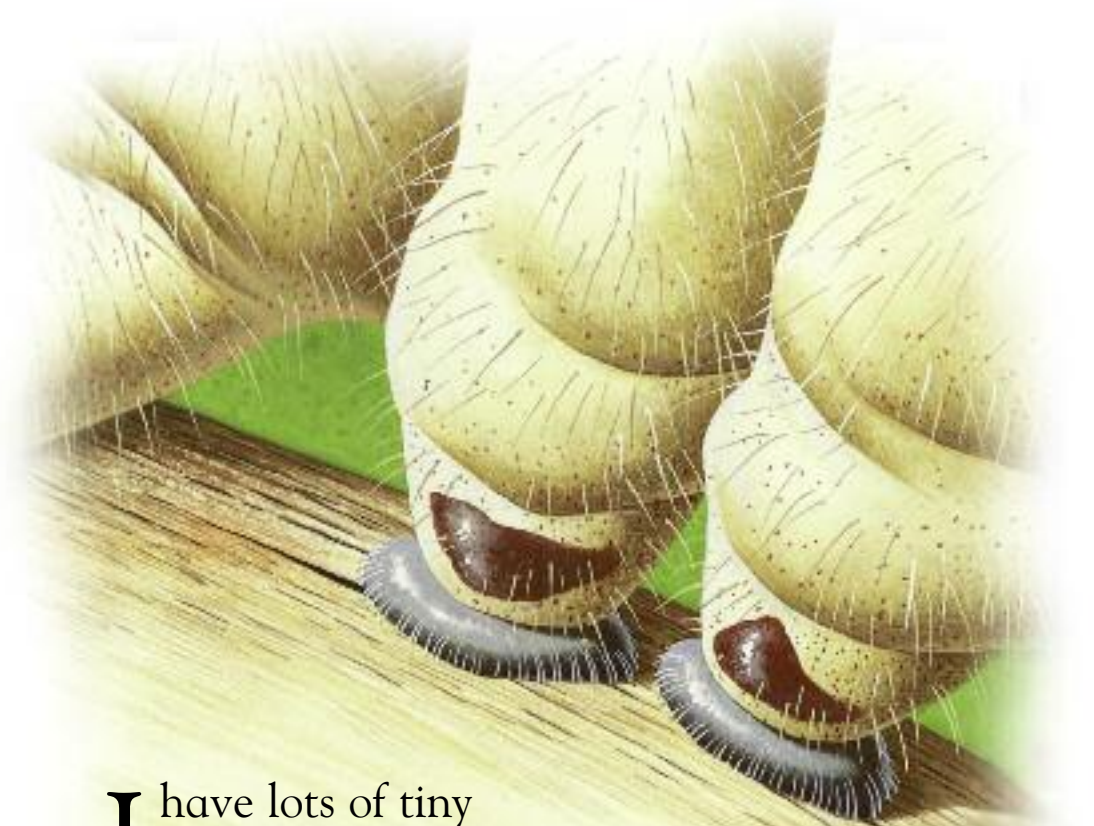
These shiny green buttons are tiny. They are actually morpho butterfly eggs stuck to the surface of a leaf. It takes around 10 days for a caterpillar to hatch after the egg is laid. Keep watching—one of them is about to hatch.



The thin shell splits open and I, a fresh new caterpillar, struggle out of my egg. The bright colours we have when we are caterpillars are there for a reason. They warn other creatures not to try eating us, as we might be poisonous.

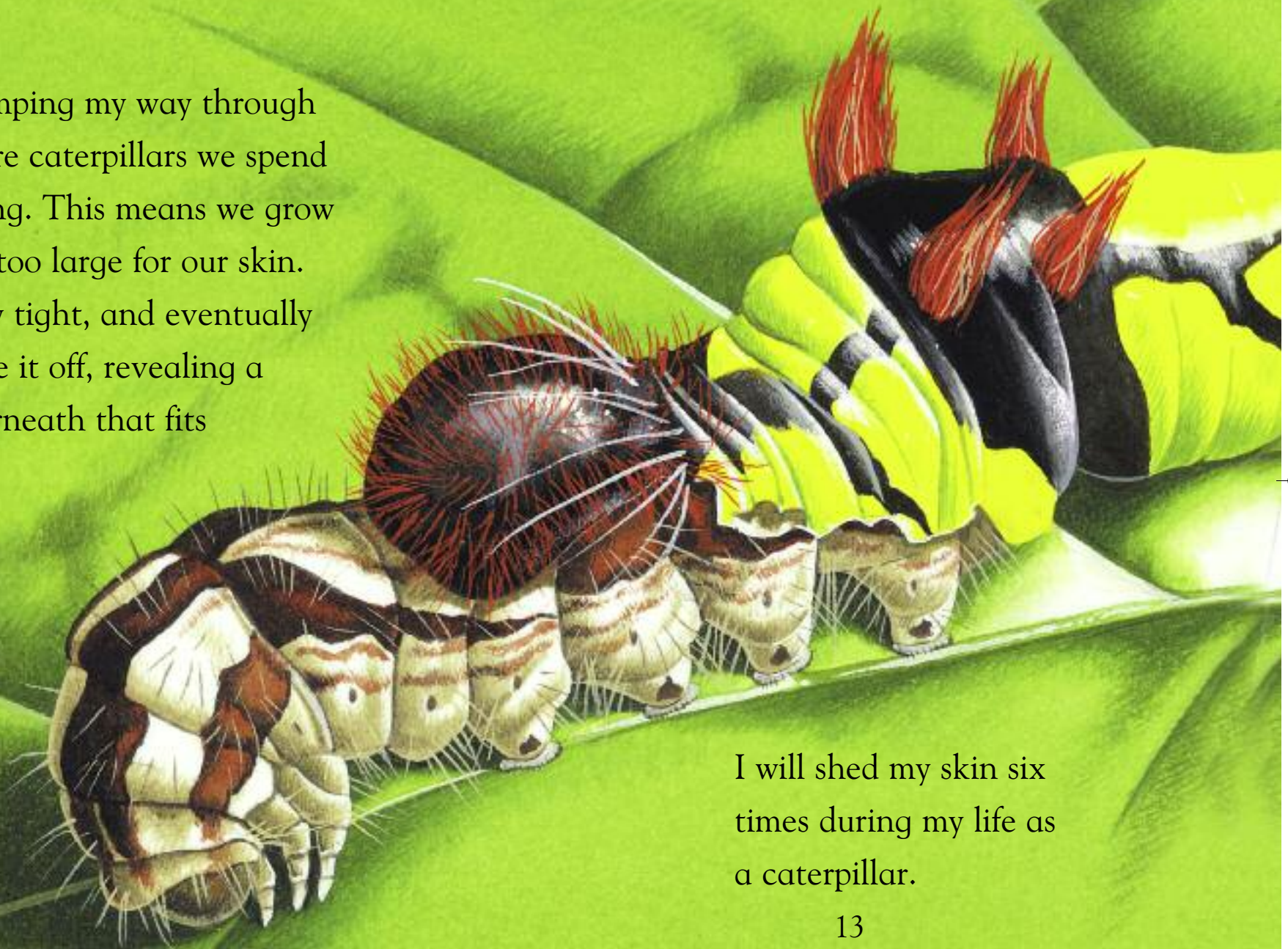


You can see why we are such good eaters. We have scissor-like jaws that make it easy to chop up leaves to eat.

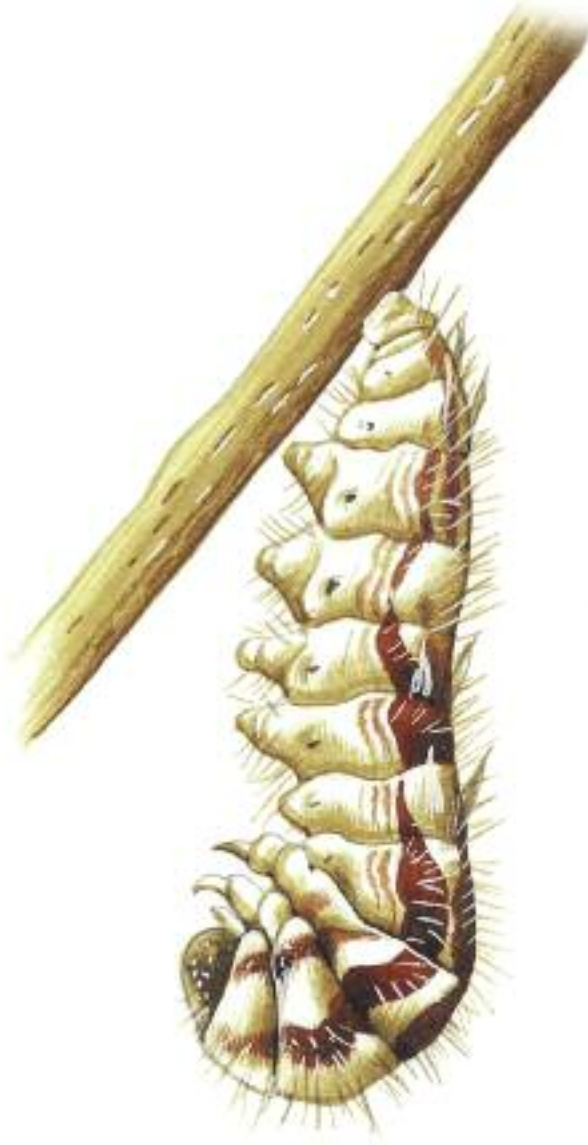


I have lots of tiny hooks on my feet to help me grip leaves and twigs. Because they hold on so tightly, it makes it very difficult for any animal who wants to eat me to pull me off the plant.

I soon get busy chomping my way through leaves. When we are caterpillars we spend most of our time eating. This means we grow quickly and soon get too large for our skin. The old skin gets very tight, and eventually splits. Then we shuffle it off, revealing a bright new skin underneath that fits us much better!



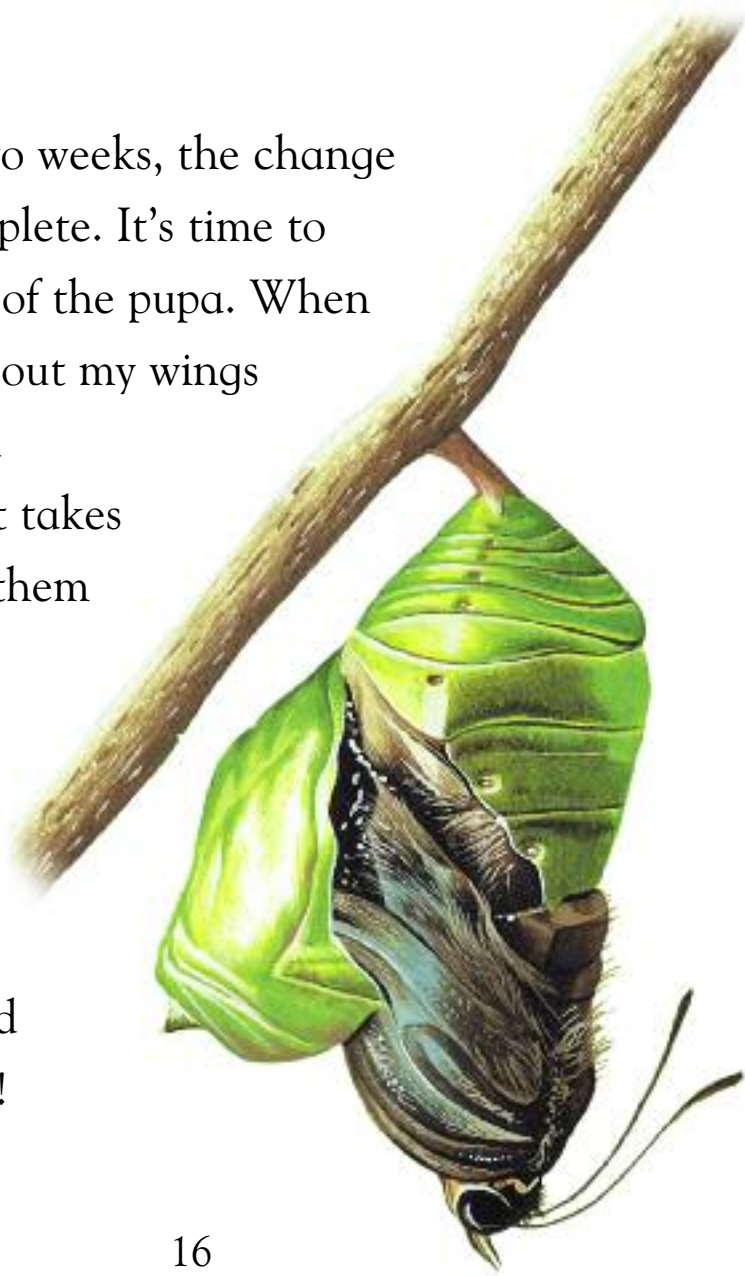
I will shed my skin six times during my life as a caterpillar.



After about eleven weeks of eating and growing, it's time for me to start turning into a butterfly. I attach myself to a twig and grow a hard shell—called a pupa. This is very well camouflaged to look like a leaf. Safe inside I slowly begin to change ...



After two weeks, the change is complete. It's time to wriggle out of the pupa. When I first come out my wings are soft and crumpled. It takes a while for them to stiffen so that I can fly. Now I must look for food and a mate!



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I suck plant sap and fruit juices with my long tongue, which I keep tightly rolled up when not feeding.

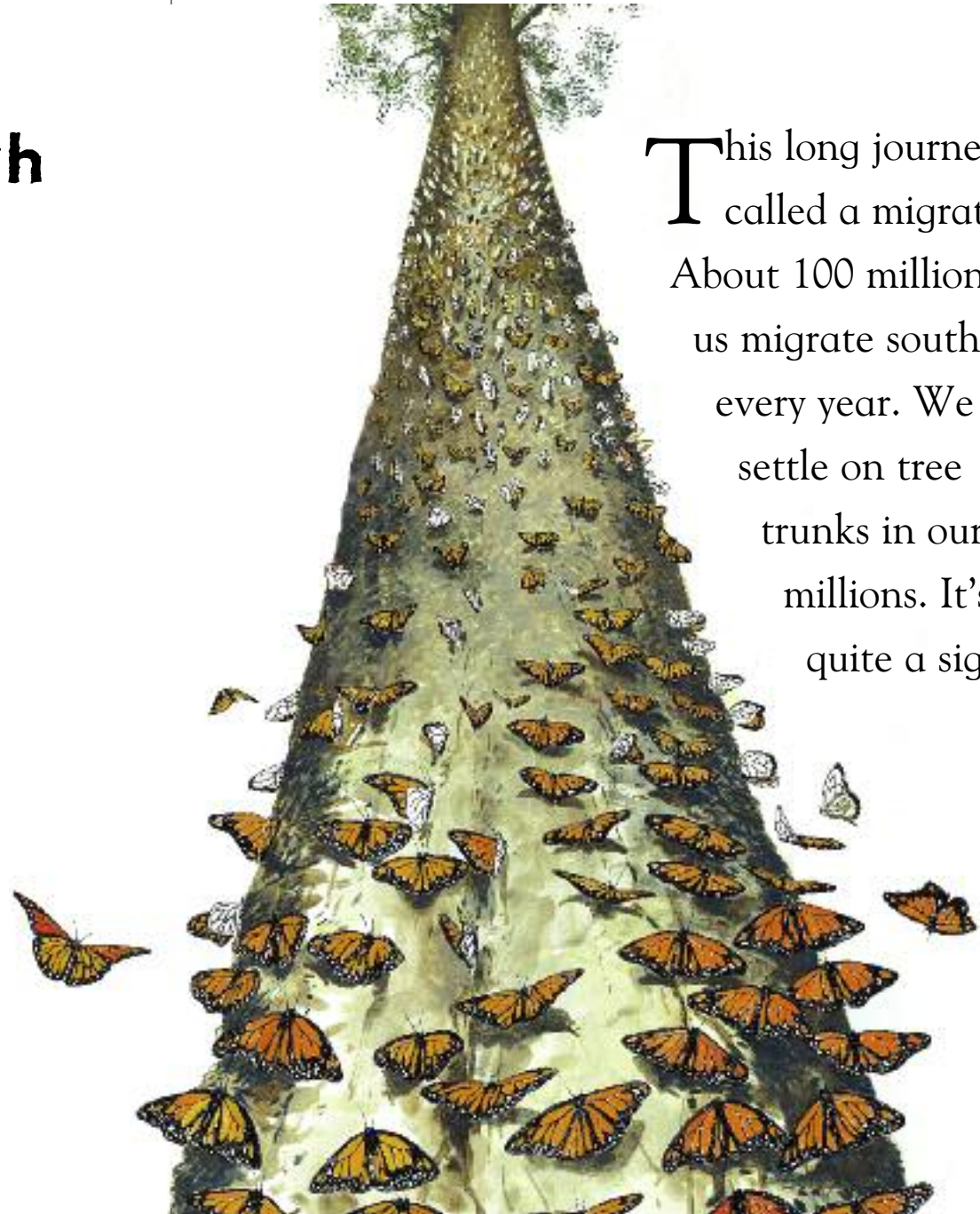
As butterflies we live for just two weeks—not much time to find a mate! But I have been lucky. See the undersides of my wings are brown? This helps me blend in with my surroundings.



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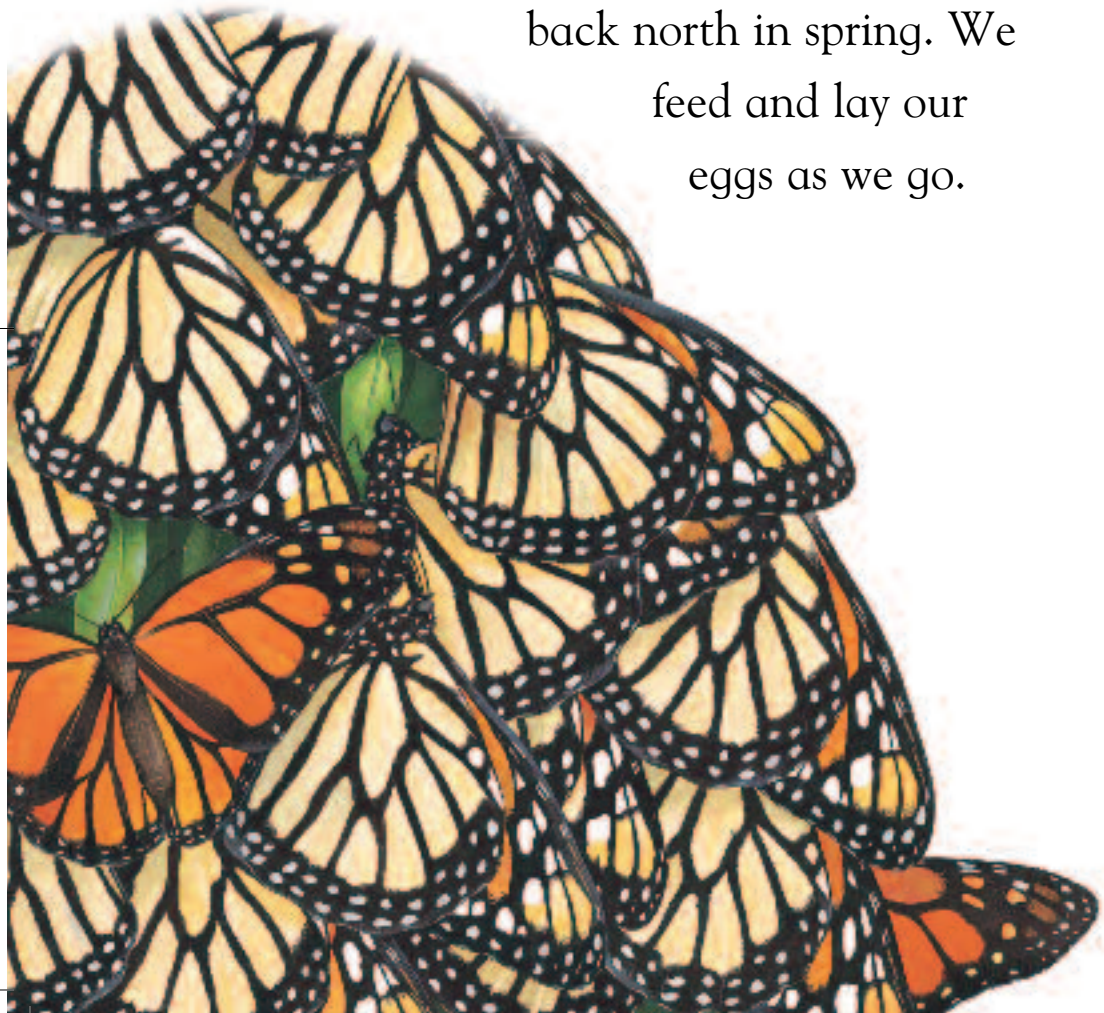
Where does a monarch fly to in winter?

We monarch butterflies fly thousands of kilometres south for the winter, from our summer homes in the USA and Canada to the mountain forests of Mexico.



This long journey is called a migration. About 100 million of us migrate south every year. We settle on tree trunks in our millions. It's quite a sight!

We rest over the winter on the trees,
huddling together for warmth. We
save our energy for the long flight
back north in spring. We
feed and lay our
eggs as we go.

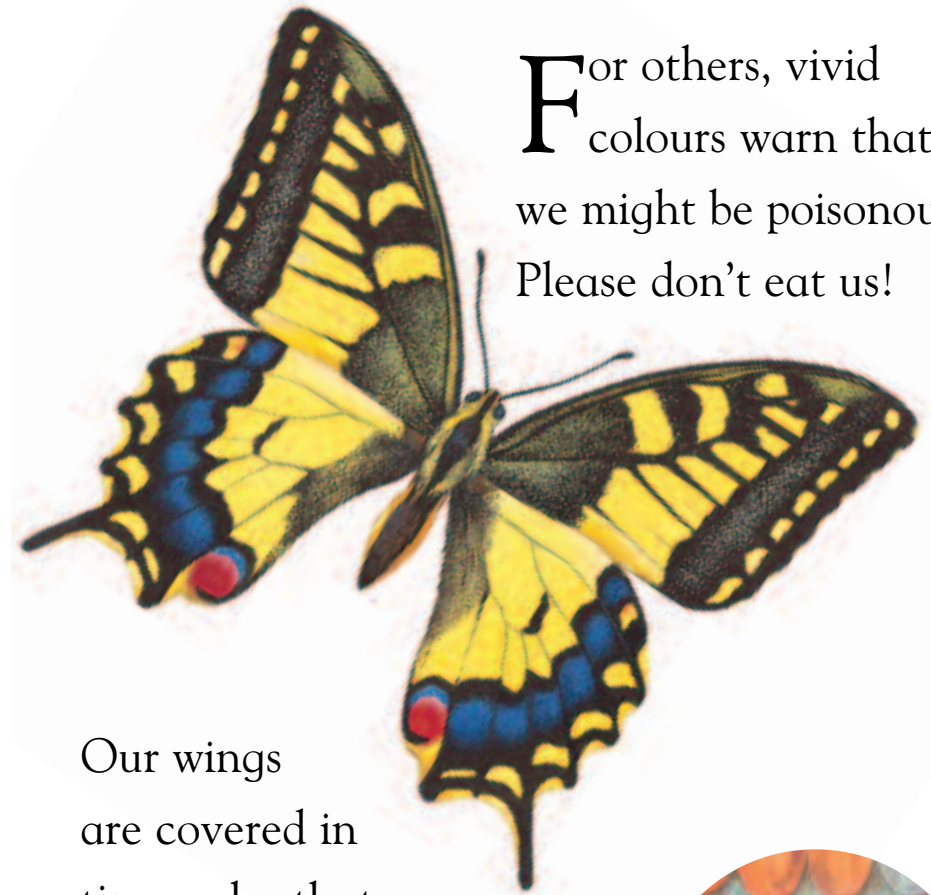


Our caterpillars live on milkweed plants,
eating leaves, flowers and stems. Once
they have turned into butterflies, they fly
back home.



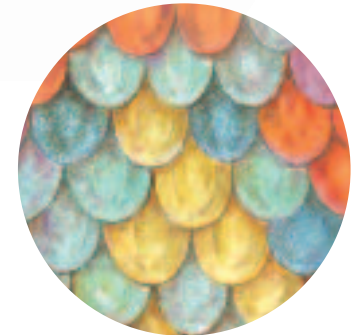
Why are some butterflies brightly coloured?

We have bright colours for many reasons. Some of us use our beautiful wings to attract a mate.



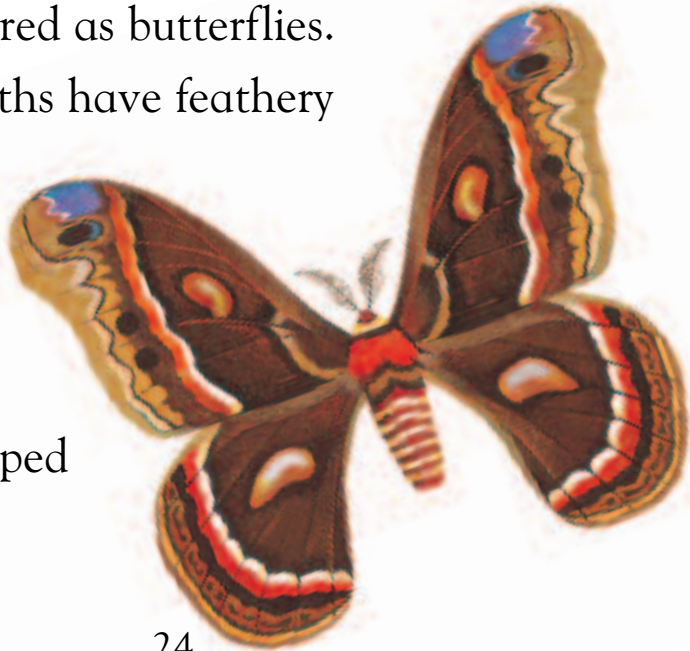
For others, vivid colours warn that we might be poisonous. Please don't eat us!

Our wings are covered in tiny scales that reflect the light and give us our shimmering colours.



How do moths differ from butterflies?

Moths and butterflies look quite similar, but there are differences. Most moths fly at night, while butterflies are daytime creatures. Moths are not usually as brightly coloured as butterflies. And most moths have feathery antennae, while most butterflies have long, thin, club-shaped ones.



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When we rest we moths spread our wings out

flat. Butterflies close their wings up and hold them upright.

Both moths and butterflies like to drink nectar, and use our long, hollow tongues to suck it from flowers.



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I am a Hercules moth caterpillar. I make no attempt to blend into the background. For a start, I am 15 centimetres long so it's difficult to hide! I'm not actually poisonous, but I pretend to be by showing these bright warning colours to any animals who might want to eat me.

My long yellow spines also look dangerous and they make me very difficult to eat—I'd get stuck in a bird's throat.



Why are some moths camouflaged?

Life can be dangerous for moths. One way to avoid being a tasty meal for bigger animals is to make ourselves more difficult to see. That's where camouflage comes in. Some of us use our appearance to blend in with the background. That's what peppered moths do. Can you find two resting on this tree trunk? You'll have to look hard ...

Even the caterpillars are really well camouflaged—they look just like twigs!

