

SEXY BEASTS

Finding beauty in small obscure beings

By Jennifer Frye

In the early 1900s, French entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre wrote that “the sea, where life first appeared, still preserves in its depths many of those curious shapes which were the earliest specimens of the animal kingdom. But the land has almost

But many creatures will reveal themselves as they emerge to pollinate the first spring flowers, feed on tender new foliage, and try out their wings for the first time. Witnesses to these events will be rewarded with glorious displays.

overwinter as adults. While this behavior is not unique to the mourning cloak, most Lepidoptera (the Order comprising butterflies and moths) will spend the winter enclosed in the safety of its pupa or cocoon, or as a small caterpillar curled up amongst a thick bed of dried leaves or buried beneath the soil. Some will even pass the cold winter days inside an egg, waiting patiently for their lives to begin. But despite its somewhat bulky adult form and its delicate wings, mourning cloaks will seek out tree hollows or unheated sheds or barns, and spend the winter in their finished form.

You may even catch a glimpse of them on particularly sunny days towards winters end, as early as February or March. Look for these butterflies in parks and woodlands where they feed on the tree sap of oaks. You might even see them flying around your neighborhood.

While out enjoying the warm weather, pay close attention to cherry and apple trees and take note of when the buds break open. This is when you will begin to see the tent caterpillars. The young larvae are some of the most social characters you will ever encounter. They live together in the safety provided by their silken communal webs which they build amongst the branches of cherry and oak trees. Older caterpillars will eventually leave the trees and wander off on their own.

There are two forms – the eastern tent caterpillar and the forest tent caterpillar. Both share patterns of blue and black and are covered with fine, soft hair, but forest tent caterpillars are easily distinguished



Sierra Club - Howard County Group

Mourning cloak

entirely lost the strange forms of other days. The few that remain are mostly insects.”

After a long winter spent hibernating beneath the frozen ground, or perhaps tucked away inside a well-camouflaged cocoon, spring arrives, and with it, a stunning variety of insects. They appear in small forms. Some remain only for a short time; others take care to blend in with their surroundings and may go unnoticed by all but the most careful observers.

On butterflies, moths and their caterpillars

One of the first to arrive on the scene is an appropriately named butterfly known commonly as the mourning cloak. When its wings are closed, it appears to be wearing a dark cloak and as a result is quite well camouflaged. But when the mourning cloak's wings part, a peek inside reveals golden trim along the edges of the wings, bordered by brilliant blue spots.

Mourning cloaks are able to arrive so early because of their unusual ability to

by the footprints along the length of their bodies. They look as if a very small man wearing black patent leather shoes had just walked across their backs. Eastern tent caterpillars, by contrast, have replaced these footprints with a simple white line.

Tent caterpillars are often compared to the exotic and destructive gypsy moth caterpillars, but this is not entirely fair. Gypsy moths, having almost no natural predators in this part of the world, have exploded in number and can cause large-scale destruction of trees.

Tent caterpillars on the other hand, have successfully coexisted with oaks and cherries for ages. While tent caterpillars can defoliate trees, they generally do not cause widespread damage and trees will usually recover. It is true that this periodic defoliation is generally not aesthetically pleasing, and their webs may look messy and unkempt, but these are small crimes.

Not all caterpillars are oak and cherry feeders. Many are interested in finding out what else is on the menu. Greenbrier, it turns out, is not at all difficult to find in Maryland, and while it may not have many admirers amongst our own species, there is at least one creature that appreciates it. This is the turbulent phosphila.

The next time you find yourself cursing greenbrier for ripping your clothing or your flesh, remember there is a tiny beast out there that requires this plant for survival.

Like the tent caterpillars, turbulent phosphila caterpillars feed in groups and are easy to spot and identify. They are dressed in black and white stripes and appear to have a head at each end of their bodies, which is sure to confuse predators who might want to feast upon them.

A bee or not a bee...

A recent phenomenon involving the death of large numbers of honey bees and the subsequent collapse of their colonies has led to great concern over the uncertain future of commercial honey bee hives. In times like these, we often forget about the

many native pollinators that surround us and the crucial role that they play in the lives of many of our native trees, shrubs and flowers.

Maryland boasts almost 400 species of native bees, most of which are small, solitary and seldom seen. But some are quite willing



Greg Humes

ABOVE: Forest tent caterpillar BELOW: Snowberry clearwing



Tom Barnes, US Forest Service



Bruce Marlin

If you have flowering plants in your backyard that attract bumblebees, take a closer look this spring at what other insects might be out there. You may have more visitors than you think.

Ancient dragons

We cannot talk about spring insects without paying tribute to one of our largest and most stunning dragonflies, the common green darner. While many of our most beautiful insects are active only for a very short time each year, the green darner graces us with its presence from early spring until late fall.

You will find them in ponds and lakes, flying all day long in pursuit of mates and prey. You cannot miss them: in addition to their grand stature, they are gaudily dressed in bright colors of

green and blue and possess gigantic eyes that will follow your every move.

You likely cannot catch them either, as dragonflies are some of the fastest and strongest fliers around. Their thick wings cannot be folded up against their bodies and are instead held outstretched when they are not in flight, marking them as one of our most ancient insects. Yet theirs is a design that has held up for millions of years.

For every insect encountered this spring, there will be thousands you will never notice, all working behind the scenes to perform the necessary functions defining our world as we know it. In large part, they are the reason flowers continue to bloom, diverse plant communities continue to spring forth from the soil and higher organisms like birds and mammals continue to thrive.

When spending time outdoors this spring, be it fishing or canoeing or hiking in your favorite state park, take a moment to reflect on the natural beauty surrounding you. It is always fascinating to think about how much of the beauty that you do see is largely a result of the small beasts that you don't. ■

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ABOVE: Green darner BELOW: Turbulent phosphila



J.D. Roberts, Bugwood.org

blueberry shrubs.

When walking through the park or forest this spring, especially on the coastal plain, keep your eyes open for small holes along sandy roads; these are the tunnel entrances. An abundance of bees flying low to

to show themselves if you know where to look, and what to look for...

When on the lookout for bees, remember it is important to look down as well as up. While large queen bumble bees fill the spring skies, seeking out tree hollows and other places to start a new colony, the southeastern blueberry bee will be busy digging underground tunnels. The blueberry bee looks very much like a bumblebee, but is actually one of many species of native ground nesting bees.

Female bees handle the construction of the tunnels, which are typically found in areas with dry, sandy soils. At the end of the tunnel they construct a small chamber where they lay their eggs and rear their young bee larvae with the pollen they have collected from wild

the ground, popping in and out of their tunnels, will alert you to nesting areas. While the bees are solitary and each female builds her own tunnel, one must keep in mind that sandy roads are prime real estate for bees, and the neighborhood is likely to be crowded.

Other creatures that resemble bumblebees are not bees at all. Consider the case of the day-flying moth commonly called the snowberry clearwing. This moth is comparable in size to a bumblebee, has the same black and yellow coloration, and exhibits a dramatic reduction in the number of scales on the wings, leaving them almost completely transparent.

They seek nectar from many of the same flowers as bumblebees, including orange milkweed and bee balm.