

The Polyphemus Moth has a short but interesting life  
By: Corine Burgess

The other day I was working out in the yard and my husband called to me to come over and look at something. I looked down at the ground where he was pointing, but I didn't see anything. Of course, I didn't have my glasses on, but I must have had that blank look on my face and he smiled and continued pointing to the ground and said, "Don't you see that?" Mercifully, he decided to point out to me what he had discovered that I was too blind to see. It was a Polyphemus Moth.

In my defense, these moths do blend in nicely with their environment. This particular moth had landed, with outstretched wings, on a bed of dead leaves and was camouflaged. Once I saw the creature, I was delighted with its beauty and the fact that it seemed to be posing just for us. I immediately got my camera and took some shots. Thus the inspiration for this article.

Named after the legendary Cyclops Polyphemus from the Greek myth, the *Antheraea Polyphemus*, is a beautifully colored, large moth. Most likely named for the round "eye" looking spots on the lower half of its wings, the moth is said to be nearly extinct in many areas. One of the reasons for this may be that, once they reach adulthood, they only live for about a week.

The Polyphemus Moth is one of the largest moths and can have a wingspan up to six inches. It has tan to brownish colored wings with a yellowish tint. Lined with black and white wavy lines on each wing, it can also be identified by the small, yellow eyespots on each forewing and the larger blackish blue and yellow eyespots on the hindwings. If turned over, the underside of the moth resembles dead leaves.

This magnificent creature begins life as an egg. After mating, the female lays from three to five eggs on the underside of a leaf. But not just any leaf, it must be a host plant that can be consumed once the egg turns into a caterpillar. When the caterpillars emerge, they make a meal of the egg shells that they came from and then begin munching on the leaves they were laid on. The caterpillars are bright green in color with yellow stripes and red and silver spots. They grow to be about three to four inches long.

When in the caterpillar stage, predators such as birds, bigger insects and small mammals will prey on the vulnerable creature. One defense mechanism of the caterpillar is to eat an entire leaf and then cut the petiole. This keeps predators from seeing partially munched leaves and knowing where the caterpillar is feeding. Caterpillars continually eat, about 86,000 times their weight in less than two months, and they grow bigger and bigger. As they grow, they molt four times before they are fully mature. Then they wrap themselves into a leaf and build a cocoon with silk from their mouth. The cocoon hardens and turns brown. While on the outside, the cocoon resembles a dead leaf, inside the caterpillar is turning into a pupa.

Once the Polyphemus leaves its cocoon, it no longer requires food. In fact, at this stage of their lives, they don't even have mouthparts. In contrast to their caterpillar stage, where they ate as much as they could, at this stage all they seem to care about is reproducing. Almost immediately

after emerging from the cocoon the female releases pheromones and attracts a mate. Once the male moth gets a whiff of the scent, he will travel far distances to mate with her.

You can tell the difference between a male adult moth and a female. The male has large, bushy antennae. These antennae help it to detect the female's scent. Another difference is that females are larger in the abdomen area because they are usually carrying eggs.

Moths are generally nocturnal and fly at night. They hide during the day to protect themselves from predators. They use mimicry, which according to Wikipedia, is the similarity of one species to another which protects one or both. This similarity can be in appearance, behavior, sound, scent and even location, with the mimics found in similar places to their models. Like camouflage, it is a defense mechanism. The big eye like circles on their wings resemble owl eyes and may confuse or scare off predators.

Although these caterpillars are voracious eaters, usually the female moth scatters the eggs on several different leaves. They do a lot less damage than many other types of moths and butterflies.

These big, beautiful moths are members of the family Saturniidae, the giant silk moths. Apparently they are not that common of a sight and I feel fortunate that we were able to observe this splendid creature in our back yard. It constantly amazes me how fascinating nature is. So much can be learned just by taking a few minutes and observing the creatures that are right in front of us.