



Now overwintering in cocoons American Dagger Moth caterpillars are not as bad as their image in the media.

THIS ISSUE

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Carbon Footprint Consciousness

In Defense of the “Poisonous” Dagger

With longevity, milestones continue to come and go. This issue of The Wild Times represents ten years of uninterrupted monthly newsletters. Each issue provides details about the month's open Sunday here at our private center as well as upcoming events and enrollment opportunities. It also begins with an opening Michigan wildlife or wildlife education-related column and finishes with info about the state of the environment in light of today's climatic, social and political turmoil. Newsletter archives on our website.

Our mission is to educate about wild living aspects of the local environment. Making readers more aware generates appreciation, and with it, hopefully, a more ingrained sense of personal responsibility toward preserving it. Thank you to all who send feedback stating how much they look forward to, enjoy, and learn from the newsletter.

The native American Dagger Moth has - and *always* has - occurred in every county in Michigan and throughout most of the Eastern Deciduous Forest Biome, but leave it to social media-run-amok to ramp up yet another reason to keep Richard Louv's "last child" out of the woods:

"Poisonous Caterpillar Found in Clare County!"

<https://www.wilx.com/content/news/Poisonous-caterpillar-found-in-Michigan-562695341.html>

The above column and associated Youtube video announce the "discovery" of this common, native caterpillar and treat it, because of one child's allergic reaction, as a menace to humanity. A stew of misinformation (i.e., son bitten by venomous caterpillar), omissions (i.e., ecological role in the forest community) alarming rhetoric (i.e., severe/painful stings) would not only scare any parent into sequestering a child indoors, but incite many to kill these basically harmless caterpillars and anything that looks remotely close to them on sight. A quick perusal through the comments after the video bear this out.

At one point, as the video shows a dying yellow dagger larva the news reporter states that this caterpillar can also be white, whereby the image cuts to a completely different species, the Hickory Tussock Moth larva. There have been similar social media uproars in the same vein over this common, native species. If you have the time, check out this excellent, thoughtful, well-researched synopsis of the minimal threat



Hickory Tussock Moth larvae experienced a population boom this summer.

the hairs of the hickory tussock caterpillar are to the average person who handles one, then extrapolate the information to similar contact to hairy caterpillars of virtually any local species: <https://www.gardenmyths.com/hickory-tussock-moth-caterpillar-poisonous/>

I harbor a distinct childhood memory of my first encounter with a fairly large, yellow, fifth-instar dagger moth larva. I discovered it crawling on the ground in mid-August when our baby-boomer family drove from our Chicago home to vacation at a cottage in southern Wisconsin. I picked it up and let it crawl over my hand. Of course, I expected no ill effects and received none. At some point later I found and identified the species in my *Golden Guide to Butterflies and Moths* as an American Dagger Moth larva. I now knew what to call it among countless dozens of benign encounters through my life.

Through most of its life, a dagger moth caterpillar sports white hairs with two pairs of longer, black “pencils” protruding from its front segments and a single one extending in the back. It lives and eats among the branches of maples and other deciduous trees over our heads and largely out of sight. Then, in late summer the white hairs on the fifth-instar larva turn yellow, and it crawls down from the tree. Often seen wandering across the ground as it searches for an appropriate overwintering site, it eventually locates, then burrows under a log, a piece of bark or even a cast away old board or piece of plywood where it will spin its cocoon. A naturalist of any age habitually flips such objects to investigate what may be living or hiding beneath. Therefore, it didn’t take long for tween-aged me on an early-September day to discover a dagger larva in the process of cocoon construction.



This American Dagger Moth caterpillar made its rounds through our weekly school lessons this September at two Montessori schools and at Okemos Nursery School.

A completed cocoon barely looks like one and can easily miss detection by the casual looker. At the onset of construction the caterpillar, perched upside down under the wood, begins chewing a shallow depression beneath itself into which it literally *imbeds* its cocoon. As it spins the sticky silk above and around it, coarse granules of the chewed bark become lodged among the strands. Hairs from the caterpillar’s body loosen and also stick readily to the freshly spun silk. Since it has been spun over this shallow excavation the finished oblong product barely rises from the surface of the wood. The generous smattering of masticated bits across its surface result in the cocoon taking on the same hue as the surface to which it is stuck. On closer inspection, the hairs generously adhered throughout make it take on a mien not unlike that of a cat-cuddler’s sweater.

It is not hard to envision a hungry deer mouse or shrew foraging for protein under a blanket of snow, squeezing under the bark, locating the cocoon, chewing into it to get at the pupa and receiving a mouthful of the irritating hairs. Basically, think of a hairy caterpillar as a porcupine in miniature. Just as its quills are a formidable deterrent to would-be large predators, so are the caterpillar’s hairs to much smaller feathered or furred ones.

I’ve found, kept and raised dagger moth larvae many times since childhood - keeping them in jars, securing fresh maple leaves, then providing chunks of bark for them to use for cocoon construction. I’ve also introduced them to kids of all ages at summer camps here and in school classrooms, advising them so as to successfully care for the caterpillar themselves.

I never discourage kids from taking close, prolonged looks at caterpillars and their activities, however, I

often discourage handling of caterpillars, mostly for the well-being of the creature. I often mention that excessive handling of hairy species could result in some of the hairs becoming dislodged and possibly irritating the skin. However, when you do handle any caterpillar, never contain it in a closed hand, but let it walk freely across your open palm. Just as if a miniature porcupine were waddling across your hand, the hairs of a tussock or dagger larva will not dislodge unless the caterpillar is pressed within a closed palm or otherwise rubbed or pinched. Better yet, handle and inspect the caterpillar while it clings to a stick or leaf on which it is resting or feeding.



How to check out a Hickory Tussock Moth caterpillar "safely."

Lots of local, wild-occurring organisms, plant and animal, possess defensive aspects of their anatomy or behavior to deter predators. Others may contain chemicals that are toxic to large mammals like us. Learning about each and every one: a bramble, a bumblebee, a poison ivy leaf, a garter snake, a stinging nettle, a snapping turtle, a poke berry, or, yes, a dagger or hickory tussock caterpillar, enables you to identify it as you approach, then alter your behavior in such a way that the potentially harmful organism becomes not harmful in the least. With many of these, closer inspection and even some adjusted physical interaction (like letting the hickory tussock caterpillar crawl across your open hand) can be accomplished with little or no risk.

Potentially harmful properties possessed by a wild living thing that might cause wariness or fear in others become subverted or even dismissed through purposeful acquisition of knowledge by any adult or child. Absent the need to flee from or kill the organism, opportunity rises to the forefront to more closely inspect its physical or behavioral traits as well as its interaction with other organisms in its surroundings. Acceptance, then, arises naturally regarding its rightful role as one of many interconnected pieces comprising the complex jigsaw puzzle that is the ecological community. To kill it becomes just plain wrong.

-Jim McGrath

Thank you...

To Barb Paff and Richard Moe for their generous donation to Nature Discovery.

Thank you, as well, for hours of service to volunteers Cailin Gallagher and Jace Beland.

We could always use more help. If you are an adult or high school student interested in assisting with animal care and upkeep within our small nature center, please contact us!



Catch Jim on Coffee Break Thursday, November 14

Jim is scheduled to appear on Thursday, November 14 at 9:45am, discussing Michigan hawks and more. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at lcc.edu/radio/onair/ or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at lcc.edu/tv/watch. We'll post a reminder on our Facebook page.

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A Powerpoint Guide to Michigan Hawks & Eagles



Sunday, November 17, 1 to 5pm; \$5/person



The migratory Northern Harrier exhibits a number of owl-like features and behaviors.

Join us any time during our open hours. At 2pm we will present *A Powerpoint Guide to Michigan Hawks & Eagles*. Throughout the seasons, up to twelve species of hawks can be found in Michigan, as well as the Bald and Golden Eagle. Vultures will also be featured since they share similar flight characteristics with the birds of prey. While viewing an abundance of beautiful color images, learn how to identify all of them in the field. Discussion will also include classification, interesting behaviors of each species, and the best seasons in which to find them, as well as where you can go to see them around Greater Lansing and throughout the state.

Come early or stay late to visit, and interact with our huge zoo of over 40 species of Michigan-native reptiles & amphibians. Meet the “grand slam” of Michigan turtles – all 10 species found here including the state-threatened Spotted Turtle. Also meet the “grand slam” of Michigan frogs – all 13 species found here including the state-threatened Blanchard’s Cricket Frog. Meet, hold, and even “wear” a gentle Black Rat Snake, our state’s largest. Lots of feeding opportunities, too. Knowledgeable staff is on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit. Photo ops, galore!



Allegan County Birding Day

Tuesday, November 19

6:30am to 4:30pm

Photo © Steve Sage.



On Tuesday, November 19, from 6:30am to about 4:30pm, join us on a guided trip to Allegan County for some great fall birding. Jim will lead and drive a maximum of five participants on this full-day odyssey to tally as many species as possible through a multitude of West Michigan habitats. We'll bird for waterfowl, gulls and eagles along the Lake Michigan shoreline and encounter a slew of other species while traversing field, forest and dune habitats. Rough-legged Hawks, Northern Harriers, kestrels, shrikes, Snow Buntings and many more species are in store. Locations include Saugatuck Dunes State Park, Douglas Public Beach, Morrison Bayou, Allegan State Game Area, and the South Haven Jetty.



Rough-legged Hawk.

Weather-permitting, we should tally over 40 species. Most of the birding will be near the vehicle or relatively short hikes from the vehicle. We'll stop for lunch at Crane's Pie Pantry Restaurant in Fennville. Each participant will also receive a Michigan Birds checklist to keep track of the day's finds.

COST: Only \$70/person, includes all transportation. Meet at Nature Discovery. With notice, we can also arrange to pick you up at a convenient location for you. Contact us to reserve a spot.

Thanksgiving Eve Michigan Wildlife Day Camp

Wednesday, November 27 9am-3pm

For K thru middle school. If your children have the day before Thanksgiving off school enroll them in a day of in-your-face Michigan wildlife. All students will spend time learning about, holding and feeding cold-blooded occupants of our huge zoo of Michigan snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders. We'll also spend time engaged in outside activities. A hot lunch is provided.

COST: \$65/student. Advance enrollment. Contact us to enroll.



Everyone Can Be More Carbon Footprint Conscious

Here is some reading to guide you...

“How to be a More Conscious Consumer, Even if You’re on a Budget”

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/smarter-living/sustainable-shopping-conscious-consumer.html?te=1&nl=morning-briefing&emc=edit_NN_p_20191003§ion=aBreak?campaign_id=9&instance_id=12803&segment_id=17539&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e®i_id=97652655&action=aBreak

“Flying is Bad for the Planet. You Can Help Make It Better”

Take one round-trip flight between New York and California, and you’ve generated about 20 percent of the greenhouse gases that your car emits over an entire year.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/27/climate/airplane-pollution-global-warming.html?module=inline>

“One Thing You Can Do: Smarter Laundry”

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/climate/nyt-climate-newsletter-laundry.html?te=1&nl=morning-briefing&emc=edit_NN_p_20191004§ion=aBreak?campaign_id=9&instance_id=12835&segment_id=17575&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e®i_id=97652655&action=aBreak

The next generation would be justified in looking back at us and asking, “What were you thinking? Couldn’t you hear what the scientists were saying? Couldn’t you hear what Mother Nature was screaming at you?” -Al Gore

I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act like you would in a crisis. I want you to act like your house is on fire, because it is. -Greta Thunberg



Less Beef = Less CO₂
Cowspiracy.com

**[Union of
Concerned Scientists**
Science for a healthy planet and safer world

350.org

Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!

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