

TOLEDO MAGAZINE

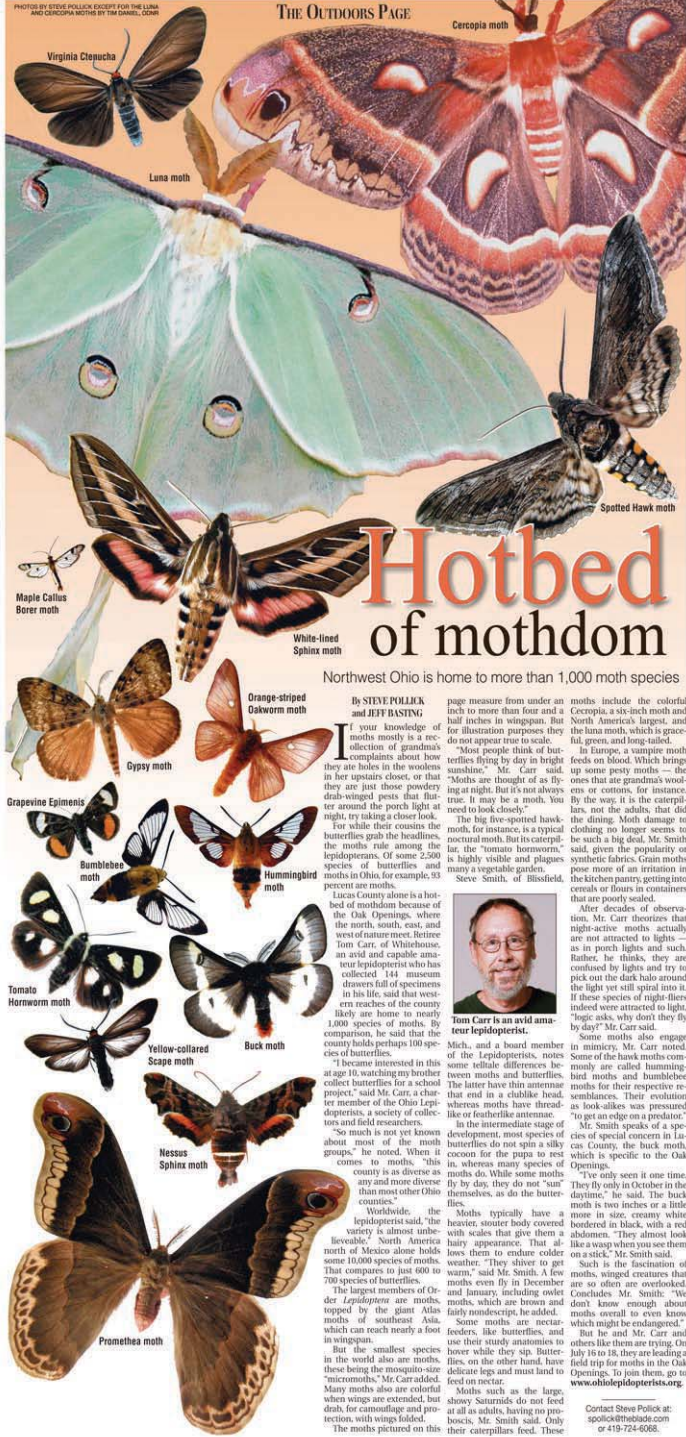
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THE OUTDOORS PAGE

PHOTOS BY STEVE POLLECK, EXCEPT FOR THE LUNA AND CERCOPIA MOTHS BY TIM DANIEL, CC-BY



Into of mothdom

Northwest Ohio is home to more than 1,000 moth species

By STEVE POLLECK and JEFF BASTING

If your knowledge of moths mostly is a recollection of grandma's complaints about how they are holes in the woodens in her upstairs closet, or that they are just those powdery drab-winged pests that flutter around the porch light at night, try taking a closer look. For while they consist the butterflies grab the headlines, the moths rule among the lepidopterans. Of some 2,500 species of butterflies and moths in Ohio, for example, 93 percent are moths.

Lucas County alone is a hotbed of mothdom because of the Oak Openings, where the north, south, east, and west of nature meet. Retiree Tom Carr, of Whitehouse, an avid and capable amateur lepidopterist who has collected 144 museum drawers full of specimens in his life, said that western reaches of the county likely are home to nearly 1,000 species of moths. By comparison, he said that the county holds perhaps 100 species of butterflies.

"I became interested in this project," said Mr. Carr, a charter member of the Ohio Lepidopterists, a society of collectors and field researchers. "So much is not yet known about most of the moth groups," he noted. When it comes to moths, "this county is as diverse as any and more diverse than most other Ohio counties."

Worldwide, the lepidopterist said, the variety is almost unbelievable. North America north of Mexico alone holds some 10,000 species of moths. That compares to just 400 to 700 species of butterflies. The largest members of Order Lepidoptera are moths, topped by the giant Atlas moths of southeast Asia, which can reach nearly a foot in wingspan.

But the smallest species in the world also are moths. These being the mosquito-size "micromoths," Mr. Carr added. Many moths also are colorful when wings are extended, but dead, for camouflage and protection, with wings folded. The moths pictured on this

page measure from under an inch to more than four and half inches in wingspan. But for illustration purposes they do not appear true to scale.

"Most people think of butterflies flying by day in bright sunbaths," Mr. Carr said. "Moths are thought of as flying at night. But it's not always true. It may be a moth. You need to look closely."

The big five-spotted hawk-moth, for instance, is a typical nocturnal moth. But its caterpillar, the "sawtooth hornworm" is highly visible and plagues many a vegetable garden.

Steve Smith, of Blinnid,

moths include the colorful Cercopia, a six-inch moth and North America's largest, and the luna moth, which is graceful, green, and long-tailed.

In Europe, a vampire moth feeds on blood. Which brings up some pesty moths — the ones that ate grandma's woollens or cottons, for instance. By the way, it is the caterpillars, not the adults, that did the dining. Moth damage to clothing no longer seems to be such a big deal, Mr. Smith said, given the popularity of synthetic fabrics. Grain moths pose more of an irritation in the kitchen pantry, springing into cereals or flours in containers that are poorly sealed.

After decades of observation, Mr. Carr theorizes that night-active moths actually are not attracted to lights — as in porch lights and such. Rather, he thinks, they are confused by lights and try to pick out the dark halo around the light yet still spiral into it. If these species of night-fliers indeed were attracted to light, "logic asks, why don't they fly by day?" Mr. Carr said.

Some moths also engage in mimicry, Mr. Carr noted. Some of the hawk moths commonly are called hummingbird moths because of their respective resemblances. Their evolution as look-alikes was presumed "to get an edge on a predator."

Mr. Smith speaks of species of special concern in Lucas County, the buck moth, which is specific to the Oak Openings.

"I've only seen it one time. They fly only in October in the daytime," he said. The buck moth is two inches or a little more in size, creamy white with a black spot on its abdomen. "They almost look like a wasp when you see them on a stick," Mr. Smith said.

Such is the fascination of moths, winged creatures that are so often overlooked. Concludes Mr. Smith: "We don't know nearly about moths overall so even know which might be endangered."

But he and Mr. Carr and others like them are trying. On July 18 or 19, they're leading a field trip for moths in the Oak Openings. To join them, go to www.ohiolepidopterists.org.



Tom Carr is an avid amateur lepidopterist.

Much, and a board member of the Lepidopterists, notes some subtle differences between moths and butterflies. The latter have thin antennae that end in a clublike head, whereas moths have threadlike or feathery antennae.

In the intermediate stage of development, most species of butterflies do not spin a silky cocoon for the pupa to rest in, whereas many species of moths do. While some moths fly by day, they do not "sun" themselves, as do the butterflies.

Moths typically have a heavier, softer body covered with scales that give them a hairy appearance. That allows them to endure colder weather. "They shiver to get warm," said Mr. Smith. A few moths even fly in December and January, including owl moths, which are brown and fairly nondescript, he added.

Some moths are nectar-feeders, like butterflies, and use their study anatomy to hover while they sip. Butterflies, on the other hand, have delicate legs and must land to feed on nectar.

Moths such as the large, shrewy Saturniids do not feed at all as adults, having no proboscis, Mr. Smith said. Only their caterpillars feed. Those

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