

Maiden of the Monarchs

Discoverer of butterfly wintering site breaks decades of silence to tell her story.

by Sheryl Smith-Rodgers

Catalina Trail holds the 1976 *National Geographic* magazine where she appears on the cover.

For more than three decades, Catalina Aguado Trail fiercely guarded her secret. Only those closest to her knew of the arduous searches she'd made in the 1970s with her then-husband, Kenneth Brugger, in the Trans Volcanic Mountains of Central Mexico and the biological wonder that they'd found high among the oyamel firs. With crystal-clear clarity, Trail still remembers climbing a final slope on that chilly January day and gazing up to see towering evergreens shrouded with millions of dormant monarchs.

Finally, after searching for more than two years, they'd solved the mystery of where eastern populations of the orange-and-black butterfly spent their winter months. But then, after having played a part in one of the modern world's greatest natural discoveries, the Mexican-born, self-taught naturalist — who graced the August 1976 cover of *National Geographic* — vanished.

"No one knew where I was," says Trail, 66, seated in the conference room of a South Austin community center. "I kept my lips zipped for 35 years because I was disappointed and disagreed with what happened after we found the butterflies. Now I want to set the record straight. I want to tell my side."

Trail, a retired behavioral health counselor who gardens and stargazes at her Austin home, doesn't seek recognition. In fact, she prefers her privacy. So much that producers of *Flight of the Butterflies* (SK Films Inc., January 2013) hired a detective in 2011 to find Trail.

"It took a lot of thinking before I answered their letter," she says.

In February 2012, Trail returned to Mexico to serve as a historical adviser during part of the filming. The 40-minute documentary interweaves monarch biology

with the story of Fred and Norah Urquhart, two Canadian scientists who had studied monarch ecology and migrations since 1937 and perfected a tracking tag that could remain stuck to a delicate butterfly wing. Their fieldwork, bolstered by amateur volunteers, would confirm that the fall generation of eastern monarchs migrates up to 3,000 miles to reach roosting sites in Mexico. (Western monarchs overwinter along California's coastline.)

Once temperatures warm in the spring, the same monarchs head north, laying eggs on milkweeds as they go. After a month, they die. Subsequent generations continue north, reaching as far as Canada, where the cycle starts over in the fall.

Monarchs and butterflies of all kinds always fascinated Catalina Aguado, who grew up in the Mexican state of Michoacán.

"I was a crazy, buggy girl," she says. "I'd lie on my stomach in the mud so I could watch the monarchs, mourning cloaks and tiger swallowtails sip, lift up and then land again. I'd spend days there, just watching them."

Free-spirited, Catalina vowed to avoid marriage, unlike her sisters who married young and started families. She wanted to see the world and attend college. In 1971, she

met Brugger, an American inventor and textile consultant in Mexico. At 53, he fell madly in love. She was 22. The two traveled Mexico together in his 20-foot Winnebago.

"I made Ken a net so we could chase butterflies," Trail says. "I taught him about them. He didn't know one butterfly from another. He was colorblind, too."

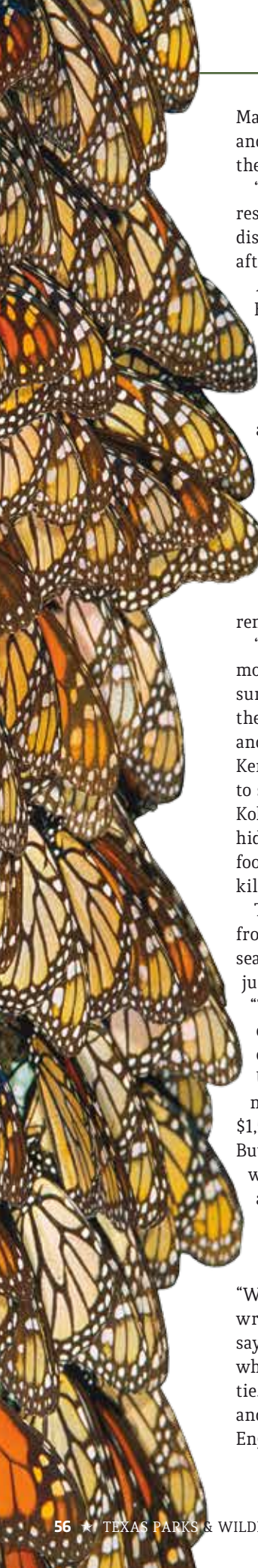
In February 1973, they came across Norah Urquhart's notice in a Mexico City newspaper that sought volunteers to search for and tag monarchs. Brugger wanted to help. Getting involved, though, meant no time for Trail's college courses. In the end, she agreed. Her passion for butterflies as well as her knowledge of the native dialects, culture and countryside would be crucial to their success.

"Ken answered the ad," Trail says. "I was the little Mexican girl; he called me Cathy. He was the big American guy. I was rusty on speaking English, but I could read and write it. So he communicated, and I typed."

In response, Urquhart mailed them books on monarchs. That winter, Brugger and Trail loaded up the motor home and began to search the mountains near Zitácuaro, located 100 miles west of Mexico City. In



PHOTO OPPOSITE PAGE BY CHASE FOUNTAIN / TPWD; THIS PAGE © INCO ARNDT / MINDEN PICTURES



May 1974, they married in Austin and then visited the Urquharts at their Toronto home in August.

"They told us more about their research and how the monarchs disappeared into a 'black hole' after they left Texas," Trail says.

Armed with a search plan, Brugger and Trail returned to Mexico, towing a postal delivery Jeep that they'd rebuilt and painted harvest gold. They also brought along a Honda Trail 90 motorcycle and Kola, a Basenji (barkless dog). The couple headed northeast on Federal Highway 15 back to Zitácuaro, where they'd seen monarchs. At night, they slept in the Winnebago. Sometimes they rented a hotel room.

"We'd leave at 4:30 in the morning and return after sundown," she says. "We'd hide the Jeep with a camouflaged sheet and get on the motorcycle. While Ken drove, I used the binoculars to search the mountains, and Kola sat between us. Then we'd hide the motorcycle and go on foot. Most days we'd walk 18 kilometers (just over 11 miles)."

Travel expenses came largely from their own pockets. "We searched for two years, starting just with weekends," Trail says. "Then we went every day. We decided, what the heck, no one is going to pay us. The Urquharts didn't have much money. Later, Fred did give us \$1,500 and then maybe \$500. But 99 percent of our searching was for free. Ken and I were adventurous. He was retired, and I was curious."

The couple spent Christmas Day 1974 in the mountains. "We gave each other gifts wrapped in banana leaves," Trail says, smiling. "I gave Ken a white dress shirt and blue silk tie. He gave me a blue jumpsuit and a huge Simon and Schuster's English/Spanish dictionary."

She continues: "We saw monarchs flying close to the mountains, but we still weren't sure where they went. So we drove to Mexico City to get topographical maps. We knew that the butterflies needed a certain temperature and humidity. Then we returned and focused just on certain areas. Finally, we felt like we were close to finding them."

Encouraged, they ended New Year's Day 1975 at a shabby inn. "The beds were horrible, but we wanted electricity and a hot shower," Trail says. "We barely slept. Then we got up around 3 and ate our usual big bowl of cream of wheat, topped with sugar and cinnamon. We always wanted to get to our location in the dark to stay out of the public eye."

Still, their expeditions occasionally raised eyebrows. "Some said that we were looking for Zapata's treasure or that we wanted to take their minerals," she says. "But I'd tell them, oh, no, we're looking for monarchs. 'What's that?' they'd ask. Then I would show them pictures of monarchs. 'Why?' they'd ask, and I would say because we wanted to educate people about how they live and travel. They were OK with that."

Loaded with three backpacks and sturdy walking sticks, Brugger, Trail and Kola set off at 4 a.m. on Thursday, Jan. 2, 1975, on the trail bike. They met up with a local man whom they'd hired and tied their packs onto his uncle's horse. Their equipment included three cameras, canisters of film, topo maps, water, food and notebooks.

"I always wrote down where we went, temperatures, altitudes, wind direction and how many monarchs we saw," Trail says. "I kept a total of around 40 legal pads and composition books, filled with data."

In her book that morning, Trail

noted that snow and rain had recently fallen. Gray clouds hid the sun. Temperatures hovered in the 30s. Despite the miserable conditions, the group trekked up Cerro Pelón, wading at times through thigh-deep mulch.

"The man was afraid that coral snakes would hurt the horse," she says. "I told my feet that there were no coral snakes and kept going."

Then, late in the afternoon, Trail looked up and stopped dead in her tracks.

"I yelled, 'I need the camera! I see them! I see them! Up here!'" she remembers. "Ken hurried up behind me, and all he could say was, 'Oh, my God!' From then on, there was complete silence. Neither of us could talk. I will never get over seeing so many butterflies at one time. I don't have the words to describe what I saw.

"My mind just went blank," she continues. "Then Ken and I walked together. We kept whispering, 'Wow! Wow! Wow! We didn't want to scare the monarchs in their own sanctuary. The ground was a foot and a half deep with them. They covered the tree trunks like pages of a book. We stepped carefully so as not to kill any."

"With each step, I'd shake my foot back and forth until I could feel bare ground. Then we stood in the middle of a clearing. The man was calling, 'It's really getting late! I told him I had chocolates in my bag. He ate them all!'"

Awed and overwhelmed, Trail squatted down. Gently, she nudged away monarchs. Then she sat down and slowly lowered her back to the ground. She bent her legs up and crossed her arms across her chest. Soon monarchs covered her body.

"I felt their scratchy feet on my face and thought to myself, Oh, my God, what are we going to do now," Trail says. "I wish everyone

in the world had my eyes right now to see what I'm seeing and feel what I'm feeling because this is so amazing! My God, you butterflies flew thousands of miles, and here you are! You see, not many people knew back then how far they flew."

Soon the last traces of sunlight slipped behind the firs. "We had to hurry back down the mountain and call the professor to tell him," she says. "But my heart was crying, and my spirit was low. 'So we found them. Now what?' I asked Ken. 'We call Fred,' he said. 'Then what? Now there will be hordes of people here, and they'll destroy everything,' I said. 'That's why we don't tell anyone,' Ken said. And we didn't, except for the Urquharts. They were adamant that we not tell anyone else."

Brugger telephoned Urquhart to share the news. In the coming days, the couple found five more monarch colonies. A year

later, Brugger and Trail led the Urquharts and a *National Geographic* photographer to the second found site. In August 1976, the journal published Urquhart's report on finding the monarch roosts. The 14-page spread mentioned Trail only once as "a bright and delightful Mexican, Cathy."

Urquhart's slight and the controversy that followed between him and other monarch researchers saddened Trail and led to her decision to remain silent until 2012. She wanted no part of the drama.

After 18 years of marriage, she and Brugger divorced. He died in 1998 at age 80. In 1995, Catalina married George Trail, a rehabilitation counselor. A year later, she received a social work degree from the University of Texas at Austin. She worked as a case manager and counselor and helped to pioneer treatment for co-occurring psychiatric and

substance use disorders in Austin. "Searching for the monarchs was crazy fun and dangerous," reflects Trail, who's writing her memoirs. "Ken and I went through so many scary situations. We were lucky not to perish."

Catalina Aguado Trail both survived and was forever changed by what she witnessed among the firs in January 1975.

"Life became more precious, important and beautiful," she quietly reflects. "I became more sensitive to everything."

"I searched for the monarchs because of the love I have for all insects and all of nature," she adds. "For the awe that they provoke in me in all the beautiful and ugly ways. I care about the truth and the marvelous way that nature works in all of us." ★

Sheryl Smith-Rodgers is a writer and photographer who lives in the Texas Hill Country.



The Stars of Texas Shine Upon You

As our towns and cities grow brighter, some lights could be lost. Today, 80% of Americans have never seen the Milky Way. Texas State Parks remain some of the few places where everyone can marvel at the night sky. Find how you can see the stars on your next park visit:

[TexasStateParks.org/darkskies](https://www.texasstateparks.org/darkskies)

TEXAS
PARKS &
WILDLIFE

Life's better outside.®