

Silkworm Moths

By A. L. Antonelli, Extension Entomologist
WSU Puyallup

Two very spectacular moths in the silkworm family that gain the attention of homeowners when they are observed are the polyphemus moth, *Telea polyphemus*, and the cecropia moth, *Samia cecropia*. As well as being quite large as adults, they are also very attractive.

The polyphemus moth (Fig. 1) has a wing expanse of 4 – 4 ½ inches and is somewhat tan or reddish brown as the overall color. The outer wing margins are somewhat lighter, separated from the basal region by parallel bluish and pink lines. A semi-transparent “circular” eyespot occurs in the middle of each wing. Both eyespots are margined by darker colors; however, those of the hindwings are more heavily margined with blue and black. The caterpillars (Fig. 2) are pale green with seven pale yellow lines on the sides. The segments each have six short tubercles or spine-like projectiles arising from a red spot, and the airholes or spiracles are pale orange. When the caterpillars prepare to pupate, they spin a large cocoon inside of leaf material, which serves as an outside covering (Fig. 3). This cocoon is attached to branches with tough silk threads. The adults emerge from the overwintering pupal cases in the spring, mate and lay eggs on the leaves of host plants. Host plants include oak, apple, alder, elm, cherry, madrone, plum, willow, and more. A single generation occurs per year, but they are never numerous enough to be considered a pest.



Fig. 1. An adult polyphemus moth



Fig. 2. A larval polyphemus moth



Fig. 3. A polyphemus moth pupa.

The cecropia moth (Fig. 4) exhibits a wingspan somewhat smaller than that of the polyphemus moth, averaging about four inches in length. The overall color is more reddish brown than the preceding species. The most striking difference is that the cecropia bears light-colored, comma-like markings near the middle of each wing. The markings on the hind wings measure twice the size of those on the forewings. The outer wing margins are delineated with parallel light and dark lines and the extreme edges show scallop-like patterns. There is also a circular dark spot, oftentimes including a blue crescent, at the tips of the forewings. The caterpillar (Fig. 5) is large, green, and often contains bluish shading. Numerous spiny red, yellow, and bluish knobs protrude from the body. The biology and life cycle is similar to the polyphemus moth. The cecropia moth also has a large host list. Its favorite foods include lilac, maples, and willows. Cecropia moth populations should rarely be considered a significant problem.



**Fig. 4. An adult cecropia moth.
By A.L. Antonelli.**



**Fig. 5. A cecropia moth larva.
By P. Eide**

Reference:

Milne, L. and M. 1980. *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Insects and Spiders*. 989 pp. Chanticleer Press.