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MOVIEMAKER

Chasing monarchs

Louisville filmmaker captures migration, hopes to help save them

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Butterflies are elusive, flitting away in the blink of an eye. Photographing them on the move seems nigh impossible, but Louisville filmmaker Kay Milam is doing it.

With high-definition video cameras, she and a film crew are documenting the annual 2,500-mile fall migration of monarch butterflies from Canada and the United States to the oyamel fir forests in central Mexico.

While following the odyssey of the fragile creatures from Canadian meadows to milkweed fields in south Texas to rare trees 10,000 feet above sea level in the Transvolcanic Mountain Range of Mexico, the film will explore the environmental, economic and social issues that surround the butterfly and its threatened habitats.

“It was wonderful, but it was the most physically grueling shoot I’ve been on in 20 years,” Milam said recently about her trek earlier this year up the Mexican mountain range to film the black, white and golden-yellow monarchs as they clustered in the trees. “No amount of StairMaster training can prepare you for that.”

But the sight of millions of monarchs resting en masse in a semi-dormant state was worth the aching calves and back, according to Milam, who lugged heavy cameras and tripods up through the forest. “You have to be at the right place at the right time. To actually see them at their wintering sites -- it’s like a religious experience.”

Experts estimate that as many as 200 million monarchs converge in the oyamel fir forest for the winter. Although each butterfly weighs less than half a gram, the accumulated weight of multitudes of colonies can break large branches. And when the monarchs moved simultaneously, Milam heard something few people ever hear, a sound like “tens of thousands of falling leaves” as they slowly flapped their tiny wings.

The day after Milam filmed the monarchs in the trees, they were gone. “We were very, very lucky to be where we were when we were,” she said.

The filming of “The Butterfly Trees” will continue in the fall when Milam and her crew convene in south Texas with four scientists who are tracking the monarch migration in an effort to discover why the offspring of the butterflies instinctively return to the same trees as their ancestors.



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Kay Milam said trekking up mountains in Mexico to film monarch butterflies made for “the most physically grueling shoot I’ve been on in 20 years.” (Photos by Geoff Maxwell)

QUICK TAKE

‘The Butterfly Trees’

Filmmaker: Louisville resident Kay Milam.

The work: A one-hour documentary that follows the annual migration of millions of monarch butterflies from North America to Central Mexico, where they winter in the rare oyamel fir forests.

What’s next: The film, expected to be completed by next year, will be shown at festivals and on public television.

More: To read more about the project or to make a tax-deductible donation, visit www.butterflytrees.com

The world's leading monarch expert, Dr. Lincoln P. Brower, is one of the butterfly authorities included in Milam's documentary, and he's impressed with the footage he's seen. "It is absolutely spectacular," said Brower, a distinguished service professor of zoology emeritus at the University of Florida and research professor of biology at Sweet Briar College in Virginia.

Brower, who has been chasing butterflies since he was a child, has studied monarchs for more than 50 years. He's written several books and more than 200 scientific articles about them.

"I have seen them flying, taking advantage of the wind (and) going at about 40 mph. I have heard stories of where monarchs come through a canyon and up a mountain pass like a magic carpet of butterflies 10 feet thick and 200 feet wide. I am hoping we can catch the magic carpet," he said. "One of the things that's fun about working with Kay is that this is not just a gee-whiz flick, but a comprehensive documentary. It will also be aesthetically fantastic. I've seen some of her shots, and they are better than I have seen anywhere."

That's high praise from a scientist who has worked with photographers from around the world who travel to Mexico to see the monarchs in their winter home. No other filmmaker has done the depth of research or employed as much scientific focus as Milam, said Brower, adding that he thinks "The Butterfly Trees" "has the potential to be one of the finest monarch movies ever made."



A monarch rested on a cameraman's head.

Milam, 44, is a Houston native and longtime Louisville resident with nearly 20 years' experience as a producer and production manager. As a freelance film producer, she often works with Donna Lawrence Productions of Louisville on state-of-the-art multimedia projects. Her credits include films for the Kentucky Derby Museum, the Louisville Slugger Museum, President Clinton's library, and the Lewis and Clark Visitor Center in Illinois; and an undersea IMAX film called "LegaSea."

"I have spent my life helping other people make their films" as a producer and assistant director, she said.

"The Butterfly Trees" is the first documentary she has directed herself about a subject that inspired her.

Milam's love of nature began early, spurred by her "best friend and salvation from the city," a horse named Goldilocks. After high school, Milam studied photo communication and video production at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, and photography at the renowned Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, Calif. There, she participated in the school's undersea photography program, sometimes diving and shooting five times a day.

Milam intends for her documentary to enthrall viewers and educate them about the factors that threaten the annual monarch migration and the very existence of the butterflies. The film looks at the issues surrounding the land where the monarchs go to winter, an area owned communally by farmers who make their living from the forest. Unfortunately, much illegal logging occurs, which puts the oyamel fir trees and the butterflies at risk.

In the United States and Canada, pesticides and development have destroyed milkweed plants, which are crucial to the monarchs' reproductive cycle. When the butterflies travel north from Mexico in early spring, they lay their eggs on the underside of milkweed plants. The eggs hatch into caterpillars, which eat the milkweed. Besides food, the plant gives caterpillars protection. The devoured milkweed contains a substance that is toxic to most birds.

The one-hour documentary will cost more than \$400,000 to complete. Milam has raised about \$80,000 from individuals, mostly local supporters and people concerned about preserving the monarchs. One group of schoolchildren contributed \$25 they raised by selling butterflies made of pipe cleaners. Milam also is seeking funds from foundations and wildlife-preservation organizations.

The financial and emotional assistance Milam has received for her project from friends and colleagues has touched her, she said. “I feel an overwhelming gratitude to all who have supported it.”

One of those supporters is Elaine “Cissy” Musselman, who has known Milam for more than 10 years. Musselman, vice chair of Risk Management Services Corp. in Louisville, contributed \$2,000 toward the making of the documentary. As a person, she said, Milam is hard-working, passionate, fun and loyal. And as a filmmaker, she “has a talented eye” and is patient with her subjects, whether they are humans or butterflies.

“Like her mentor, Donna Lawrence, Kay’s work is perfection and has a lasting quality,” Musselman said. “Her current project is much more complicated and on many levels reflects the metaphors of life. The story of the monarch is fascinating, and Kay’s work on this documentary is important.”