

The Achemon Sphinx

By Kim Smith

I have been meaning to share with you for quite some time about Bill Oehlke and his extraordinarily informative and photo-rich websites devoted to different families of moths and caterpillars. Bill maintains the World's Largest Saturniidae Site, or silkmoth, website. The beautiful translucent green Luna moth is one example of a silkmoth. The Cecropia, or Robin moth, the largest North American moth, with a wingspan of half a foot, is another example of this fascinating species. I came across his websites when searching for help in identifying an unusual large, cherry-red caterpillar that I found when collecting fresh milkweed leaves. I knew enough about caterpillars to know that it was some type of sphinx, perhaps an Achemon sphinx (*Eumorpha achemon*, pronounced you-MOR-fuh ACK-eh-mon) but to rear a caterpillar successfully precise identification is imperative in order to supply the caterpillar with its food plant, or plants. I wrote Bill and he responded immediately, confirming its identification and providing excellent advice on rearing sphinx moth caterpillars.

As you can see from the photograph, the Achemon sphinx caterpillar is red with oblique white dashes, outlined in black. The caterpillar is holding its head in typical sphinx-like fashion, and shows the prominent dorsal horn at the tip of its abdomen. Sphinx moths are often referred to as hornworms because of the characteristic horn. During the final instar, with all the *Eumorpha* species of caterpillars, the horn drops off, or does not develop. Shingids, also called hawk moths, possess one of the most acute sense of color vision of any animal, and can discriminate different colors of flora at light intensities that would appear black to the human eye.

The primary caterpillar food plant of *Eumorpha achemon* is Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*), along with grape and ampelopsis vines. Virginia creeper is a vine native to eastern and central North America. The blue-black berries provide an excellent source of food for migrating and winter resident songbirds, however, its potential to devour is well known, attaching itself with forked tendrils terminating in adhesive pads. Virginia creeper is used for erosion control, giving us a clue as to its vigor. Plant to disguise an eyesore and monitor its potentially invasive behavior. *P. quinquefolia* turns a glorious crimson red in early autumn. Perhaps the red of the Achemon sphinx caterpillar evolved to mimic the red foliage on which it feeds.

We raised the caterpillar in a clear glass vase fitted with fine mesh screening, secured in place with an elastic band. Monitoring his behavior daily, family members and visitors keenly observed his voracious appetite for Virginia creeper foliage and expanding heft. What you cannot discern from the photo is how large he grew. By the final instar, he was as long and as round as a man's thumb. The day before he began to pupate he left the foliage, searching for a safe place. We provided him with a mound of shredded paper towels to simulate underground burrows. Several times the container was jostled and he became visibly agitated. Thereafter, we made sure he was left undisturbed, and within a week, it had become a beautiful chocolate brown pupa. We were planning to store the pupa in early October, in a Tupperware container placed on a shelf over the stairwell of our cellar bulkhead, expecting it to eclose next spring. But much to our surprise, and dismay, he emerged early—too early, I am afraid. Not really knowing what to

do next, we placed him outdoors amongst the honeysuckle vines still flowering, as that is one of the adult moths preferred nectar foods. He vanished. Bill suggests that perhaps the indoor lighting that it experienced upset its timing, causing the moth to emerge from hibernation, or pupate, too early.

The individual species accounts on Bill's websites include photographs, caterpillar preferred food plants, adult nectar plants, rearing instructions, range, and flight times. Many of the photographs are from contributions from around the world.

For direct links to Bill's page on sphinx moths and caterpillars of Massachusetts and Essex County, visit the home page of my website, www.kimsmithdesigns.com and scroll to the bottom of the page. To become a member of the World's Largest Saturniidae Site email Bill at oehlke@islandtelecom.com, or go to <http://www.silkmoths.bizland.com/indexos.htm>.

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Eumorpha achemon Caterpillar



Achemon Sphinx Moth



Parthenocissus quinquefolia