
An Unexpected Guest: Charlie the Moth

By: Jen Geck, Conservation Education Program Assistant

Last July, I had the fortunate “run-in” with North America’s largest native moth. Well, sort of – it was actually the caterpillar whom I found or who found me! I was trimming back my cherry tree at home and when I went to gather up the branches I stumbled upon the most beautiful caterpillar I had ever seen. Having never seen one like it before I searched the internet to see just what it was.

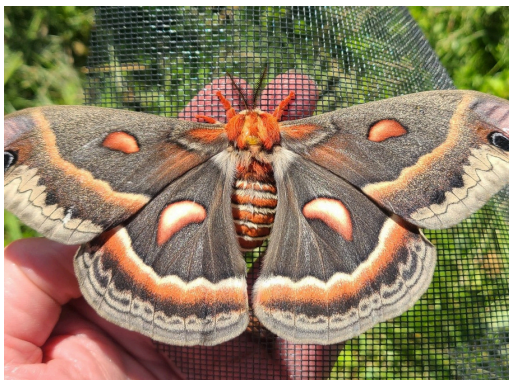
To my surprise I learned I had found a cecropia moth caterpillar. Cecropia moth caterpillars are born black and grow to be green, with four reddish knobs and 16 yellow ones. Well, that was it for me – he was going to come home with me, for a little while anyway. In my home we tend to name things that we find out in the wild – so our caterpillar was given the name, Charlie the Cecropia Caterpillar.



Charlie the cecropia caterpillar was found on one of the cecropias host plants, a cherry tree.



Cecropias belong to the silk moth family. They construct their cocoons from silk.



Charlie the cecropia moth. Cecropias wings can reach up to 7 inches in width. Females have a larger abdomen filled with eggs. They will lay around 100 eggs to carry on the next generation.



I made Charlie a nice “home” and fed him leaves daily from the cherry tree – one of the cecropia’s host plants. Others include oak, cherry, beech, apple and button bush. He was a “hungry caterpillar” and ate and ate and ate some more! Soon I noticed Charlie was getting bigger and bigger until one day he started spinning silk on the side of his glass bowl. He could spin silk because Charlie is a silkworm - member of the Saturniidae family. I knew what that meant – he was ready to make himself a cocoon!

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I also knew from my research that cecropia moths pupate in late July/August – the resting stage when caterpillars transform into a moth. Charlie eventually spun his cocoon in between a couple of the cherry tree twigs that I had placed in his home. I was so fortunate to be able to see this construction take place – what amazing builders caterpillars are!

After about 10 months of overwintering in my garage, early in May, Charlie the caterpillar came to live at the GCP Interpretive Center in hopes that more people would be able to see his eclosion – his emerging from the cocoon as an adult moth. I left for the weekend late this May and came back to work the following Tuesday to find Charlie clinging to the top of the screen covering on his temporary home! Sadly, I had missed his eclosion but oh how stunning he was!

After a little more research I found out that the sole purpose of adult cecropia moths is to mate and carry on the next generation – they do not eat so they will only live for about two weeks. I also discovered that in fact, Charlie is a female! Female cecropias have smaller antennae and larger abdomens that carry all the eggs of their future generation. Females produce natural chemicals called pheromones, which can be detected by the male cecropia moth from over a mile away. She will lay over a hundred eggs on the leaves of one of her host plants. Many of the caterpillars won't live to see adulthood as birds will eat and feed their chicks with the caterpillars – they are full of protein, fats and nutrients.

As I released Charlie back into the wild I felt a sense of loss knowing she will live for only a short while but also a sense of gratification knowing that she is doing her part in the natural world and continuing the life cycle of the cecropia. Connecting with nature is something we can all do every day. Take time to slow down & observe your own little neck of the woods. You'll be amazed at what you find or what finds you!

Butterflies and moths are both in the insect order **Lepidoptera**. There are over 12,000 different species of Lepidopterans just in North America! How many different butterflies and moths have you seen at the Genesee County Parks?

Butterflies



Monarch Butterfly

- Long, straight or clubbed antennae
- Active during the day
- Typically hold wings folded against back when at rest

Moths



Polyphemus Moth

- Short, feathery antennae
- Active at night
- Typically hold wings spread out when at rest