

“What Is That On The Screen?” By Meagan Keefe, LLCC Naturalist

Perhaps you have been fortunate enough this spring to have one of the Saturniidae or giant silkworm moths resting on your door or window screen. These are our largest moths with wingspans ranging from 1-1/8 to 5-7/8 inches.



Most are bright and beautifully colored and may have large eyespots on their wings. These moths do not have any hearing organs. Instead, they have large antennae, which look feathery or fern like, used for smelling. The adults are short-lived lasting maybe only 24 hours to up to a week as they have non-functioning mouthparts and cannot feed. One species you are likely to have seen

is the brown and red Cecropia.

The Cecropia is the largest of our native silkworm moths (distantly related to the Asiatic silkworms that give us silk, the caterpillars are too difficult to raise in large numbers to profitably produce silk). The adults emerge from their cocoons in mid to late May and are a grayish brown with white, red and black markings. They are most active at night often seen near window screens or outdoor lights. The females emit pheromones, which the males detect with their antennae, sometimes flying several miles to find a mate. Once the moths mate, the female will spend the rest of her short life laying eggs, while the male might mate several more times before he dies. The female tends to lay her oval-shaped light brown eggs on the leaves of the host plant preferred by caterpillars (including ash, birch, cherry and maple) although here at Long Lake one laid her brood on our office door screen.

The eggs hatch into small hairy black caterpillars. This is the first instar. (Each stage of caterpillar life after hatching and subsequent molts is called an instar). The Cecropia molts five times into 4 very colorful instars. The second instar, about four days after hatching, is a yellow-green with black spots and spiny with orange yellow and blue knobs. The third and fourth instars are similar and after the fourth molt (fifth instar) is a large, 5 inches, whitish color with bright yellow, blue, and red knobs. Once at this stage the caterpillar has an enormous appetite, although not large enough to do much damage to the host plant, for two weeks before spinning its cocoon. The pupa overwinters in the cocoon and will hatch the following spring when the outdoor temperature warms up. The Cecropia has only one generation per year.





Other members of this family include the pale green Luna, the lo with bright yellow hind wings and huge eyespots, and the Prometheus and Polyphemus, both brown with eyespots. In many areas, populations are declining due to factors such as pollution and pesticide use or lack of leaf litter on the ground to in which to overwinter.

A fun summer project to do with a youngster (or just for yourself) is to raise caterpillars to adult

(both butterfly and moth). Make sure your caterpillar has a clean safe home with plenty of air and lots of fresh food; usually the plant you find it on is the host plant. No need to water, they will get moisture from the food. Keep them out of direct sunlight and

be sure to let the adult free once fully emerged. Resist the temptation to help them

out of their cocoon (chrysalis if a butterfly) as they need to struggle to fully use their wings. If you have a species that overwinters in the cocoon, make sure to place it in a safe place outside. Enjoy your little



Lepidopteron as well as the many other pleasures of summer!

Footnote from Carol Lindelien, Promotions Coordinator for LLCC:

The Cecropia Moth has been spotted multiple times at Long Lake Conservation Center the past few weeks. The area is very conducive to their survival. In one morning alone, in addition to the Cecropia moth, 2 Luna moths and an lo moth were also attached to the front of the Administration Building. As a matter of fact, 9 different moths were clinging to the building on one morning alone. A group of students, teachers, and parents, visiting the center from a Minneapolis school, were fascinated at seeing the “natural” collage of these moths. Both teachers and parents noted that they too, had never seen several of these moths ever before, and that this sighting would be a cherished memory! The moths were polite and stayed long enough for the visitors to get some snapshots of them.