

# Say Goodbye to . . . The Orange Visitors From Montana

JOHN RICHARDS

**E**VERY YEAR they come from miles away to party in Santa Cruz. They are seasonal visitors, gathering near the beach by the thousands; sleeping close together and having sex in front of God and everybody. Like many in town, they are transients who come here because of the climate and permissive atmosphere. They come from a cult called *Danaus Plexippus*, and they are as much a part of Santa Cruz as the surfers and the Town Clock.

The winter storms have not dampened their enthusiasm for the good life. In fact, they have stayed longer this year because of the rains, since they don't like to fly in severe storms. The wet weather has improved their social life, causing them to stay longer before going their separate ways.

We could accurately describe these creatures as being short on intelligence and long on primitive desire. After all, they are insects; pretty, but not too smart. They have one mission in life: to make more of their kind. This is why the Monarch butterflies come to Natural Bridges.

Like most of us, they don't like cold weather. Unlike most of us, they are cold-blooded, which means that when the air gets cold, they slow down. If it gets too cold, they stop. If they fly into a cold front, they drop like stones and lie paralyzed on the ground, waiting to become breakfast for an ant, beetle, or mouse. If it stays too cold for too long, they die, whether they get eaten or not.

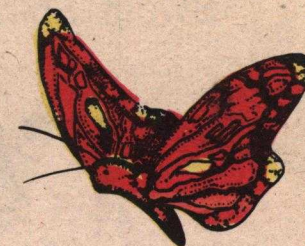
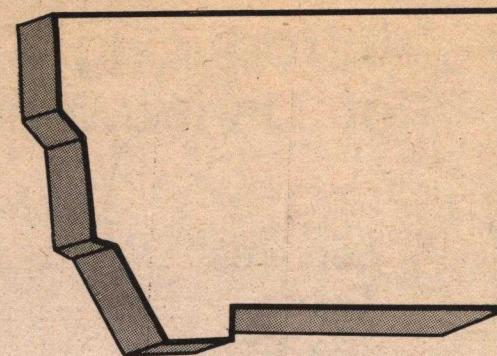
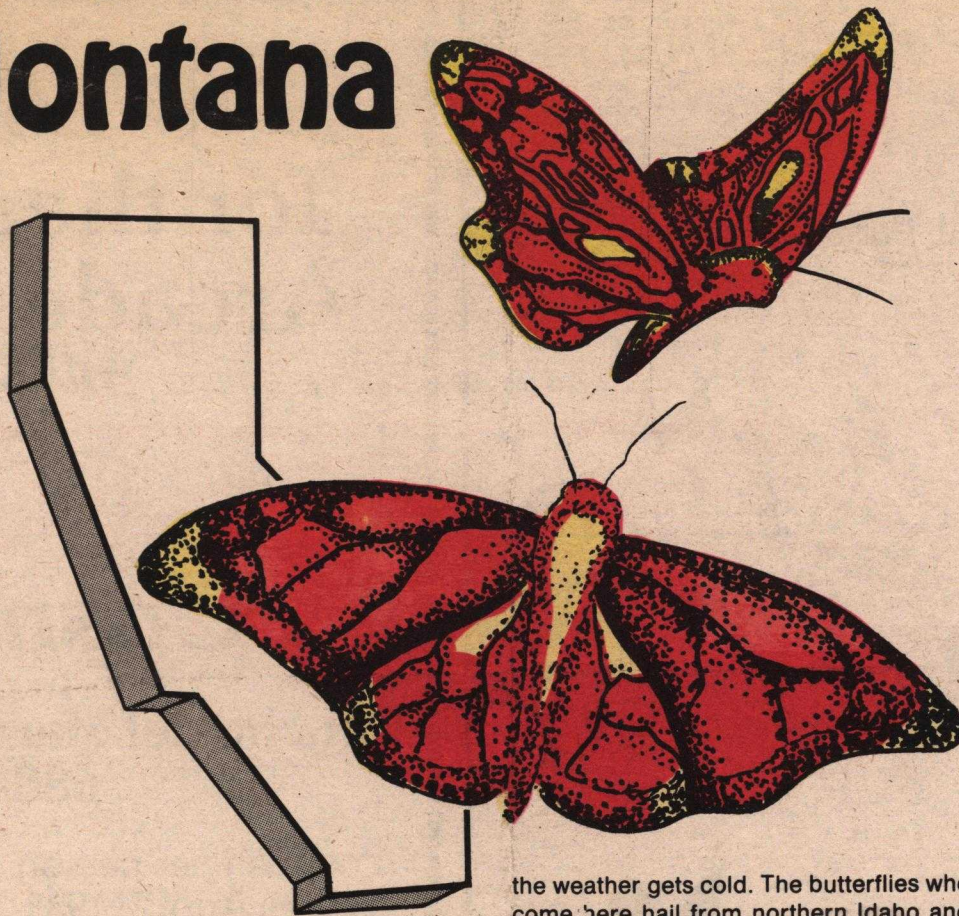
Since they have to survive in order to make babies, the smart ones fly south and stay in trees with their friends when it gets cold. Eucalyptus trees provide an ideal house for the butterflies, since the insects' clawlike feet cling onto the thin leaves extremely well, even when they're slightly sluggish from cool temperatures. Unlike flies, they can't walk upside-down on a smooth surface (like a smooth, fat leaf). They stay close to their friends

because it's easier to cling to a leaf in gale force winds when you're packed in with several hundred of your kind. Plus, in eucalyptus trees you don't have to worry about fleas.

Why do they come here in the first place? Are rumors of Santa Cruz's lifestyle passed along the butterfly grapevine?

They're safe here, for one thing, free to party at the beach without interference from humans, since Natural Bridges is a "protected Monarch area." But they've been coming here long before anyone made it a Monarch sanctuary. Indeed, they spend the winter in many spots along the coast. Why don't they join their cousins down in Mexico, since it's so much warmer there?

The reason can be summed up in one word: "southwest." That's the direction Monarchs are programmed to fly when



Are they here by chance or design? Do they really party? Are the large clusters on the trees really butterfly support groups? Why do they leave?

Scientists have not unraveled the Monarch mind enough to know whether they party or whether they're bored stiff up there in those trees. No one knows what they talk about, either. But there are some scientific explanations for their presence.

Butterflies base their choice of a roosting site on geographic location, degree of protection offered, and type of foliage on the trees. Natural Bridges satisfies these requirements. It's an ideal place for *Danaus Plexippus* to stay.

They leave because they're done staying. It's one of those built-in necessities, like flying southwest. The party's over. Researchers know what causes the migration (the trip north is triggered by the lengthening days of spring), but no one knows exactly why they go.

One thing's for sure—once they leave, they won't come back. They fly north, lay their eggs, and die. Their children mature and reproduce, but they don't travel—they spend their entire lives in one area. By the time *their* children grow up, however, it will be time to take flight again.

Most of them are gone now; only a few stragglers remain. Maybe they had too much fun at the party and are slow in regaining touch with reality. Maybe they want to linger awhile, for they've been told how nice spring is in Santa Cruz, and God knows it can't rain forever. •

the weather gets cold. The butterflies who come here hail from northern Idaho and western Montana. When the days get shorter, toward the end of July, they pack their bags. Once they start, they fly as far as 80 miles a day, but their radars are only designed to fly in one direction: southwest. Toward the end of October, they hit the coast around the Bay Area, where the coastline veers to the southeast.

Now they stop. If they could change direction, they might follow the coast and end up in sunny Baja. The scenic flight would take them over Big Sur, and they would meet a lot of Monarchs from the midwest, perhaps even from the east coast. Since they only know how to go southwest, however, further flight would take them over the Pacific Ocean. Even an insect knows there are no eucalyptus trees in the Pacific Ocean.

So they move in for the winter, staying all around the Bay Area. Some, like their human counterparts, are different from the general population. They end up here.