

Bug of the Month

by Jim Revell

Polyphemus Moth

As I sat at my desk preparing to write this month's bug article, I found it difficult to choose. Thanks to several of our Master Gardener "bug enthusiasts," I had a number of specimens, and known invaders, from which to choose - - from the Azalea Red-headed Caterpillar to the May Beetle, Eastern Tent Caterpillar and others, a few of which I have written about in the past.

One that did catch my eye was a specimen that Marjorie Loomis dropped off at the Help Desk a few weeks ago. It was a cocoon attached to the twig of an Azalea, which she had packaged in a clear sandwich bag.

Many insects can be identified by their cocoons and, in this case, I had placed the specimen (in its sandwich bag) carefully on my dresser with the full intent of researching to identify the type of cocoon. With the hustle and bustle of spring-time gardening, I promptly forgot about it.



<http://okeechobee.ifas.ufl.edu/News%20columns/Polyphemus.Moth>

The next morning, she reminded me about the noise and, suddenly, it dawned on me what it must be - - a moth must have emerged from the cocoon. Sure enough, there it was, rather beat up from its entrapped efforts to emerge from the cocoon within a sandwich baggie, but, nonetheless, a moth. Upon close examination, I saw it was a Polyphemus Moth, one in the family of the Giant Silkworm and Royal Moths. They have a wingspan of about 100-150mm (25mm=1 inch, so up to about a 5 ½ inch wingspan).

Class: Insecta (Insects)
Order: Lepidoptera
Family: Saturniidae (Giant Silkworm & Royal Moths)



<http://cals.ncsu.edu>

A few days later, Sherry (my lovely wife) woke me up, in the dead of night, to ask if I heard something fluttering (or, worse yet, "crawling") around. Half-asleep, I listened, heard nothing, rolled over and went back to sleep.

Unbeknownst to me, hearing the sounds of an insect moving around (her biggest concern being, it was "large" enough to hear), Sherry got up several times in the night, each time getting a flash light to try to identify the source and, each time, sounding like it came from my dresser.

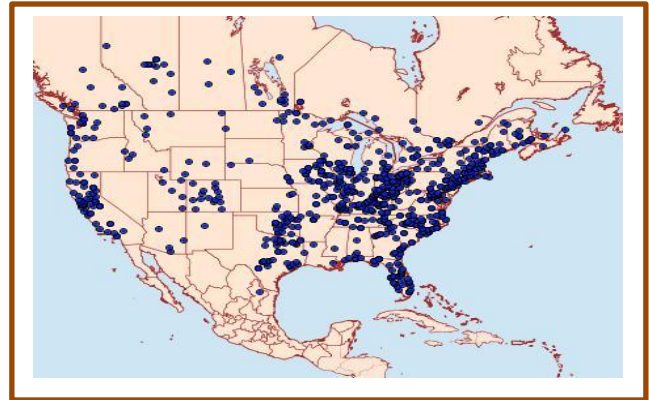
The name "Polyphemus" comes from the mythological "one-eyed Cyclops," although the large, brown adult moth has a small round eyespot near the middle of each forewing and a huge, round eyespot (blue, black and yellow) on each hind wing. These huge eyespots make it very easy to identify the Polyphemus Moth, and they aid the moth in its use of mimicry as a defense. It may lie still, with wings folded, looking every bit like a dead leaf or piece of bark but, when threatened, it suddenly opens its wings, revealing large eyespots that can mimic an owl's eyes, scaring a predator away.

The male adult moth is distinct from the female in that it has large, feathery antennae which help it detect the female's scent. Interestingly, neither the male nor female adult moths eat at all - they don't even have mouthparts!

The larvae are large-bodied, bright green caterpillars with red and silvery spots below their setae. On the abdomen, oblique yellow lines run through the spiracles - a very attractive caterpillar! Larvae feed on broad-leaved trees and shrubs which include birch, grape hickory, maple and oak, as well as some members of the Rose family.



<http://pender.ces.ncsu.edu>



<http://mothphotographersgroup.msstate.edu>

Their range is widespread across North America, from southern Canada southward across most of the U.S. The moth habitats include deciduous forests, orchards and some wetlands. Adults are attracted to nocturnal light and fly April-May and July-August through most regions, but only May-June in its northern ranges. Controls are not generally needed.

Research references:

http://www.fcps.edu/islandcreekes/econology/polyphemus_moth.htm

<http://bugguide.net/node/view/427?printable=1>

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Read more of his articles on the "Jims Bugs" page @ www.BedfordMasterGardeners.org