

The Robin Moth

By Kim Smith

Our daughter found the stunning Robin moth pictured (*Hyalophora cecropia*), trapped and unable to disengage his crochet hook-like tarsi claws from the nylon golf course net. Shooing away the sparrows snipping at his wings, we carefully untangled him from the net. After determining he was unable to fly, we placed him in a Tupperware container and froze him for several hours. This is the most humane way to kill an insect. Few other methods are employed for killing Lepidoptera today because the toxic chemicals that were formerly used are either dangerous or cause discoloration or damage to the specimen.

The Robin moth, also commonly called the Cecropia moth, is the largest moth found in North America. We measured this male, and his wingspan came in at just under six inches. The Family Saturniidae, or Giant Silkworm and Royal moths, are generally characterized as medium to very large with a dense body and relatively small head held close to the thorax. The vivid eyespots on the wings are a warning to would-be predators. Notable members of Saturniidae, subfamily Saturniinae, include Polyphemus moth and the sublime Luna moth. Saturniinae do all their feeding in the caterpillar stages, emerging as adult moths without mouthparts; therefore their lifespan lasts only a few weeks.

The body of the adult Cecropia moth is a rich burnished red, with alternating thin bands of black and white. The wings are elephant-gray brown with white hair-like scales that lend a sugar-frosted appearance. Half-moon crescents, black eyespots, and smoky gray, russet-red, and taupe borders further distinguish the Robin moth. The Cecropia moth resembles the robin, not alone because he is shaded gray with russet-red markings, but also frequents similar habitats. The robin is the bird of backyards and orchards as is the Cecropia moth; their cocoons are attached to eaves and overhangs, fences, shrubs and orchard trees. *Hyalophora cecropia* was named by Linnaeus. I failed to find the correlation between the Athenian mythical King Cecrops, whose name means “face with a tail,” and why he so named the moth. The entire body of the caterpillar is covered with colorful protuberances.

The adults emerge from large (approximately four inches) spindle-shaped chrysalis sometime during May through July. They are univoltine, meaning that they have only one full generation per year. The female releases her pheromones into the night air and the male uses his larger, bushy antennae to follow the scent plume of the calling female. They usually mate in the very early hours of the morning, just before dawn, and the pair will remain joined together throughout the following day. The female typically mates and lays her eggs within forty-eight hours of eclosure. The pearly eggs, swirled with streaks of caramel brown, are laid in rows of two to six on both the upper and lower surface of host trees or shrubs. She can lay more than one hundred eggs. After hatching in seven to fourteen days, the young caterpillars feed in groups and the later instars are solitary. The cocoon is attached along the full length of a twig to escape predation. Caterpillar host plants include wild cherry and plum (*Prunus*), alder and birch (*Betulaceae*), box elder (*Acer negundo*), lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*), sugar maple (*Acer saccharinum*), apples (*Malus*), dogwoods (*Cornus*), and willows (*Salix*)

Lepidoptera the world over symbolize hope and transformation. The following topic is becoming increasingly pervasive. I hope the young teens that have chosen to become pregnant will not lose sight of their ability to transform their lives, no matter life's circumstances. The media firestorm was originally ignited from an investigation to answer questions regarding the

resignation of the high school clinic's physician and nurse regarding Beverly Hospital's refusal to allow confidentially administered birth control. The focusing lens created by the media will hopefully be used to teach us how better to inspire our children.

Gloucester has a diverse population and also a willingness among these multifarious groups to work together to create a better city. This is exemplified time and again by the sublime beauty of our surrounding environment, and the courage of its citizens to protect it against less well-meaning and self-serving special interest groups. I am reminded of last spring, photographing community leaders and volunteers, including an enthusiastic group of Gloucester High School students, planting native grass plugs along the newly restored shoreline at the Dun Fudgin salt marsh. I can only imagine the utter dismay and embarrassment felt by the students and their parents at the negative portrayal of our community and the attention showered upon these young teens in crisis.

Gloucester is by no means at the forefront of this disastrous nation-wide cultural celebration of babies having babies and myriad associated consequences. Most assuredly the word "pact" fed the maelstrom. Contrary to their objective of finding unconditional love and fulfillment, these young teenagers are almost certainly facing a period of extreme struggle, loneliness, and uncertainty. What can we do to help teens entering adulthood make better life choices? Why does America have the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the world? Parenting and education go hand and hand, without which teens, all teens, who are facing tough choices everyday of their lives, have an even more difficult struggle navigating between good choices and poor choices. As voting citizens we make the choice as to how our tax dollars are spent, from the highest levels of government to our local officials. The combination of the elimination of health and sex education programs coupled with pregnancy popularized by films such as *Juno* and *Knocked-Up*, along with sixteen year-old mega-Disney television stars such as Jamie Lynne Spears recently having a baby, has created the tremendous rise in teen pregnancy. To counter balance the unrelenting influence of this fantasy-based culture, fully funded reality-based health and sex education programs throughout students' school careers are plainly needed, and a relatively minor expense when compared to the overall financial burden of societal support for fifteen year-old mothers. Tragically coming at the cost of programs for students who are trying to make good choices, we will all be sharing in the expense of housing, feeding, clothing, and providing medical and day care for the child having the child, and her infant(s).

Kim Smith is an interior and garden designer. Preorders for her forthcoming book *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities! ~ Notes from a Gloucester Garden*, September 2008, are available through her website at www.kimsmithdesigns.com and Toad Hall Bookstore at www.toadhallbooks.org. Kim will be happy to respond to readers' questions and comments at kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com.

Male Robin Moth (*Hyalophora cecropia*)

