

Photo Description



This image shows a monarch butterfly caterpillar with yellow, black, and white stripes crawling on a rock surface. Next to the caterpillar is an empty chrysalis case that looks clear and pale. The caterpillar appears to be in its final stage before forming its own chrysalis to become a butterfly.

Scientific Phenomena

The anchoring phenomenon shown here is metamorphosis - specifically the complete life cycle transformation of a monarch butterfly. This image captures a moment where one monarch has already emerged from its chrysalis (leaving behind the empty case), while another caterpillar continues growing and will soon enter the pupation stage. This happens because the caterpillar's body contains special groups of cells called imaginal discs that remain dormant during the larval stage but activate during metamorphosis to form adult butterfly structures like wings, antennae, and reproductive organs.

Core Science Concepts

1. Complete Metamorphosis: Monarch butterflies undergo four distinct life stages - egg, larva (caterpillar), pupa (chrysalis), and adult butterfly. Each stage has different characteristics and functions.
2. Life Cycle Adaptations: The striped pattern on monarch caterpillars serves as warning coloration to predators, indicating they are toxic from eating milkweed plants.
3. Growth and Development: Caterpillars molt (shed their skin) five times as they grow, increasing in size dramatically before pupation.
4. Structural Changes: During the chrysalis stage, the caterpillar's body completely reorganizes through a process called histolysis (breaking down old structures) and histogenesis (building new structures).

Pedagogical Tip:

Use real monarch caterpillars or chrysalises if available in your area, as hands-on observation significantly increases student engagement and retention. If live specimens aren't available, high-quality photographs and videos can be equally effective when combined with interactive discussions.

UDL Suggestions:

Provide multiple ways for students to document their observations - through drawings, verbal descriptions, written notes, or digital recordings. This allows students with different learning preferences and abilities to fully participate in scientific observation and documentation.

Zoom In / Zoom Out

Zoom In: At the cellular level, hormone signals trigger the breakdown of larval tissues and the activation of imaginal discs. Special enzymes dissolve muscle and organ tissues, while stem-like cells rapidly divide to form entirely new body structures like compound eyes, wings, and antennae.

Zoom Out: Monarch metamorphosis is part of a larger ecosystem cycle that includes multi-generational migration patterns spanning thousands of miles, pollination services to flowering plants, and complex predator-prey relationships that help maintain biodiversity across North American habitats.

Discussion Questions

1. What evidence can you observe that shows this monarch caterpillar is preparing for its next life stage? (Bloom's: Analyze | DOK: 2)
2. How might the monarch's four-stage life cycle help it survive better than if it stayed a caterpillar its whole life? (Bloom's: Evaluate | DOK: 3)
3. What patterns do you notice between the monarch life cycle and other animals you know about? (Bloom's: Analyze | DOK: 2)
4. If you were designing an organism that needed to travel long distances and also eat lots of leaves, what life cycle stages would you create and why? (Bloom's: Create | DOK: 4)

Potential Student Misconceptions

1. Misconception: The caterpillar just grows wings inside the chrysalis.
Reality: The caterpillar's body completely dissolves and rebuilds into an entirely different body plan with new organs, systems, and structures.
2. Misconception: All insects go through the same type of metamorphosis.
Reality: Some insects like grasshoppers undergo incomplete metamorphosis (egg, nymph, adult) without a pupal stage.
3. Misconception: The chrysalis is like a cocoon that the caterpillar spins.
Reality: The chrysalis is actually the caterpillar's final molted skin that hardens, while cocoons are silk structures spun by moth caterpillars.

NGSS Connections

Performance Expectation: 3-LS1-1 - Develop models to describe that organisms have unique and diverse life cycles but all have in common birth, growth, reproduction, and death.

Disciplinary Core Ideas:

- 3-LS1.B - Growth and Development of Organisms
- 5-LS2.A - Interdependent Relationships in Ecosystems

Crosscutting Concepts:

- Patterns - Observable patterns in nature guide organization and classification
- Structure and Function - The shape and stability of structures relate to their function

Science Vocabulary

- * Metamorphosis: The process of changing from one life stage to a completely different form
- * Chrysalis: The hard protective casing that forms around a caterpillar during its transformation stage
- * Larva: The caterpillar stage of a butterfly or moth's life cycle when it focuses on eating and growing
- * Molt: When an insect sheds its outer skin to grow larger
- * Life cycle: The series of changes an organism goes through from birth to death
- * Pupa: The transformation stage when a caterpillar changes into an adult butterfly inside its chrysalis

External Resources

Children's Books:

- From Caterpillar to Butterfly by Deborah Heiligman
- Monarch Butterfly by Gail Gibbons
- Waiting for Wings by Lois Ehlert

YouTube Videos:

- "Monarch Butterfly Metamorphosis Time Lapse" - Real-time footage showing the complete transformation process (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocWgSgMGxOc>)
- "Life Cycle of a Butterfly" by National Geographic Kids - Animated explanation perfect for elementary students (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmae4lzx8s>)